

Breaking the School-to-Prison and School-to-Deportation Pipelines to Create Safe and Welcoming Pathways for All Students

Students need safe and welcoming school environments to learn. Disciplinary practices that push students out of classrooms, physically punish them, or put them into contact with police officers are ineffective and harmful. These punitive strategies cause students to miss important learning and social time with their teachers and peers; can lead to trauma and disengagement from school; and increase the likelihood of grade retention, students dropping out, and contact with the justice system.

This process of exclusion, punishment and poor outcomes is known as the school-to-prison or school-to-deportation pipeline. Rather than simply punishing students, schools should focus on creating safe and welcoming campus climates that put students on the pathway to college and life success.

How the Texas School-to-Prison and Deportation Pipeline Harms Students

Black students, Latino students and LGBTQ students experience greater rates of school discipline and have higher contact with police in their schools than their peers, even though they are not more likely to misbehave (GLSEN, 2016; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). Students with disabilities also are disproportionately punished and referred to police, even though their behaviors may stem from their disability and require non-punitive interventions and supports.

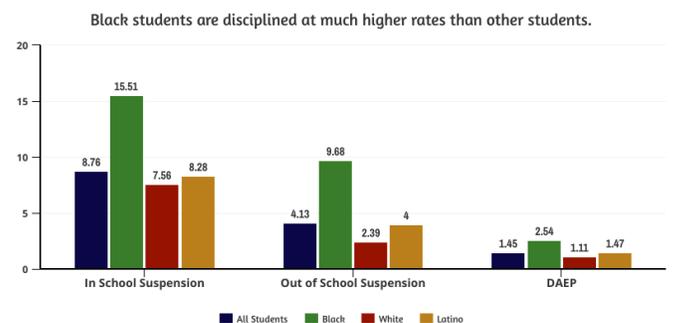
The majority of punishments are for “discretionary offenses,” like horseplay, which are vague and subject to the interpretation of teachers and administrators.

Recently, in Texas and across the country, communities have adopted “school safety” measures in response to high-profile, violent tragedies in schools. Unfortunately, many of these measures – including increasing the regular presence of police inside schools, arming teachers, and adopting unnecessary surveillance and barriers in the school building – are not based in research and can actually end up harming students (Wilson, 2020).

Sending students away from their school into disciplinary alternative educational program (DAEPs) and juvenile justice alternative educational program (JJAEP) settings also do more harm than good to students (Ramón, 2020). Schools reassign students outside regular classrooms and to these alternative settings for largely discretionary behavioral offenses. Students should be able to stay in their classroom and receive the appropriate behavioral, social-emotional and developmental supports they need to succeed.

Texas still permits schools to practice corporal punishment with students. This means that school administrators may intentionally hit, spank and slap students as a form of discipline. These harsh security and punishment measures often harm students of color and students with disabilities (Gershoff & Font, 2016; Startz, 2016).

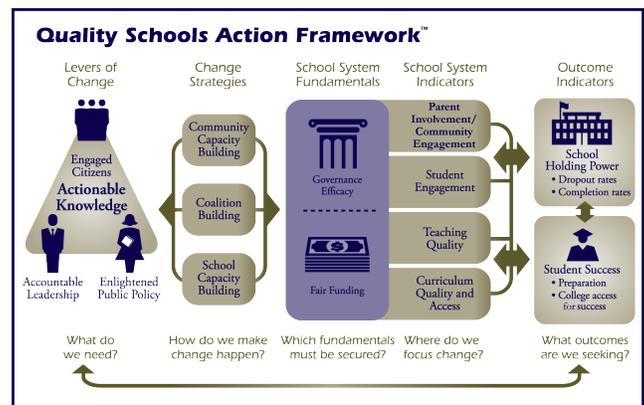
Disciplinary Action Rates by Race-Ethnicity in Texas, 2018-19



Policy Recommendations for Texas

The Texas Legislature should...

- End abusive punishment techniques in schools, like corporal punishment.
- Eliminate invasive monitoring systems and the presence of police officers and armed personnel in schools to ensure school safety measures do not create harmful learning environments or push students into the school-to-prison and deportation pipeline.
- Adopt the Texas CROWN Act and protect against racial and gender biases in school district dress codes, including discriminatory bans on hairstyles.
- Promote disciplinary policies that keep students in their regular schools and classrooms whenever possible instead of disciplinary placements in alternative programs or juvenile justice facilities.
- Require that schools meet the recommended student-to-mental health professional ratios (including counselors and social workers) and allow the school safety allotment to be used for these personnel expenses.
- Enhance discipline data reporting requirements to include data on discretionary referrals for code of conduct violations, English learner designation, homelessness status, and grade level. In addition, have the Texas Education Agency provide a data report to the legislature on a quarterly schedule.
- Raise the ages of juvenile court jurisdiction. Both the upper and lower ages should be increased so that 10-to-12-year-old children are not criminalized, and 17-year-old youth are not pushed into the adult criminal justice system



District leaders should...

- Develop schoolwide programs that build positive school climates and address the needs of all adults and students on the campus, without relying on punishments or criminalization. This includes modifying local codes of conduct to be fairer toward students' safety and civil rights, without racial, gender or cultural biases.
- Expand the implementation of effective programs, including restorative practices and social emotional learning, and increase the presence of trained mental and behavioral health professionals like counselors and social workers.

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