

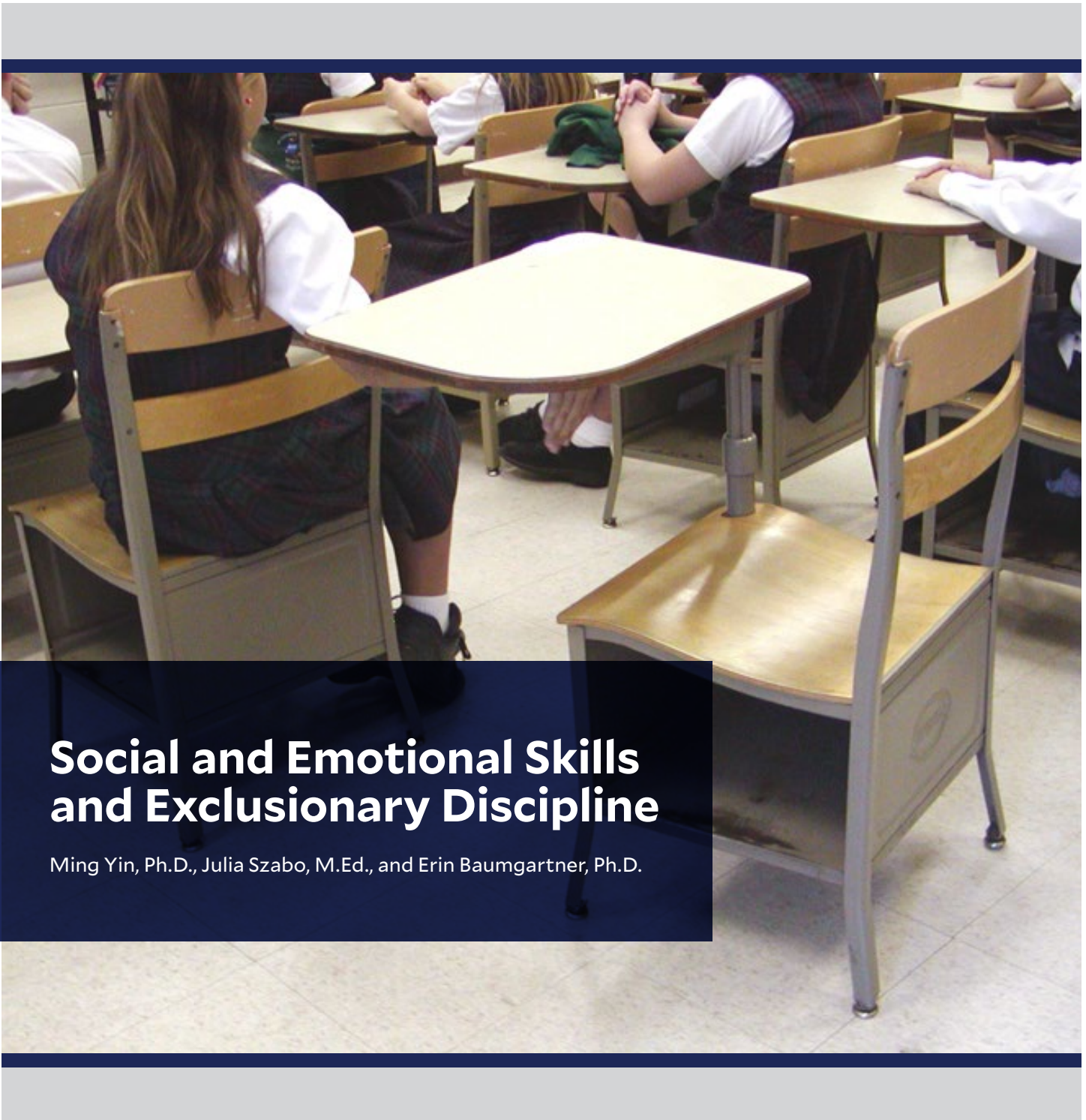


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*Houston Education Research Consortium*

*Building Better Cities  
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## **Social and Emotional Skills and Exclusionary Discipline**

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**Research Brief**

for the Houston Independent School District

January 2023

**Suggested citation.** Yin, M., Szabo, J. & Baumgartner, E. (2023). *Social and Emotional Skills and Exclusionary Discipline*. Houston, TX: Houston Education Research Consortium, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University.

**About this study.** The Study of Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) at the U.S. study site was made possible through support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Houston Endowment, and The Wallace Foundation. The research reported was also made possible (in part) by a grant from the Spencer Foundation (#201800104). The findings, conclusions and views contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the funders.

**About HERC.** Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision makers—culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.

## Research Brief

# Social and Emotional Skills and Exclusionary Discipline

**T**he Study of Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) is an international effort led by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with Houston Independent School District (HISD) serving as the only U.S. site. Over 3,000 15-year-old students from 45 HISD campuses participated in SSES in the fall of 2019. Social and emotional (SE) skills refer to the process by which children acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (OECD 2015). SE skills can lead to improved outcomes in education, employment, health, and well-being (Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez 2019).

**This brief examines whether and how social and emotional skills were connected to students' experiences of exclusionary discipline.** Exclusionary discipline, or disciplinary actions that remove students from a traditional classroom, included in-school suspension, out of school suspension, and referral to an alternative education program. Among the sampled students under study, 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students disproportionately experienced exclusionary discipline. Therefore, this brief focused on these student groups. **It was found that students who self-reported higher levels of self-control or persistence were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline, whereas students who self-reported higher levels of assertiveness were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline.**

## Key Findings

- Students who reported higher levels of self-control or persistence were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline.
- Students who reported higher levels of assertiveness were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline.

# Introduction

## Background

Exclusionary discipline or suspension has been found to be a major problem facing schools and students of color because it is common and harmful (Fabelo et al. 2011). Exclusionary discipline is connected with lowered academic achievement (Perry & Morris 2014) conceptualizing exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., out-of-school suspension, sense of belonging in school, and trust in adults in school (Pyne 2019), and an increased likelihood of school dropout (Fabelo et al. 2011; Torres et al. 2015), subsequent disciplinary involvement and juvenile justice contact (Fabelo et al. 2011; Mittleman 2018). Although exclusionary discipline is linked to multiple contextual and subjective factors, such as school racial composition (Welch & Payne 2018) and teacher perceptions (Owens & McLanahan 2020), less research has focused on the role of student social and emotional skills in disciplinary outcomes.

In the fall of 2019, over 6,400 HISD students from 119 campuses participated in the SSES study, an international survey led by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) studying the SE skills of 10- and 15-year-old students. Among the sampled students, 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students disproportionately experienced exclusionary discipline. This study aimed to understand the ways in which SE skills were connected with disciplinary outcomes for the students who were most likely to experience exclusionary discipline—Black and Hispanic adolescents<sup>1</sup>.

## Research Questions

This brief addresses the following research question:

- *How were 15-year-old HISD students' self-reported social and emotional skills connected to exclusionary discipline?*

<sup>1</sup> Exclusionary discipline was rare in the 10-year-old cohort (1.3%), compared to the 15-year-old cohort (over 10%). Among 15-year-olds, Black and Hispanic students were disproportionately disciplined compared to White and Asian students.

# Study Details

## Data and Sample

Data for this study came from the SSES student survey collected in fall 2019. This survey was administered to a randomly selected group of 15-year-old students from 45 campuses in HISD. Additional data came from the 2019-20 Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), HISD fall 2019 course grade data, and district disciplinary records. Among the students who completed the survey, 2,765 students were included in the study. See Appendix II for more information on the students included in this study.

## Discipline

In this study, exclusionary discipline, or disciplinary actions that remove students from a traditional classroom, included in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and referral to an alternative education program. Because of the survey administration timeline, this study focused on students' experiences of exclusionary discipline in fall 2019. Among the 15-year-old students sampled in this study, Black and Hispanic students were disproportionately disciplined compared to Asian and White students. As shown in Table 1, about 18% of Black students and 10% of Hispanic students experienced exclusionary discipline, whereas only 2% of Asian students and 3% White students had such experiences.



Photo by Andrew Neel on Unsplash

Black and Hispanic students were overrepresented in exclusionary discipline in fall 2019 and make up the majority of the student populations in HISD<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, this study focused specifically on the connections between SE skills and exclusionary discipline among 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students. Among the 2,765 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students included in the study, 11.7% of students experienced discipline in fall 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In HISD, over 62% of the students are Hispanic and 22% are Black. White and Asian students together make up around 10% of the student populations (<https://www.houstonisd.org/achievements>).

TABLE 1 **Percent of 15-year-old respondents who experienced discipline by race/ethnicity in Fall 2019**

Black	Hispanic	Asian	White
17.7%	9.4%	>2%	>3%

Note: Percentages reflect fall 2019 suspension among student participants in the SSES and were calculated using survey weights

### Measures of social and emotional skills

A set of 15 social and emotional subdomain skills from the OECD study were included in this analysis. Items that make up each of the SE skills are available in an [online appendix](#). These skills include:

- Cooperation (living in harmony with others)
- Empathy (understanding and caring for others and their well-being )
- Trust (assuming that others generally have good intentions)
- Assertiveness (able to confidentially voice opinions, needs, and feelings)
- Energy (approaching daily life with energy, excitement and spontaneity)
- Sociability (able to approach others)
- Emotion Control (effective strategies for regulating temper, anger and irritation)
- Optimism (positive expectations for self and life)
- Stress Resistance (effectiveness in modulating anxiety and able to calmly solve problems)
- Creativity (generating novel ways to do or think about things)
- Curiosity (interest in ideas and love of learning and intellectual exploration)
- Tolerance (open to different points of view, values diversity)
- Persistence (persevere in tasks and activities until they got done)
- Responsibility (able to honor commitments, and be punctual and reliable)
- Self-Control (able to avoid distractions and sudden impulses )

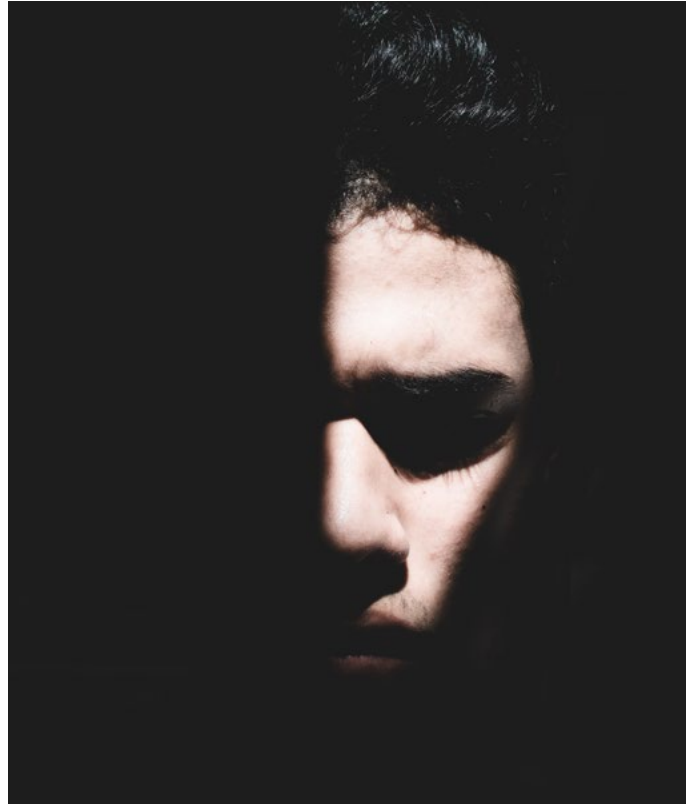


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### Analytical strategies

To understand the ways in which SE skills were linked to exclusionary discipline, this analysis used Generalized Structural Equation Modeling (GSEM) to examine the relationship between SE skills and discipline as indicated by in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or a referral to an alternative education program. Important student demographic, academic, and socioeconomic characteristics were also accounted for in the analyses. Specifically, the following student characteristics were included: grade level, English learner (EL) status, special education status, gender, race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage status, and average reading and math grades in fall 2019. Differences between campuses were also accounted for. Detailed results for all SE skills from the analyses can be found in Appendix I.

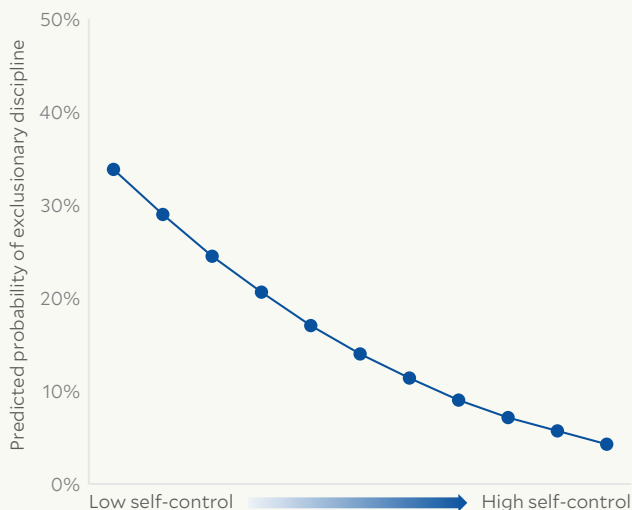
# Key Findings

## 1 Students who reported higher self-control and persistence were less likely to experience exclusionary suspension.

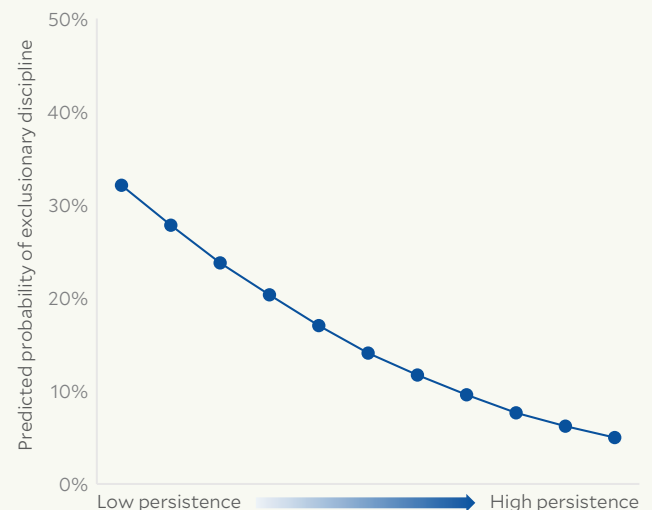
Fifteen-year-old Black and Hispanic students reporting higher levels of self-control and persistence were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline as demonstrated in Figures 1-2. “Self-control” describes the ability to avoid distractions and sudden impulses (OECD 2021a). Fifteen-year-old Black and Hispanic students reporting the highest level of self-control were 8.5 times less likely to experience exclusionary discipline than those reporting the lowest level of self-control. The skill of persistence measures perseverance in tasks and activities and refers to the ability to continue and complete tasks and activities in spite of challenges and distractions (OECD 2021a). Specifically, among

15-year-old Black and Hispanic students, those reporting the highest level of persistence were about 6.4 times less likely to experience exclusionary discipline than those reporting the lowest levels of the skill.

**FIGURE 1** Self-control and Exclusionary Discipline



**FIGURE 2** Persistence and Exclusionary Discipline

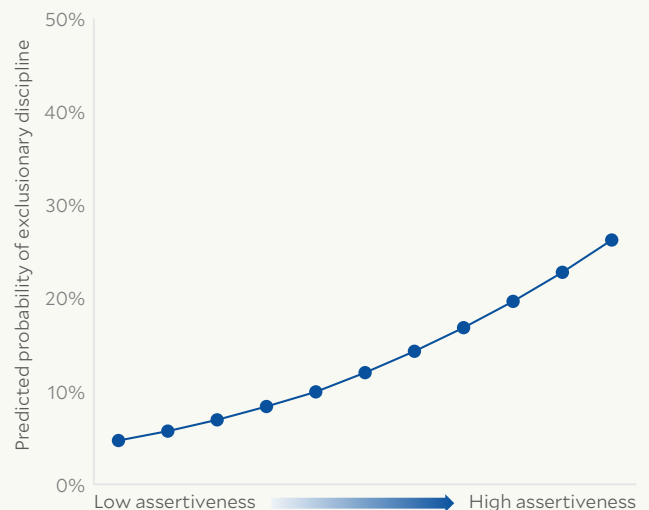




## 2 Assertiveness was positively associated with exclusionary discipline.

As seen in Figure 3, students reporting higher levels of assertiveness were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than those reporting lower levels. Assertiveness is an SE skill that describes individuals who are able to confidently voice opinions, needs and feelings, and lead others (OECD 2021a). Among 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students, those who reported the highest level of assertiveness were about 5.7 times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than students reporting the lowest level of assertiveness.

**FIGURE 3** Assertiveness and Exclusionary Discipline





# Conclusion and Recommendations

## Conclusion

The purpose of this brief was to understand the ways in which SE skills were linked to exclusionary discipline. The study moved beyond parent and teacher measured behaviors (Huang 2020; Owens & McLanahan 2020) Obama-era disciplinary guidance aimed at reducing the use of suspensions in schools (especially for minorities and students with disabilities) to consider the connection between student's self-rated skills and their actual disciplinary experiences. It was found that 15-year-old Black and Hispanic students who reported higher levels of self-control or persistence were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline, whereas students who reported higher levels of assertiveness were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline.

The findings about self-control and persistence are aligned with research that suggests social and emotional skills and attitudes that regulate emotions and behaviors are protective factors of discipline (see Gregory & Fergus 2017). In addition, prior research has focused on how teacher perceptions of assertiveness vary by students' race and ethnicity and linked to experiencing exclusionary discipline (E. W. Morris 2007; M. W. Morris 2016). In this study, we found that student perceptions of their own assertiveness were also associated with experiencing exclusionary discipline. The findings highlight the importance of contexts in which SE skills are enacted. For example, the skill of assertiveness may

be admired when students express themselves among friends or family. But in another context (i.e., school or classroom), the same demonstration or expression may be devalued or seen as disruptive, relating to more disciplinary outcomes. Other instances where there were no relationships between certain SE skills and exclusionary discipline do not mean that these SE skills were not strengths in different settings or with respect to other outcomes. This may simply suggest some skills have a stronger relationship with exclusionary discipline.

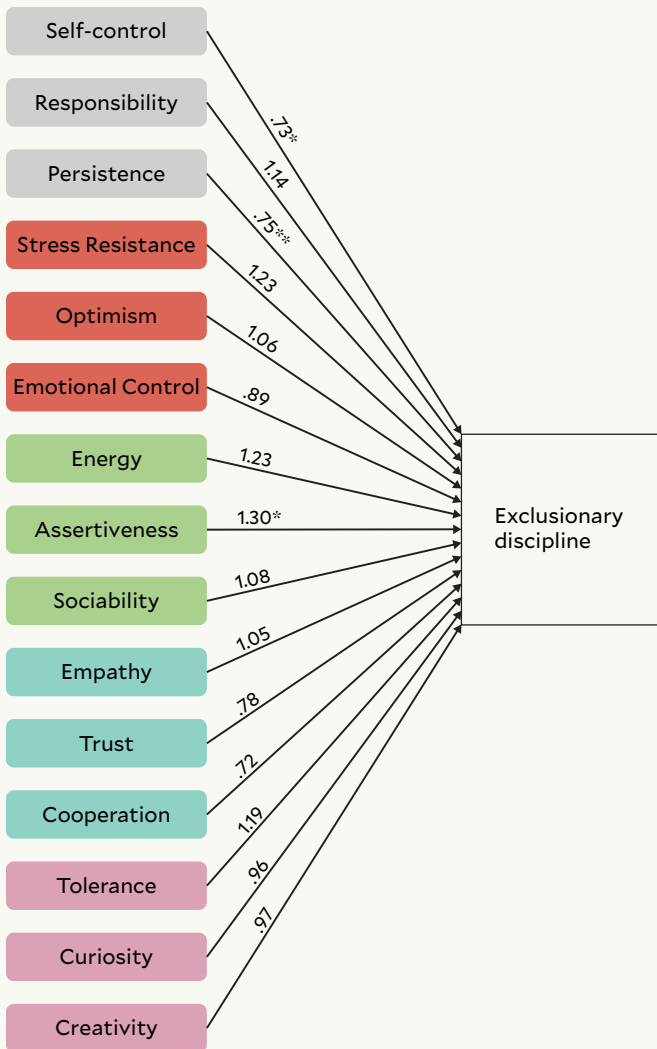
## Recommendations

- Consider opportunities for campuses to assess student social and emotional skills regularly, particularly assertiveness, self-control, and persistence, so that teachers and staff can use this information to support students who may be at greater risk of experiencing exclusionary discipline.
- As students who exhibit higher levels of self-control and persistence also are also less likely to experience exclusionary discipline, integrating these topics into the curriculum may help students build these skills and result in fewer discipline outcomes.
- Encourage a dialogue within teachers and staff to reflect on how students' assertiveness is identified and responded to, both in the classroom and the school context at large.

# Appendix I. Generalized Structural Equation Modeling Result

Figure A1 illustrates the odds ratio and significance level between each of the SE skills and exclusionary discipline.

**FIGURE A1 Relationship between SE skills and Exclusionary Discipline**



Note: \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Numbers shown are the odds ratio from GSEM model, conditioning on student-level controls and latent school effects (see a list of control variables on page 3). Full GSEM results are available upon request. The exclusionary discipline here includes in-school suspension, out of school suspension, or a referral to an alternative education program.

**TABLE 2 15-Year-Old Black and Hispanic Student Respondents Profile**

Student Group	N	Percent
Overall	2,765 <sup>1</sup>	100
<b>Grade<sup>2</sup></b>		
Grade 8	5	0.18
Grade 9	545	19.71
Grade 10	1,981	71.65
Grade 11	216	7.81
Grade 12	18	0.65
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	1,306	47.23
Female	1,459	52.77
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black	781	28.25
Hispanic	1,984	71.75
<b>Economic Disadvantaged Status</b>		
No	420	15.29
Yes	2,345	84.81
<b>English Learner (EL) Status</b>		
Not Current EL	2,239	80.98
Current EL	526	19.02
<b>Special Education Status</b>		
No	2,637	95.27
Yes	128	4.63

<sup>1</sup> Analytical samples were finalized based on the following exclusions. Students were excluded if (1) the demographic information was not captured in Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) 2019-20 data; (2) survey responses were invalid or missing; or (3) students identified as Native American, multiracial, White, or Asian.

<sup>2</sup> As shown above, the majority of 15-year-old students in this study were in Grade 10.

# Appendix II. Technical Notes

## Analytical Strategies

Because of the binary nature of the dependent variable, generalized structural equation modeling with logit link function was estimated to predict the likelihood of experiencing exclusionary discipline. The complex survey design and student-level final/inference weights were accounted for in all analyses. School differences were also controlled for by adding a latent effect of school in the analytical models. This is similar to adding a school-fixed effect. All SE skills were analyzed in the model simultaneously. Raw scores of the SE skills were transformed through dividing by 100 prior to using them in the analyses. To ease interpretation, odds ratios are presented in Figure A1.

To visualize the findings, the graphs in Figure 1 to 3 were produced based on the adjusted differences in the likelihood of the dependent variable (experienced exclusionary discipline or not). Predictive margins/adjusted predictions of the SE skills that were significantly connected with discipline were graphed to visualize how the likelihood changed with different levels of the SE skills.

## Academic Outcomes

The academic control variable was composite grades, created by averaging students' reading and math grades in fall 2019. The course grades data came directly from HISD and is different from the official end-of-year course grades data that the Houston Education Research Consortium typically receives. Most secondary schools had a six-week grading cycle. For schools with six-week grading cycles, the researchers used the cycle 2 grades, which covered early October to early November.

To generate consistent performance measures on reading and math, a series of rules were applied. The researchers first categorized all courses offered based on subject areas and course descriptions. Among over 600 courses offered, 116 language-arts-related courses (i.e., English language arts, Reading, Writing) were categorized under reading, and 59 math-related courses (i.e., General math, Algebra, Geometry, Calculus) were categorized under math. Then the researchers identified applicable reading and math courses for each of the sampled students. If a student had two or more courses within the same category, the course with the highest grade was kept. About 10% of students in each cohort had letter grades for applicable courses. Next, letter grades were converted to numeric grades based on HISD conversion guidelines.<sup>3</sup>

Grading Scheme	Converted Score	Note
A	95	This conversion only applies to the students who received letter grades. The wide majority of students had numeric grades and those grades were sustained.
B	85	
C/D	75	
F	60	

<sup>3</sup> Conversion guidelines were based on grading scale in the 2020-2021 HISD School Guidelines on pp. XV-7: <https://www.houstonisd.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&ModuleInstanceId=228302&ViewID=C9E0416E-F0E7-4626-AA7B-C14D59F72F85&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=191356&PageID=31617&Comments=true>

## Survey items measuring self-control, persistence, and assertiveness

Self-Control	Persistence	Assertiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Careful with what I say to others</li> <li>▪ Can control my actions</li> <li>▪ Think carefully before doing something</li> <li>▪ Avoid mistakes by working carefully</li> <li>▪ Stop to think before I act</li> <li>▪ Often act without thinking*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Keep working on a task until it is finished</li> <li>▪ Make sure that I finish tasks</li> <li>▪ Give up easily*</li> <li>▪ Finish things that I start</li> <li>▪ Stop when work becomes too hard*</li> <li>▪ Hate leaving tasks like homework or chores unfinished</li> <li>▪ Finish things even if they are hard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A leader</li> <li>▪ Want to be in charge</li> <li>▪ Know how to convince others to do what I want</li> <li>▪ Enjoy leading others</li> <li>▪ Dislike leading a team*</li> <li>▪ Like to be a leader in my class</li> <li>▪ Commanding and act like a leader</li> </ul>

\*Reverse-coded items. Items for all skills are available online.

### Survey Weights

All analyses in this study have accounted for survey weights in order to calculate appropriate estimates of sampling error and to make valid estimates and inferences about the population.

The final student weight indicates the relative contribution of that unit to the estimated outcomes of the survey. It is the product of a design or base weight and of one or many adjustment factors. The former is the inverse of the selection probability, and the latter compensates for random non-response and other random occurrences that could, if not accounted for, introduce bias in the estimates. These design weights and adjustment factors are specific to each stage of the sample design (OECD 2021b).

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The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



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