

# Dismantling Disparity in Georgia – Harder Schools are not Safer Schools

Schools should be safe, supportive learning environments where all students can thrive. However, many state policies for schools rely on ineffective harsh, invasive and exclusionary practices, like zero-tolerance policies and surveillance.

These policies harm students, particularly marginalized students, by exacerbating disparities and fostering environments of distrust, rather than support and inclusion.

Georgia public schools have seen increasing use of punitive discipline measures that often target historically marginalized students: Black students, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. Data reveals that these students face higher rates of suspension and exclusionary practices, despite their not being more likely to misbehave.

Black students are twice as likely to be disciplined as their white peers. Students with disabilities are 1.4 times more likely to be disciplined than their peers. (GOSA, 2024)

Safe schools are built on strong relationships between students and educators with inclusive practices. Research shows that proactive, evidence-based solutions, such as restorative justice, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and trauma-informed practices, are more effective than punitive measures in creating safer, more equitable learning environments.

## Key Points

### Fear and Distrust in Schools

Increased surveillance, policing, and exclusionary discipline create fear and distrust in schools, hindering student success and well-being. To support student success, we must invest in preventative strategies that build strong student-teacher relationships and implement evidence-based systems for resolving conflicts.

### Surveillance systems are not good for student success

Surveillance systems and predictive artificial intelligence (AI) monitoring tools raise significant privacy concerns. Systems like those used by Cobb County Public Schools increase the inappropriate exposure of students to law enforcement and contribute to disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black students and students with disabilities.

## Recommendations & Considerations

- The most effective school safety measures leverage relational skills, such as restorative justice and culturally sustaining pedagogy. These practices, aimed at changing foundational school culture, require time and resources often not provided at the state level.
- Schools must rely on local funding and training, leading to inconsistent practices between districts. Dedicated state investment would provide stability, standardization and long-term change.

- Prioritizing student-teacher interaction reduces reliance on technology for managing learning environments, fostering stronger, safer schools.
- Addressing safety concerns without harsh or exclusionary discipline ensures environments that are secure and supportive.
- As a state, it is important to set comprehensive guardrails for the collection, storage, and use of student data by technology vendors and law enforcement.
- Lawmakers should prohibit the sharing of student data with law enforcement agencies, except in court-ordered situations, health or safety laws, mandatory reporting laws, or specific emergency circumstances.
- Georgia should incorporate evidence-based behavior intervention systems such as multi-tiered systems of support, restorative justice and trauma-informed practices.
- Lawmakers should eliminate the presence of school-based law enforcement officers in public schools.
- Georgia should invest in counselors, social workers, and mental and behavioral health professionals to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio from 450:1 to 250:1 (as recommended by the American School Counselor Association, currently at 450:1 in Georgia).
- Lawmakers should expand exclusionary discipline restrictions to include the entire K-12 continuum.
- Lawmakers should prohibit corporal punishment in all Georgia public schools.

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

*IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. 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.*

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