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# Southern Education Policy Update

**IDRA**  
Southern Education Equity Network

For 50 years, IDRA has advocated excellent schools for all students, using our proven model of community-centered advocacy, research and community engagement to provide critical insights to federal, state and local policymakers.

Our policy advocacy campaigns, educator training, legal strategy work and research promote equitable educational opportunities for all students, particularly students of color, immigrant students, and those from communities with limited incomes in the U.S. South.

The Southern Policy Update covers policy, research and current events that have an impact on education equity in the U.S. South. This edition covers issues related to school discipline and school policing.

Learn more about our [policy work here](#) and join IDRA's [Southern Education Equity Network](#). For more information about IDRA's regional work please contact Terrence Wilson, J.D., IDRA's regional policy and community engagement director at [terrence.wilson@idra.org](mailto:terrence.wilson@idra.org).

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## What We've Been Working on at IDRA...

### New IDRA Equal Justice Works Fellow

## Project Seeks to Investigate, Interrupt and Replace Policies and Practices that Harm Girls of Color in Georgia and Across the South

This fall, IDRA was thrilled to welcome Makiah Lyons, J.D., to the IDRA team as an Equal Justice Works Fellow. Makiah's fellowship project uses a legal participatory action research framework to support students to investigate, document and disrupt the negative impacts of punitive and exclusionary discipline on girls of color in the South.



Nationally, girls of color, particularly Black girls, are disproportionately disciplined in school. As Makiah argued in her fellowship application:

“The educational experiences of girls of color in the South are uniquely informed by racial and gender biases riddled with both historic and cultural nuance. Girls of color are often mischaracterized as deviant, unladylike, too adult, loud, or simply “too much” and penalized for cultural and self-expression.

“Girls of color are disproportionately punished using vague and sweeping offenses like “defiance” or “disobedience” or by the enforcement of subjective dress codes.

“Data tell us that girls of color do not misbehave more than their white peers, but that biased policies, practices and perspectives of educators and school communities are responsible for racial and gender discipline disparities. These disparities have both immediate and enduring consequences for girls of color, as demonstrated by their overrepresentation in the school-to-prison pipeline.”

Through student-driven research, community education, direct advocacy and policy advocacy, Makiah will address school discipline policies and practices that disproportionately harm girls of color in Georgia and other southern states. She, and the young people she works with, will add important research, data, insights and reform recommendations to the field.

Learn more about [Makiah and her work](#) and reach out to her at [makiah.lyons@idra.org](mailto:makiah.lyons@idra.org) for more information.

## Advocates in Mississippi Challenge Harmful Discipline Policies and Practices

In October, Morgan Craven, J.D., IDRA's national director of policy, advocacy, and community engagement, joined partners from the [Mississippi Coalition to End Corporal Punishment](#) and [Dignity in Schools Campaign](#) to demand an end to corporal punishment and other harmful forms of discipline in Mississippi schools.



The Mississippi Coalition to End Corporal Punishment is convened by the [Nollie Jenkins Family Center](#) and works to change local, state and federal policies and practices that harm children in schools. The event in October – part of the Dignity in Schools Campaign National

Week of Action – brought together partners from across the country to participate in advocacy at the Mississippi State Board of Education and in front of the Mississippi State Capitol.

The event also featured a series of learning sessions led by students, parents and advocates that highlighted the harms of corporal punishment and other forms of punitive discipline and examined opportunities for collective solutions. Morgan participated in a panel that examined how students and families can use federal tools, including filing complaints and engaging in policy advocacy, to end corporal punishment in schools.

This event aligned with other IDRA efforts aimed at ending corporal punishment including [testifying in favor of Texas House Bill 772](#) and supporting the federal [Protecting Our Students in Schools Act](#). Learn more about IDRA's state and national efforts to [end corporal punishment](#).

## Pushing to End Support of Harmful Predictive Policing Program in Pasco County, Florida

IDRA participates in the [PASCO \(People Against the Surveillance of Children and Overpolicing\) Coalition](#) and joined with several other partners recently to send a [letter](#) to the U.S. Department of Justice to urge them to end support of a predictive policing program operating in Pasco County, Florida. The coalition, led by the Southern Poverty Law Center, includes individual members, local, state and national organizational members working together to end the Pasco Sheriff's Office predictive policing program.

This program shares school records with the Pasco Sheriff's Office, which uses the information along with child welfare files, student records, family information and past experiences with law enforcement to put children on secret watch lists. The students identified for "enhanced" surveillance are disproportionately Black and Latino Pasco County students.

The coalition's [letter](#) to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance was submitted in response to a report on the Pasco County predictive policing program. The letter highlights how the report failed to fully address the harms of the program and gives recommendations for critical actions the department should take to halt this program.

The coalition recommended that the U.S. Department of Justice require the Pasco Sheriff and school district to halt the program and conduct a full Title VI investigation to determine the impact that the predictive policing program has had on the civil rights and privacy rights of students and their families.

## IDRA Works with Students and Families to Address the Harms of Identity-Based Bullying and Harassment

IDRA chief legal analyst, Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., and Equal Justice Works Fellow, Makiah Lyons, J.D., have been working closely with students and families to examine how identity-based bullying negatively impacts students and to develop community-driven solutions to address those impacts.



IDRA has long provided [training and technical assistance](#) to schools and districts to address identity-based bullying and harassment and appropriate disciplinary responses to those behaviors. These responses underscore [IDRA's position](#) that exclusionary discipline is not the answer to bullying, harassment or discrimination, whether that discipline is applied against the young person engaging in the bullying or the young person experiencing the bullying.

Paige and Makiah have expanded that school support work to further incorporate critical legal, policy and community engagement analyses and initiatives. They have [developed policy recommendations](#) to help schools address identity-based bullying and harassment. They also [supported families and students](#) to assert their right to protection from bullying and harassment by helping them file complaints with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

Finding effective solutions to [bullying and harassment behavior](#) is crucial as they are some of the most common negative behaviors that lead to school discipline. These behaviors are incredibly prevalent as the [latest bullying statistics](#) indicate nearly one out of every five students reports being bullied.

Additionally, it is important to understand how identity impacts these students as the reasons for being bullied reported most often by students include physical appearance, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion and sexual orientation.

As the U.S. South is home to a [large percentage](#) of students from historically marginalized backgrounds, understanding this issue is vitally important in the South. This is especially true today as the current context of public schooling in the South demonizes diversity, equity and inclusion under a misguided attempt to "ban CRT" and "wokeness."

To learn more about IDRA's work to address bullying and harassment in schools and our framework to create safe schools for all students, read our [Roadmap for School Safety for All Students](#). For more information on identity-based bullying and harassment, please reach out to [paige.duggins-clay@idra.org](mailto:paige.duggins-clay@idra.org) or [makiah.lyons@idra.org](mailto:makiah.lyons@idra.org). Finally, stay tuned for further developments and a model policy related to identity-based bullying and harassment, coming soon!



## Southern Research Corner

### What Educators Need to Know from School Discipline Research

In a recent [article](#) published by Education Week, education professor Richard O. Welsh summarized his extensive [literature review](#) on school discipline reforms that have been able to successfully reduce discipline disparities as well as overall discipline. He gives four keys to successfully changing discipline policy for the better.

First, Walsh found that in order for discipline reforms to be successful, school districts and schools need a strategic direction. Specifically, he recommends that these leaders reject race-neutral discipline reforms and coordinate different responses to student behavior as an alternative to exclusionary discipline.

Second, Walsh found that school discipline reform must support educators, not just students. His review found that improving teacher training to better manage classrooms is a core strategy to reducing discipline disparities.

Third, leaders should acknowledge the limitations of school discipline. He highlights that policy is only one part of the equation as educators and administrators also need training to build their capacity for non-punitive practice.

Finally, Walsh found that sustainable school discipline reform depends on the quality of implementation. Taken together, these findings support comprehensive equity-based interventions and strategies that help schools build more supportive climates to work toward eliminating harmful disciplinary practices.

The focus of Dr. Welsh's study aligns with how IDRA uses research to help schools pursue equity. His study describes institutional responses and changes rather than a litany of socioeconomic factors "plaguing" students. Studies that concentrate purely on socioeconomic factors, perceived or real, are always tainted with white supremacy – regardless of intent – as they rarely consider studying deep structural changes in processes or staff behaviors that have inherited belief systems at odds with equity or socially just educational practices. In turn, such studies reaffirm negative interventions that harm students. On the other hand, Dr.

Welsh's review of the literature provides empirical evidence that positive institutional interventions, such as restorative justice and well-implemented positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) work.

## Focusing on “Top Referrers” May Help Reduce Racial Disparities in Discipline

In another recent [study](#), researchers looked at the characteristics of a large district in California and examined which teachers were most responsible for office discipline referrals. Their findings indicate that the top 5% of referrers effectively doubled the racial gaps in referrals for Black and Latino students compared to white students. The study also found that much of the behavior that led to referrals in these cases was due to interpersonal offenses and subjective offenses, like defiance.

This research indicates that tracking the demographics of referrals and targeting interventions toward top referrers may have an outsized impact on disparities in discipline. In an [interview](#), the researchers note that the demographics and experience level of teachers helped explain some of the differences in referrals, but also noted that some of the offenses create more room for biased decision making.

Another of the articles' authors asserts that schools may seek to impact discipline by providing more support to junior teachers, assigning them a less challenging student body, and offering more targeted professional development to reduce the number and disparities in referrals.

The focus of this study aligns with IDRA approaches to training, professional development, research and policy that always begin by assuming that schools and staff must adapt their practices and behaviors. The “top referrer” study reaffirms what IDRA has documented for decades, that interpersonal biases directly affect a teacher's response.

When IDRA trains about these issues, the recommendation is not to simply say “quit writing referrals.” Instead, IDRA trainers provide space for the voices of teachers and administrators who have experienced asset-based practices, like IDRA's new [Youth Leadership Now](#) and the highly successful [IDRA Valued Youth Partnership](#), where schools are suddenly surprised that “troublemakers” respond to being treated as leaders and not as labels.

Likewise, IDRA supports and encourages the use of restorative practices that engender positive climates, assuming our students are at their best selves through deep involvement in their personal growth and community-building efforts.



**South Got Somethin' to Say – Education Headlines**

In a process sometimes called “virtualization,” school districts across the country have begun punishing students by forcing them into online classes, sometimes indefinitely ([Hechinger Report](#)).

Georgia Lieutenant Governor and Senate Republicans seek to pass legislation in 2024 to pay teachers to carry guns in schools ([AP News](#)).

Schools in Brevard County, Florida, are considering the expansion of Florida’s Guardian program, which allows teachers to carry firearms ([Florida Today](#)).

In North Carolina, the ACLU of North Carolina published a [report](#) titled, “The Consequences of Cops in North Carolina Schools,” which illustrates the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of referrals to law enforcement across North Carolina.

Alabama School Safety Commission identifies trauma treatment as largest gap in school safety ([Alabama Daily News](#)).

After years of debate, corporal punishment ends in Kentucky schools ([Lexington Herald-Leader](#)).



**IDRA Southern Education Equity Network**  
A community forum and resource hub for advocates of strong inclusive public education

- Get advocacy how-to tools
- Share policy & action updates
- Plan actions with your group

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Plus! Get teaching tools on IDRA's We All Belong School Resource Hub [www.idraseen.org/hub](http://www.idraseen.org/hub)

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For more information about our work in the U.S. South, join the [Southern Education Equity Network](#). Also check out IDRA's award-winning [We All Belong School Resource Hub](#) with classroom lessons and tools for educators, families and policy advocates, particularly in the U.S. South, who want to make sure students receive a strong, truthful education in our public schools.



Children First  
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IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

[Reach Out To Us](#)

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