Discipline is Not Security

IDRA Policy Brief

by Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed. • February 2025

Dismantling Disparities Should be Top of Mind When Developing School Safety Policy in Georgia

In recent years, the heightened focus on school safety has spurred debate about policies and practices for protecting students and staff. Particularly with school shootings and concerns about external threats making headlines, decision makers are understandably under increasing pressure to implement measures that build safer learning environments.

With these pressures has come a conflation between reactive "visible" policy measures – metal detectors, armed security personnel, school-based law enforcement, zero-tolerance policies – and proactive, evidence-based solutions that actually make learning environments safer at their foundation (Craven, March 2024).

It is crucial that policymakers adopt safety measures that are proven to be effective rather than establishing harmful yet ineffective school discipline policies that harden schools and exacerbate already significant disparities among students.

Historically marginalized students are already disproportionately disciplined in Georgia public schools. Black students are twice as likely to be disciplined as their white peers, and students with disabilities are 1.4 times more likely to be disciplined than their peers (GOSA, 2024).

We must prioritize policies and practices that prevent the types of violence many students experience every day, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. These very practices enable schools to build trusting relationships and recognize student and adult needs, which can help to address and prevent even the most extreme and extraordinary incidences of violence like school shootings.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that safe schools are those that are proactively grounded in strong relationships, where every student feels valued, supported and safeguarded against abuses (Craven, June 2022).

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Protect Students from AI Misuse

Leaders have increasingly proposed the use of technologies, such as surveillance systems and artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor student behavior and identify potential "risk" behaviors (Joyner, 2025). However, these systems have raised significant concerns about their reliance on historically biased data, which can perpetuate or even exacerbate existing disparities in student discipline (Williamson et al., 2024; Human Rights Council, 2024).

Many surveillance and learning technologies, such as AI, depend heavily on historical data to make predictions and assessments. When these data reflect racial or socioeconomic

disparities in past disciplinary actions, as is the case in Georgia, the technology risks reinforcing and amplifying these biases.

For instance, schools with a documented history of disproportionately disciplining Black or Latino students might inadvertently train AI systems to associate these students with higher levels of "risk," resulting in biased predictions and interventions (Williamson et al., 2024).

These concerns are particularly pressing with the adoption of predictive monitoring tools, such as those controversially procured by Cobb County Public Schools (Moore, 2024). Such fallible tools increase the exposure of students to law enforcement based on statistically predicted behavior rather than actual behavior. Misuse of these tools is, in turn, linked to disproportionate disciplinary actions, particularly against Black students and students with disabilities (Sorensen, et al., 2023).

Marginalized communities often bear the brunt of these invasive practices, facing heightened scrutiny under the guise of maintaining safety and order (Lee & Chin-Rothman, 2022).

The extensive use of surveillance technologies also raises significant privacy concerns, especially when these systems track students' behaviors, movements and online activities (Barnett, 2017; Alim et al., 2017).

Experts have identified incidents where student data were misused, particularly when robust limitations were not in place for how student data may be shared and used by both law enforcement and technology companies. These harms have perpetuated disparities for students of color, multilingual learners and students with disabilities. For example, in 2020, the PASCO Coalition, a group of civil rights organizations, educators, and advocates, condemned the Pasco County Sherrif's office in Tampa Florida for misusing student data for surveillance and predictive policing. The coalition highlighted how the Pasco County Sheriff's Office in Florida used student data to identify children supposedly at risk of "falling into a life of crime." This list was created without student or parent knowledge, using criteria like receiving a D or F grade or having excessive absences (PASCO Coalition, 2021).

While some federal regulations exist to protect students' privacy, they have not kept pace with the rapid adoption of classroom technologies, which accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic. This digital behavior can essentially be captured for profit, exploitation or abuse if not properly safeguarded.

In Georgia, where learning devices now outnumber students by nearly 1.4 to 1, explicit guardrails and oversight mechanisms should be established for the use of data by school and district-based staff (GADOE, 2025).

Before moving forward with calls to purchase and implement often expensive and invasive systems, policymakers should pause to fully assess the potential threats these technologies pose to children instead of prioritizing them as a strategy over the things we know work: counselors and emotional and social support.

If these procurements are made, districts should avoid data sharing with law enforcement, particularly agencies outside of the local school district. Robust limitations should be established for technology vendors who are permitted to collect, store or sell students' data, if at all (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2025).

AI surveillance systems raise significant concerns about their reliance on historically biased data.

Policymakers should not prioritize invasive surveillance systems as a strategy over the things we know work: counselors and emotional and social support.

Use Evidence-based Practices that Actually Make Schools Safer

Pressure for safer schools has increasingly translated to a demand for measures that conflate harsher discipline policies with security measures. This often looks like zero-tolerance policies and accelerated exclusionary discipline, such as in-school and out-of-school suspensions and increased presence of law enforcement in schools.

Such measures, though, cause more harm than good, particularly to historically marginalized student groups, such as Black students and students with disabilities (Sorensen et al., 2023; Morris & Berry, 2016). More discipline does not make schools safer. In fact, it does the opposite.

Keep Students Out of the Margins

Black children are no more likely to misbehave than any other children. But in Georgia, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended out of school than their white peers and twice as likely to be in-school suspended. And students with disabilities are 1.5 times as likely to be suspended out-of-school than those with no disabilities (GOSA, 2024). Clearly, the disparity is in how schools use discipline.

It is well established that suspension and expulsion can negatively impact students' life outcomes. Suspension and expulsion have been shown to stimulate feelings of disconnect from the school environment and make students less likely to graduate and more likely to be incarcerated (Pufall Jones et al., 2018).

These costs are more than with the individual student. Exclusionary discipline practices carry a substantial price tag and can negatively impact overall school culture. A study of Florida discipline practices estimated that a ninth grade suspension rate of 27% translated to nearly $2 billion in social and fiscal costs (Belfield, 2014). These costs include long-term effects on education attainment and health outcomes along with the immediate impact on administrative overhead and personnel costs for managing students who have been suspended. The in-school suspension rate for ninth graders in Georgia is 18%.

Students who attend schools that rely heavily on suspensions, whether they are suspended or not, have lower education outcomes and are more likely to be incarcerated as adults (Backher-Hicks et al., 2024).

Other methods of punitive discipline have similar harmful outcomes. For example, Georgia is one of the few states that still allows corporal punishment. Black students and students with disabilities disproportionately receive corporal punishment. It is also used on children as young as 3 years old. In 2017-18, more than 3,700 Georgia students were hit as a form of school punishment. Corporal punishment does not teach nor lead to improved behavior, but it does harm students and their classmates. (Craven, Feb. 2022)

Even further, these impacts have been found to follow educators who leverage these exclusionary practices, lending further urgency to the need to invest in training and support for educators to implement evidence-based alternatives to manage unproductive behaviors.

Georgia legislators have proactively attempted to address this harm in the past. House Bill 740, enacted in 2018, placed much-needed limitations on suspensions and expulsions for children in kindergarten through third grade.

It is time to reaffirm the commitments the state has made to keeping our students in school.

Policymakers should stand firm in the progress we have made to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and invest in supporting evidence-based practices that make all schools safer learning environments.

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Put Mental Health Personnel, Not Police in Schools

The presence of law enforcement officers in schools does not reduce the incidence of school shootings nor of bullying or discrimination that students experience (Sorensen et al., 2022). But police presence in schools does increase the likelihood that minor behavior infractions are escalated into criminal charges (Chris Curran, 2020).

Police in schools often foster a climate of fear rather than safety. Students subjected to harsh disciplinary measures, including arrests for nonviolent infractions, may develop mistrust toward authority figures and experience trauma, reducing the likelihood that they may report concerning behavior.

Funding allocated to police in schools diverts resources from critical educational support, like counselors, mental health professionals and restorative practice, which is a "relational approach to building school climate and addressing student behavior" (Duggins-Clay, 2024). These resources are more effective at addressing behavioral challenges and fostering a positive school environment.
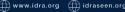
Recommendations for Georgia

The most effective school safety measures leverage relational skills, such as restorative justice and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Duggins-Clay, 2022). However, these practices, aimed at changing foundational school culture take time and resources that are not typically provided at the state level. Without consistent funding, schools are forced to leverage local sources of funding and training, which in turn leads to inconsistent practices between districts.

Dedicated state investment in this type of programming would create stability that allows for standardization and long-term change.

Prioritizing student-to-teacher interaction also reduces reliance on technology resources to manage learning environments and re-centers the human interaction needed to build stronger, safer schools.

- **Redirect potential investments in school surveillance and AI monitoring technology into evidence-based, student-centered supports focused on violence prevention.**

- **Set comprehensive guardrails for how student data can be collected, stored and used by technology vendors and law enforcement.**

- **Prohibit the sharing of student data with law enforcement agencies, except as required by court orders, health or safety laws, mandatory reporting laws, or specific emergency circumstances.**

- **Incorporate evidence-based systems for behavior intervention, such as multi-tiered systems of support, restorative justice and trauma-informed practices.**

- **Eliminate the presence of school-based law enforcement officers in public schools.**

- **Invest in counselors, social workers and other mental and behavioral health professionals in schools. Ensure schools can meet the student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, as recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2024). Currently, Georgia only funds a ratio of 450:1.**

- **Expand exclusionary discipline restrictions to include the entire K-12 continuum.**

- **Prohibit the use of corporal punishment in all Georgia public schools.**

Closing

It is critical that Georgia use effective, evidence-based safety strategies and equitable disciplinary practices. By addressing safety concerns without adopting overly harsh or exclusionary discipline policies, schools can foster environments that are both secure and supportive, ensuring the success and well-being of all our students every day.

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