

# HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES

A Health Impact Assessment of Exclusionary School Discipline, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Restorative Justice Policies in Three California School Districts



ONE MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY of the public school system is to provide a safe and hospitable “school climate” in which teachers and students can successfully teach and learn. School discipline policies can promote safe, positive and healthy schools. “Zero tolerance” policies enforce mandatory sentencing for specific behaviors, leaving no room for administrators to exercise good judgment. Ongoing national, state and local school district policy debates have explored the costs and benefits of zero tolerance and alternative discipline programs. Few of these debates incorporate the health of students and their communities as part of the cost-benefit analysis.

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a tool that is used to evaluate the

impacts of a proposed policy on health. In order to more deeply investigate the potential impacts on health and health disparities, Human Impact Partners (HIP) conducted an HIA on school discipline policies in Los Angeles, Oakland, and Salinas, California school districts. HIP worked in collaboration with Community Asset Development Re-Defining Education (CADRE) in Los Angeles and Restorative Justice Partners (RJP) in Salinas. The HIA was funded by The California Endowment (TCE).

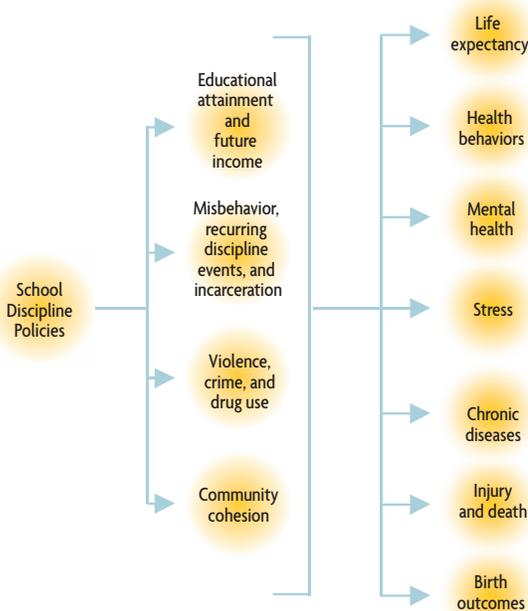
## School Discipline Policies Evaluated in this HIA

*Exclusionary school discipline* (ESD) policies, also known as “zero tolerance policies,” typically enforce mandatory sentencing such as automatic suspension, expulsion, or even arrest. These policies emerged as part of a federal mandate regarding weapons at school, but over the course of their widespread adoption in the 1990s, school districts slowly broadened their scope, eventually including drugs, alcohol, threats, insubordination, and even cursing to the list of behaviors that may now trigger severe disciplinary actions. The majority of U.S. public schools rely heavily on ESD as their primary disciplinary strategy.

*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* and *Restorative Justice* are two well-known whole-school climate programs being scaled up in schools to address behavior, often as alternatives to zero tolerance policies. The two policies are complementary.

With the goal of improving school climate and decreasing school disruption, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) teaches social skills and reinforces positive student behaviors. HIA partners in South Los Angeles have focused efforts on adopting and implementing PBIS district-wide in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and there is interest within Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and multiple Salinas school districts (including Salinas City Elementary School District or SCESD) to increase the use of PBIS in schools as well.

A Restorative Justice (RJ) approach also can be universally applied across a school, engaging students in taking responsibility for school improvement and when necessary, focusing on ‘repairing the harm’ caused by challenging behavior through stakeholder cooperation and dialogue. Administrators, teachers and peers work with the offender to take responsibility for his/her actions and change disruptive behavior. HIA partners in both Oakland and Salinas have focused on implementing RJ.



## Summary of Findings

### Impacts on Educational Attainment

Public health studies show that people with more education are likely to:

- Live longer
- Exercise regularly and have a healthy weight
- Not smoke
- Obtain timely health care check-ups and screenings
- Have healthier babies and children
- Have better social networks of support
- Earn more money

An *Exclusionary* discipline approach leads to lower educational attainment, including:

- Lower grades and test scores
- Negative attitudes about school and feelings of alienation
- Increased Special Education referrals
- Higher dropout rates and grade retention
- Less participation in extracurricular activities
- Lower attendance rates

A *PBIS* discipline approach leads to higher educational attainment, including improvements in reading performance and all-around student academic performance, as well as a reduction in out-of-school suspensions.

A *Restorative Justice* discipline approach also leads to higher educational attainment, including:

- Reduced suspensions and expulsions
- The development and sustainability of positive relationships



- Higher attendance rates and higher likelihood of graduating
- Higher academic performance, including test scores

### Impacts on Misbehavior, Recurring Discipline Events, and Incarceration

Studies have shown that suspension and expulsion are associated with the following public health issues:

- Engagement with juvenile justice and incarceration as an adult, which are associated with stress-related illnesses, psychiatric problems, suicide attempts, higher long-range recidivism rates, and increased HIV, Hepatitis C, and tuberculosis
- Dropping out, which can then lead to increased chance of unemployment and incarceration

An *Exclusionary* discipline approach does not prevent future offenses at school and leads to:

- More misbehavior and repeat suspension and/or expulsion
- Increased violence and drug use

- Increased referrals to juvenile justice and greater likelihood of adult incarceration

A *PBIS* discipline approach leads to a reduction in office discipline referrals and suspensions, fewer referrals to law enforcement, and fewer repeat incidents.

A *Restorative Justice* discipline approach leads to fewer instances of harmful and disruptive behavior, reduction in suspensions and expulsions, and fewer referrals to law enforcement.

### Impacts on Mental Health

One contributor to poor mental health is stress. Early life and chronic stress, including stress from feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood and environment, can lead to:

- Poor birth outcomes
- Adult chronic disease and obesity
- Mental health disorders
- Heart disease
- Substance abuse

An *Exclusionary* discipline approach would lead to negative mental health outcomes in students.

A *PBIS* discipline approach would lead to a reduction in negative mental health outcomes of exclusionary discipline policies.

A *Restorative Justice* discipline approach would lead to:

- Increased levels of respect and empathy
- Improved conflict resolution skills
- Reduced antisocial behavior among students

## Impacts on Violence and Crime

Impacts of violence on health are both direct and indirect. Violence can cause injury or death and can:

- Increase stress and exacerbate negative mental health impacts
  - Decrease neighborhood cohesion, which is a determinant of health
  - On a neighborhood level, increase pre-term birth and low birth weight
  - Increase violence and non-violent delinquency among adolescent girls and boys
- An *Exclusionary* discipline approach does not lead to increased school safety, and potentially decreases school safety. In addition, youth are more likely to use drugs when they're not in school.

A *PBIS* discipline approach would lead to improvements in students' perceptions of safety at school.

A *Restorative Justice* discipline approach would lead to:

- Reduced violence and fights
- Increased perceptions of safety

- Reduced crime

## Impacts on Community Cohesion Strong social ties and/or a social network are associated with:

- Lower stress
- Better management of and recovery from illness
- Decreased risk of mortality
- Increased access to health-related information and resources
- Lower anxiety and depression in coping with community violence
- Lower risk of suicide

An *Exclusionary* discipline approach leads to financial hardships for parents who stay home to supervise suspended or expelled children.

A *PBIS* discipline approach would lead to:

- Increased respect for all members of the school community
- Better relationships among staff
- Supportive administrative leadership

A *Restorative Justice* discipline approach would lead to:

- Better relationships throughout the school community
- Increased student participation
- Increased respect among students

## Impacts of Exclusionary Discipline Are Unevenly Distributed

Black, and to a lesser extent Latino males are suspended and expelled more frequently than students of other racial groups, even though evidence shows that Black students are consistently disciplined for less serious or more subjective reasons than students of other racial groups. Black and Latino boys make up the majority of incarcerated juveniles and are vastly overrepresented in adult prison. Thus, the school to prison pipeline is particularly robust for Black and Latino men and boys. And although problem behaviors, such as drug use, are marginally higher among White youth, increased police presence in many Black and Latino neighborhoods increases the chances of police contact that results in arrests and subsequent incarcerations. Through these impacts, exclusionary discipline disproportionately leads to poor short- and long-term health outcomes for Black males.

Low-income students and students with disabilities are also punished disproportionately.



## Summary of Impacts of PBIS and RJ on Health

For all three districts analyzed, PBIS would increase time in school for students, which would in turn improve health knowledge and behaviors, increase longevity, earning potential and thus access to resources, and access to social networks of support. Students who remain in school are less likely to become involved in a physical fight, carry a weapon, and use drugs. In addition, keeping students in school would prevent family stress and financial burdens associated with staying home to supervise children. Negative mental health conditions associated with exclusionary discipline, such as embarrassment, stress, and feelings of rejection

and alienation, would be reduced as a result of PBIS implementation.

Based on the more limited data about the impacts of RJ as implemented in OUSD and Salinas schools, RJ would increase time in school for students, in turn supporting all of the benefits described above. In addition, RJ may increase the development and sustainability of positive relationships throughout the school community, increase respect among students, improve conflict resolution skills, and prevent instances of violence, fights, and crime.

### Key Recommendations

Overall, this HIA found that exclusionary discipline leads to negative health outcomes through educational

attainment, recurring discipline events and incarceration, violence, drug use, and social cohesion, as well as direct mental health impacts. Based on results of this HIA, we recommend PBIS and/or RJ as alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices. However, importantly, since research evidence on PBIS and RJ could be strengthened, we also recommend a rigorous system of school discipline events data collection and evaluation across all schools that are piloting these alternative programs.

*For more information about this assessment, please contact Celia Harris, [celia@humanimpact.org](mailto:celia@humanimpact.org)*

Health Determinant	Impact	Magnitude	Severity	Strength of Evidence	Uncertainties
Education	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Mod-Major (PBIS) Moderate (RJ) Major (ESD)	Mod-Major	▲▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲▲▲ (ESD)	Varying degrees of discipline policy implementation will modify impacts. Student vulnerability or trauma associated with factors outside of school play a role in all of these health determinants (i.e., school discipline policies are not the only contributor)
Misbehavior, Recurring Discipline Events, and Incarceration	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Mod-Major (PBIS) Moderate (RJ) Major (ESD)	Mod-Major	▲▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲▲▲ (ESD)	
Community Violence and Crime	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Minor (PBIS) Minor (RJ) Minor (ESD)	Major	▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲ (ESD)	
Drug Use	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Minor-Mod (PBIS) Minor-Mod (RJ) Minor-Mod (ESD)	Moderate	▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲ (ESD)	
Family, School and Community Cohesion	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Mod-Major (PBIS) Moderate (RJ) Major (ESD)	Moderate	▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲ (ESD)	
Mental Health Conditions	+ (PBIS) + (RJ) - (ESD)	Moderate (PBIS) Moderate (RJ) Mod-Major (ESD)	Mod-Major	▲ (PBIS) ▲ (RJ) ▲▲ (ESD)	

#### EXPLANATIONS:

- Impact refers to whether the proposal will improve health (+), harm health (-), or whether results are mixed (-).
- Magnitude reflects a qualitative judgment of the size of the anticipated change in health effect (e.g., the increase in the number of cases of disease, injury, adverse events): Negligible, Minor, Moderate, Major.
- Severity reflects the nature of the effect on function and life-expectancy and its permanence: High = intense/severe; Mod = Moderate; Low = not intense or severe.
- Strength of Evidence refers to the strength of the research/evidence showing causal relationship between mobility and the health outcome:
  - ▲ plausible but insufficient evidence;
  - ▲▲ likely but more evidence needed;
  - ▲▲▲ causal relationship certain. A causal effect means that the effect is likely to occur, irrespective of the magnitude and severity.

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## Case Study: Los Angeles Unified School District

High school graduation rates and test scores for LAUSD are lower than state averages, and dropout rates are higher than state averages. Suspension rates in LAUSD Local District 7 in South LA have been approximately 4 suspensions per 100 students, and disciplinary referrals disproportionately involve students of color. The violent crime rate in South LA is over twice that of the county, while the property crime rate is about equal to the county's rate. Many school staff have reported that drug use is a problem among students. About one-third of students reported that sadness or depression affects their normal daily activities.



*According to a survey of 120 South Los Angeles parents, 68% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that suspension and expulsion practices increase violence at school.*

LAUSD passed a school-wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) policy in 2007. However, not all district schools are doing a good job putting the policy into place. Based on an analysis of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in schools in four states across the country, in 2009–10, if the middle and high schools in Local District 7 had increased their use of SWPBS by 50%:

- **741 (approximately 1/3)** out-of-school suspensions would have been prevented
- **At least 741** school days of student instructional time would have been saved
- **31** school days of teaching time would have been saved
- **93** school days of administrative time would have been saved

South Los Angeles parents expressed in focus groups and surveys that education for their children is a top priority. Based on their experiences, suspensions push kids towards delinquency, increase violence, increase drug and alcohol use, and increase the chances of their children coming into contact with law enforcement. Parents were also very concerned about mental health issues for their children, believing that poor mental health can spiral into other problems like drug use, violence, and disciplinary events and incarceration.

South LA youth, both those who had and had not been suspended in the past, were very opposed to exclusion-

ary discipline practices overall. They felt that suspensions and expulsions are ineffective at preventing future misbehavior and set students up for academic failure. They also expressed that severe disciplinary actions can result in stress and harm psychological well-being of students. Students overwhelmingly agreed that suspensions encourage students to “hang out” and have fun at best, and engage in illicit and violent activities at worst. Some students acknowledged that disciplining chronically disruptive students was necessary.

Findings of this HIA support the following key recommendations at LAUSD:

- All LAUSD schools should fully implement the existing SWPBS policy.
- The Los Angeles School Police Department, the Los Angeles Police Department, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department should prioritize and be trained in SBPBS as an intervention approach with South LA youth, community, and schools.
- LAUSD teachers and schools should engage parents to the highest degree possible, including within classrooms and in SWPBS implementation.
- LAUSD should concretely define the meaning of “willful defiance,” which is often cited as a reason for school exclusions, and stop suspending and expelling students for subjective reasons.

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## Case Study: Oakland Unified School District

High school graduation rates and test scores for OUSD are lower than, and dropout rates are higher than, state averages. Suspension rates have been approximately 15 suspensions per 100 students, and disciplinary referrals disproportionately involve students of color. Oakland is classified as one of the most violent cities in the state. Many juvenile arrests occur in OUSD schools. Many school staff report that drug use is a problem among students. About one-third of students reported that sadness or depression affects their normal daily activities.

In January 2010, the OUSD School Board passed a resolution to adopt a district-wide Restorative Justice (RJ) policy, and RJ is currently being



*One student commented: “If someone goes home, plays games and eats, talks on the phone, is on the computer . . . they won’t care if they get suspended. So it’s really not going to be a punishment.”*

piloted at 12 OUSD schools. District leadership hopes that in the future, all OUSD schools will implement RJ at full scale. OUSD has also started implementing a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. By the end of the 2011–12 school year, a cohort of 10–12 pilot schools will be implementing PBIS in some form. Full PBIS implementation at these schools is expected to begin in the 2012–13 school year.

Based on a predictive analysis of PBIS in schools in four states around the country, in 2009–10, if the 36 middle and high schools that have publicly available suspension data from the California Department of Education’s Dataquest website had increased their use of PBIS by 50%:

- **1,568 (approximately 1/3)** out-of-school suspensions would have been prevented
- At least **1,568** school days of student instructional time would have been saved
- **65** school days of teaching time would have been saved
- **196** school days of administrative time would have been saved

RJ is also anticipated to keep more kids in school rather than being suspended and expelled.

The general feeling of several Oakland high school students who participated in focus groups was that exclusionary discipline was completely ineffective, and that an RJ approach is more promising. One student said that in

response to a disciplinary situation, misbehaving students should discuss and question the weight of and reasons for their harmful behavior, appropriate consequences, and how to prevent similar behavior in the future.

Some students who had experienced RJ circles themselves claimed that RJ can result in students involved in a conflict resolving their differences and even becoming friends. However, at least two other students expressed that they wouldn’t feel comfortable participating in an RJ circle and becoming friends with someone who harmed them.

Findings of this HIA support the following key recommendations at OUSD:

- OUSD should continue the existing RJ and PBIS programs at OUSD pilot schools.
- OUSD should concurrently conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of the RJ and PBIS programs.
- As part of the evaluation, OUSD should implement a rigorous system of school discipline events data collection across all OUSD schools, with data cross-referenced with information on student and family demographics, academic performance and advancement, and health.
- OUSD should concretely define the meaning of “willful defiance,” which is often cited as a reason for school exclusions, and stop suspending and expelling students for subjective reasons.

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## Case Study: Salinas City Elementary School District

Suspension rates at SCESD have been approximately 8 suspensions per 100 students, and disciplinary referrals disproportionately involve students of color. The homicide rate in the city of Salinas has increased steadily over the past several years, and is currently estimated to be around four times higher than the national rate. The rate of total violent crimes in Salinas is also higher than state and national rates.

Restorative Justice (RJ) practices have been piloted in some Salinas elementary schools since 2009. In Summer 2011, SCESD's school board unanimously passed a Restorative Justice resolution for the district. Today, advocates are pushing for RJ implementation in other districts in the county, such as Alisal Union School District. In addition to RJ, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies have been implemented in three SCESD schools, and the district plans to expand their PBIS programs when funding allows.

The SCESD superintendent interviewed for this HIA emphasized the positive role of RJ in her district. She has anecdotally observed that RJ has reduced suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to police, and has helped student and teacher stress levels go



down. She believes that students who learn RJ skills at school bring them into their homes and communities, and that this can result in decreased violence and crime in the community overall. She also supported the use of PBIS in schools.

Findings of this HIA support the following key recommendations for Salinas school districts:

- SCESD should continue supporting and developing its existing RJ and PBIS programs.
- SCESD should concurrently conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of the RJ and PBIS programs.
- As part of the evaluation, SCESD should implement a rigorous system of school discipline events data collection across all SCESD schools, with data cross-referenced

with information on student and family demographics, academic performance and advancement, and health.

- Additional Salinas school districts, including Alisal, should consider passing and implementing RJ and PBIS resolutions and programs.

*Salinas City Elementary School District Superintendent Dr. Donna Vaughan reported that students can bring Restorative Justice skills into their homes and communities: "Kids are going home and teaching their parents about RJ."*