Improving School Discipline, Climate, and Safety Data Collection and Use

In recent years, many states, school districts, and schools have implemented and revised policies and practices to improve school discipline systems and create safer, more nurturing learning environments for students. To ensure such changes are informed by facts and to measure their impacts, states and districts have also focused on improving their collection and understanding of data about school discipline, climate, and safety.

Many data collection efforts have been limited, as they have primarily focused on suspension and expulsion, and the data collected rarely inform decision making. Although suspension and expulsion rates are important measures of school discipline trends, they do not give schools a comprehensive understanding of their climate and safety issues. State and district data collection systems must go beyond tracking suspension and expulsion rates so that educational entities can better understand system trends, identify gaps and challenges, more effectively target improvement efforts, and assess the extent to which new school discipline policies and practices are successful.

There are some key factors that contribute to and help explain why states, districts, and individual schools often struggle to capture, analyze, and effectively apply what they have learned from school discipline, climate, and safety data.

First, jurisdictions may lack the necessary infrastructure or capacity to collect these data. And, although additional resources have been allocated in the last several years to improve data systems through State Longitudinal Data Systems Grants, Race to the Top, and other grant programs, jurisdictions are still catching up. In fact, many systems are not yet capturing the broad range of school discipline data and other measures (e.g., school climate, safety indicators, social–emotional learning, etc.) of school success.

Second, school leaders and policy makers are often unclear about which indicators should be measured and tracked, and they have not developed the infrastructure necessary to collect these data electronically. Many states also lack common, state-wide data definitions, which creates significant inconsistencies in how data are collected across districts and further prevents state policy makers from analyzing system trends.

Third, those states that do collect school discipline, climate, and safety data only rarely use all available data to inform decision making. For example, a state may examine disciplinary data without considering how the school climate and safety data may complement, enhance, or help explain findings. Historically, states produce reports on individual indicators, yielding only limited, point-in-time snapshots of data. Those reports do not allow school leadership and policy makers to understand, for example, the impact of school discipline reforms on indicators other than suspensions and expulsions. Although a reduction in suspensions might indicate positive

progress, if suspension indicators are not viewed alongside other key academic and safety indicators, it is not possible to determine if reductions in suspension improve the learning environment.

Finally, even in states and local jurisdictions where school climate and safety data are collected and reported, findings are not shared with the public or state and local policy makers and often do not inform policy or practice, or target improvement efforts. In fact, many states do not publish school discipline and climate data on their education agency websites, and only in very limited instances are such data incorporated into education accountability systems and school/district report cards.

In order to improve the collection, analysis, and application of school discipline, climate, and safety data, states and local jurisdictions should implement four core strategies:

1. Assemble stakeholders to identify gaps and reach consensus on data measures;

2. Standardize data definitions and codes across the state;

3. Examine best practices for collecting, analyzing, and sharing data; and

4. Use data to inform policy and practice.

We will now describe each of these strategies in detail and provide exemplars of jurisdictions that have translated each strategy into action successfully.

Assemble Stakeholders to Discuss Data
A critical first step to improving the breadth and depth of school discipline, climate, and safety data is to identify and assemble key stakeholders. Stakeholder groups should include members who are committed to reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and creating supportive learning environments and should represent the multiple systems, perspectives, and people that interact with youth in schools, including:

- Educators
- Law enforcement
- School administrators
- Juvenile justice administrators
- Probation officials
- Court officials
- Child welfare administrators
- Parents
- Behavioral health professionals
- Youth

It is essential for the stakeholder group to reach consensus on the indicators necessary to assess the effectiveness of school discipline, climate, and safety policies and practices. The group should start by reviewing the measures currently collected, identify gaps in the data, and then determine which additional measures are needed and by what method or mechanism they should be collected. The stakeholder group should meet on a regular basis to review school discipline, climate, and safety data; examine system trends; and develop plans for how to use the data to inform policy and practice decisions.

Some states and local jurisdictions have taken various approaches to convene stakeholders to review and improve school discipline, climate, and safety data collection. In some cases (e.g., North Carolina and New York City), state and local leaders have partnered with advocacy organizations to establish working groups including school officials, community-based organizations, legislators, and others to develop recommendations for policy consideration. Two states, Colorado and Washington, have enacted legislation to establish task forces to examine data collection processes and make recommendations to improve data collection.

Colorado Legislative Task Force to Study School Discipline

In 2011, the Colorado General Assembly passed Senate Bill 11-133, which established a legislative task force to study school discipline, including the administration of school conduct and discipline codes and data, options for sharing discipline-related data among various departments, and the role of school resource officers and other law enforcement agencies.

The task force consisted of three state senators, three state representatives, and 10 additional members representing different stakeholder groups, including school districts, teachers and administrators, parents, law enforcement agencies, district attorneys, criminal defense attorneys, and child advocate organizations.

With regard to data collection, sharing, and reporting, the task force examined current school reporting requirements, data trends, and data definitions and discussed how to improve collection, particularly with regard to law enforcement referrals and incidents that resulted in juvenile justice contact. The task force reviewed relevant state and national reports (e.g. *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*[1]), and invited representatives from various state and local agencies to discuss options for expanding data collection efforts and identifying anticipated challenges.

As a result of these conversations and public meetings, the task force submitted a final report to the legislature and drafted a bill for legislative consideration.

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[1] Fabelo, Tony, Michael Thompson, Martha Plotkin, et al. (2011), *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University.

Standardize Data Definitions and Codes

In reaching consensus on a set of school discipline, climate, and safety measures, stakeholders should develop consistent data definitions and standardize terms used in the data collection process. States and districts can, for example, standardize infraction/offense definitions and codes in order to track and assess school-based referrals to law enforcement with consistency. Clearly establishing what measures should be tracked and how data will be collected will enable jurisdictions to make meaningful comparisons, analyze system trends, and assess the effectiveness of school discipline, climate, and safety policies and practices.

Codes and definitions that should be standardized include the following:

- Offense codes (e.g., describing a student disciplinary incident, such as a fight, dress code violation, disruption of class, or possession of a weapon);
- Removal types (e.g., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions);
- Other disciplinary actions/dispositions (e.g., law enforcement referrals, juvenile justice referrals, school-based arrests, behavioral health referrals, transfer to alternative programs); and
- Incident locations (e.g., on school campus or school bus, at a school-related event).

Basic definitions and coding guidelines should be set at the state level and should, to the extent possible, be consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Data Collection definitions.

Washington State Student Discipline Task Force

In 2013, the Washington State General Assembly passed legislation directing the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to convene a student discipline task force to develop standard definitions for disciplinary actions taken at the discretion of the school district and data collection standards for disciplinary actions that result in school exclusion.

Task force members reviewed existing data collection policies and procedures, had conversations with state and national experts, and discussed relevant research to develop new data definitions and standards for implementation in the 2015–2016 school year. A final report of the task force, including the new data collection and reporting requirements, was published in 2014. The new requirements have been implemented incrementally since then.

Examine Best Practices to Expand Data Collection and Reporting

In recent years, many states and school districts have made significant efforts to expand the collection of school discipline, climate, and safety data; and to share, package, and use data to effectively inform policy and practice. The state and district examples that follow are provided as possible models. They provide successful strategies and useful lessons that other states and jurisdictions can consider in their efforts to advance school discipline reform.

Wisconsin WISEdash Portal

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) website hosts a publicly available data portal called Wisconsin Information System for Education Data Dashboard or WISEdash, which uses "dashboards"—downloadable visual collections of graphs and tables—to provide multiyear education data about Wisconsin schools. The portal can be used to display data for multiple years and to group and filter data by a variety of student characteristics, including grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, English proficiency, and migrant status. The WISEdash portal is used by districts, schools, parents, researchers, and others to view data published by DPI.

In terms of school discipline data, the WISEdash contains data on in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, incident types, lengths of removals, as well as the services students receive after removal. The dashboards allow users to see district- and state-level trends and make comparisons across districts and by various demographic factors.

CORE Districts School Quality Improvement Index

CORE Districts is a nonprofit organization in California working to improve student achievement through productive, meaningful collaboration and learning among member school districts. Nine school districts, collectively serving more than 1 million students, participate in the collaborative: Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Sanger Unified, and Santa Ana Unified.

The CORE Districts developed a new accountability system in 2014 called the School Quality Improvement Index, which uses multiple measures to assess school quality and create a better, more comprehensive system to inform and guide the efforts of schools to improve learning opportunities. The index consists of two domains: (1) academic (including measures of math and English language arts proficiency); and (2) social and emotional learning and culture/climate (including measures such as absenteeism, discipline, and disproportionality in special education designation). During its first year of implementation, the academic domain accounted for 60% of the index, and the social and emotional learning and culture/climate domains accounted for the remaining 40%. In 2016, the index will measure growth in academic achievement, and the social/emotional and culture/climate elements will expand to include student, family, and staff surveys as well as indicators of social–emotional skills.

The CORE Districts produce interactive reports that provide results to schools on each metric for all students and by student subgroups as well as an overall index score for each measure. Working from baseline data, the CORE Districts set performance thresholds. The system applies weights to the performance levels to determine index points earned for the overall index score. For more information on the School Quality Improvement Index, see http://coredistricts.org/core-index/.

Use Data to Inform Policy and Practice

Once states and districts identify which school climate and safety measures are most appropriate and relevant for their school system and have agreed upon a data collection system, they should identify dissemination strategies and, most importantly, consider how the data can inform decision making. The following strategies can help policy makers, education officials, and other youth-serving systems to use those data more effectively:

1. **Make data user friendly, accessible, and easily understandable.** To be of value, data should be readily and easily available and clearly presented so that stakeholders from varying systems can understand it and use it to inform decision making. Discipline, climate, and safety data are often buried within state education agency or school district websites and often presented in large Excel files, making it difficult for users to identify trends or key statistics. Data should be presented in a way that allows users to easily make comparisons across schools and districts and that facilitates analysis across a variety of student and school factors and characteristics. A state-wide glossary of key terms and standard definitions for data elements should also be provided to ensure consistent understanding among stakeholders.

2. **Provide customizable reports for various audiences focused on key metrics.** School discipline, climate, and safety data reports should focus on a few metrics that are most important to policy makers and decision makers, highlighting key trends such as suspension and expulsion rates, school climate ratings, and indices of equity and disproportionality. Reports should include tools that allow users to customize reports or drill down to examine data by specific incident type, school campus, or demographic indicator.

3. **Determine benchmarks, track trends over time, and collect anecdotal evidence to evaluate the impact of school climate and safety strategies and the school discipline system**. In order to assess the effectiveness of the school discipline system and the overall school climate, schools, districts, and states should set target performance measures that they can track over time. Committees that regularly review performance measures as part of a continuous quality improvement plan should be established. Qualitative data can serve as a rich complement to survey data and will bring life to the statistics and humanize the young people embedded in them. Importantly, students and parents should have a seat at the decision-making table so that their perspectives and understanding of the data are considered.

4. **Use data to target technical assistance, allocate resources, and scale up best practices.** School discipline, climate, and safety data should be reviewed continually by school and district leaders and state policy makers to guide policy and practice. School disciplinary data should be disaggregated by geography and demographic factors so that resources and interventions are targeted, appropriate, and align with the data. Disaggregating the data also allows schools and districts to unearth any disparities or disproportionalities in their systems. If specific strategies prove to be effective, then states may choose to scale up identified best practices. States may choose to "de-scale" practices and policies that are deemed to be ineffective or iatrogenic.

Georgia Department of Education School Climate Star Rating

In 2012, the Georgia legislature passed a law requiring the development of a school climate rating with five categories: excellent (5); above average (4); average (3); below satisfactory (2); unsatisfactory (1). Georgia has consequently become one of the first states to include school climate as an indicator in its academic accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The School Climate Star Rating is a diagnostic tool that helps schools assess learning environments and school success and identify elements that could or do negatively impact students and staff. The rating consists of results from student school climate surveys, student discipline data, student attendance data, and a ratio of drug, alcohol, bullying, and dangerous incidents.

Each school has access to the School Climate Star Rating metrics. Schools and districts are using the school climate ratings to guide improvement strategies. First-year rating results received significant media attention, as the Department of Education reported that the number of schools interested in implementing school climate improvement strategies increased from 300 to more than 600 after the ratings were released. The State Board of Education also decided to establish a state-wide school climate management program to help local schools and systems develop school climate improvement and management processes.

Austin Independent School District Child Study Team

The Austin (Texas) Independent School District uses a Child Study System to employ prevention and intervention strategies to support all students' needs. The Child Study Team is a student support team that comprises educators and specialized instructional staff who oversee services to students in need of higher tiered interventions.

The Child Study Team receives referrals from school staff and reviews student academic data, discipline data, prior history of services received, and attendance data to identify goals and match interventions. The team uses an electronic dashboard to input information on goals and interventions, and the dashboard helps the team to monitor students' progress and assess the effectiveness of interventions. The team monitors the progress of each student for up to 9 weeks and then determines appropriate next steps.