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## Adopting Non-Exclusionary Discipline Practices: The First Steps Are the Most Confusing

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## Adopting Non-Exclusionary Discipline Practices: The First Steps Are the Most Confusing

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### Abstract

Two years after the State of Illinois enacted an extensive non-exclusionary discipline reform in schools, 322 key discipline gatekeepers were surveyed about the extent and impact of the new state policy. The results showed that several core provisions of the reform had not been fully implemented or addressed through professional development. Creating re-entry plans for students with long suspensions, eliminating zero tolerance policies, and limiting disciplinary transfers to alternative schools were the least implemented provisions. Furthermore, contrary to principals' conservative self-reporting, large proportions of school personnel still had not received required professional development in key topics such as (a) adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement, (b) culturally responsive discipline, and (c) developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climate. Finally, differences were revealed between principals and other gatekeepers regarding satisfaction with, and impact of the implementation. Sharp differences were found between principals, on one hand, and teachers and support personnel, on the other hand, about the continuing prevalence and high frequency of discipline incidents, and about improvement in the overall school climate. If the reform is going to be impactful, it was recommended that more emphasis be placed on ensuring that teachers and support personnel receive adequate and timely professional development on the provisions of the policies.

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### Introduction

The key premise of the zero-tolerance policies of the 1980s into the first decade of the 21st Century was that such practices would deter severe discipline infractions and protect non-offenders (Alnaim, 2018; Kodelja, 2019; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018). School leaders were using harsh disciplinary consequences, particularly, detentions, suspensions, arrests, and expulsions in the hope that students would change their behaviors, their parents would become involved in their children's education, and other students would be warned (Green, Maynard, & Stegenga, 2018; Mallett, 2016). However, rather than deterring discipline problems in schools, or even helping schools and students improve educational outcomes, zero tolerance reforms had quite opposite results (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Ritter, 2018). The most notable reverse outcome was unprecedented increase in exclusionary discipline punishments. Researchers questioned that premise because no

empirical research linked exclusionary discipline practices to deterring student indiscipline or improving the school climate (Ritter, 2018; Anderson, Ritter & Zamarro, 2019; Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017). Instead, the policies tended to perpetuate misbehaviors by disproportionately penalizing minority students, often for minor disciplinary infractions. These ruthless punishments, in turn, incited recidivism and alienated families and communities from involvement in school climate initiatives (Alnaim, 2018; DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Thompson, 2016). In fact, as research showed (e.g., Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017) zero tolerance policies failed to make school safer; they only pushed minority students and students with disabilities into prison systems. They were counter-effective and could not guarantee the well-being and safety of students and educators (Alnaim, 2018, p. 5). Rodriguez Ruiz (2017) advocated,

The decades of reliance on these punitive and harsh consequences, which are primarily comprised of extracting children from the classroom, have failed to create more consistency in punishments and have not served as effective deterrents either. Instead, research shows that these practices push students into our prison systems, strengthening the school-to-prison pipeline (p. 36).

Furthermore, decisions to use exclusionary discipline practices were based on office discipline referrals, which, as researchers (e.g., Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese & Horner, 2016) point out, were disproportionately biased against racial minorities. The realization that exclusionary discipline practices were ineffective, coupled with implicit racial bias in excluding students, led state legislatures across the United States to pass extensive statewide discipline reforms in the second decade of the 21st Century (Anderson, 2018; Fergus, 2018; Ispa-Landa, 2018; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Ritter, 2018; Steineberg & Laco, 2017). The intended focus of the reforms was to adopt and implement alternative discipline practices that would positively impact students (Anderson, 2018, p. 258). Among those disciplinary alternatives are restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and schoolwide positive behavioral supports, response to intervention, schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports, reconnecting youth, and safe and responsive schools (Ispa-Landa, 2018; Steineberg & Laco, 2017).

It is in this context that the State of Illinois enacted Public Act 99-0456 to implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices. The present study was conducted in 2019, two years after PA 99-0456 was enacted, and the practices were implemented statewide. Limited research, such as that conducted by Moreno and Scaletta (2018), has reviewed the perceptions of special and general education teachers in Illinois regarding alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices, and made recommendations for improving professional development. There still is little information about the extent to which all key gatekeepers—principals, teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals—understand the initiatives' implications or what is expected of the implementers. Limited research also seems to exist about issues inherent to the implementation of restorative justice, including strategies for ensuring that students are held accountable for their infraction, and that teachers who struggle with student behaviors are provided needed support by the administration (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Also, a comparative assessment of alternative discipline practices is necessary, mostly because previous studies on alternative practices (e.g., Gahungu, 2018) have pointed to differences in perceptions between teachers and principals, with teachers having a more negative view of discipline than principals.

It is hoped that the results from this survey will help school districts and schools in their allocation of resources to effectively implement the policy. The provisions of the policy are crucial for its implementation, but as Anderson (2018) reported, schools do not always comply with policies, even when mandated by a state. Therefore, the extent to which those provisions are being adopted uniformly by all the schools and districts, and understood by both administrators and non-administrators, is an issue that this study sought to examine. As Anderson (2018) reported, three factors appeared to have contributed to a lack of a positive impact of the State of Arkansas's policy limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions for truancy, namely,

- (a) Insufficient communication to schools regarding the reasons for the change, and indication of how schools will be held accountable, and suggested alternatives to using out-of-school suspensions,
- (b) A lack of accountability for adherence to the policy, and
- (c) A lack of capacity or resources for schools to comply. (p. 258)

Finally, researchers (e.g., Green, 2018; Mulcahy, 2019; Schechter & Shaked, 2017) discussed the central role principals play in facilitating reforms and ensuring that adopted practices reach the intended users—the teachers and students in the classrooms and the community. Researchers (e.g., Drago-Severson, Blum-Destefano, & Brooks-Lawrence, 2020; Pont, 2014; Louis & Murphy, 2017) argued that it was school leaders' responsibility to work together on discipline, as unified teams, rather than struggle with classroom behaviors in isolation. However, researchers (e.g., Sanders, 2017; Schechter & Shaked, 2017) contend that there are times when principals choose to resist rather than fully adopt reforms. Principals' resistance to fully implement reforms, particularly for policies and initiatives externally mandated may reflect their good intentions to adjust the reforms to the readiness of their school communities and teachers. According to Schechter and Shaked (2017),

When principals decided on partial rather than full implementation, they often did this because of their attempts to fit the reform program into their school's reality, so as to maintain a pleasant atmosphere among the teaching staff and using their own judgment interchangeably. (p. 253).

Other researchers (e.g., Silva, Negreiros, & Albano, 2017; Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2017) suggested that the fact that district and building-level leadership had adopted the school discipline reform statewide did not automatically translate into its full implementation in classrooms. According to Wolff, Jarodzka and Boshuizen (2017), when discipline problems arise, expert teachers may not relate them to inadequate or partial implementation of the reform, but rather attribute issues to their own poor classroom management skills. Even more challenging for a study attempting to examine the extent of the implementation of a discipline reform, or assessing the reform's impact is that, at the classroom level, teachers do not communicate to the administration all incidents they observe. As Wolff et al (2017) contend, while novice teachers may tell the administration all the misbehaviors that take place in their rooms, expert teachers rarely communicate those problems to the administration, for pedagogical reasons. Attending to discipline problems is an integral part of teaching (Wolff et al, 2017). The authors argue that classroom management can be considered fundamental to successful teaching and learning; it is intrinsically linked to both the content being taught and the pedagogical processes through which content is delivered (p. 296). This perspective may explain why only 3% of teachers in Silva, Negreiros and Albano's (2017) study share with the administration discipline incidents that occur in their classrooms.

It is in this context that the present study aimed to examine the state of the non-exclusionary school reform in the State of Illinois and its impact at the building and classroom levels. It also included the perceptions of other key gatekeepers—assistant principals, teachers, and school support personnel (counselor, psychologists, social workers, etc.).

## **Methodology**

With the help from the Illinois Principals Association, a researcher-created survey questionnaire was sent via SurveyMonkey to Illinois principals, teachers, and school service support personnel during the months of June and July 2019. The questionnaire consisted of 32 multiple choice questions. An email outlining the purpose of the study and its timely significance was first sent to all public-school principals in the Illinois Principals Association’s database. The questionnaire was then sent to the principals who consented to participate, together with their teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and paraprofessionals.

## **Results**

### **Survey Respondents and Context**

This report is based on 322 valid responses, representing 241 teachers, 45 school support personnel, 19 principals, and 17 assistant principals. As a group, most respondents reported that they worked in urban schools (89.1%), while 7.5% worked in a suburban school, and 3.4% in a rural or small-town school. By gender, more respondents were female than male (82.2% vs. 27.8%). Crime levels in areas where their students lived was not very different. It was described as high (32.5%), moderate (34.4%), low (21.3%), and different levels (11.8%).

### **Extent of Implementation of the Provisions of PA 99-0456**

Public Act 099-0456 has six key provisions: (1) eliminating zero-tolerance policies, (2) limiting suspensions longer than three days, (3) limiting expulsions, (4) limiting disciplinary transfers to alternative schools, (5) providing students the opportunity to complete missed work for full credit after a suspension, and (6) creating a re-entry plan when suspensions longer than four days are imposed. Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which those provisions were implemented. Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of the responses of respondents. Of the six provisions, the least implemented was creating a re-entry plan when suspensions longer than four days are imposed, which only 37.62% of respondents reported was fully implemented. Less than one third of teachers (32.77%) reported it was fully implemented, whereas 34.88% reported that the provision was either not implemented at all or was partially implemented. The group of principals was the only one whose majority (73.68%) reported creating a re-entry plan was fully implemented; all the other groups—teachers, school support personnel, assistant principals—had fewer than 50% report that the provision was fully implemented. The second least implemented provision was eliminating zero-tolerance policies, which was reported as being fully implemented by 56.29% of respondents.

Table 1. Extent of Implementation of Provisions of the Non-Exclusionary School Discipline Reform

		Principal	Assistant Principal	Teacher	Support staff	Total
Eliminating zero-tolerance policies	Fully implemented	78.95%	<b>58.82%</b>	<b>54.43%</b>	<b>55.56%</b>	<b>56.29%</b>
	Partially implemented	15.79%	35.29%	23.21%	26.67%	23.90%
	Not implemented at all	5.26%	0.00%	8.02%	4.44%	6.92%
	Unsure	0.00%	5.88%	14.35%	13.33%	12.89%
Limiting suspensions longer than 3 days	Fully implemented	84.21%	70.59%	76.25%	71.11%	75.70%
	Partially implemented	10.53%	29.41%	12.92%	22.22%	14.95%
	Not implemented at all	5.26%	0.00%	2.50%	2.22%	2.49%
	Unsure	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	4.44%	6.85%
Limiting expulsions	Fully implemented	94.74%	82.35%	77.35%	64.44%	76.83%
	Partially implemented	0.00%	5.88%	12.39%	20.00%	12.38%
	Not implemented at all	5.26%	5.88%	2.99%	4.44%	3.49%
	Unsure	0.00%	5.88%	7.26%	11.11%	7.30%
Limiting disciplinary transfers to alternative schools	Fully implemented	78.95%	<b>52.94%</b>	66.53%	62.22%	65.94%
	Partially implemented	15.79%	29.41%	16.32%	15.56%	16.88%
	Not implemented at all	5.26%	5.88%	5.86%	11.11%	6.56%
	Unsure	0.00%	11.76%	11.30%	11.11%	10.63%
Providing the opportunity to complete missed work for full credit after a suspension	Fully implemented	89.47%	82.35%	65.27%	55.56%	66.25%
	Partially implemented	10.53%	5.88%	15.90%	26.67%	16.56%
	Not implemented at all	0.00%	5.88%	5.44%	4.44%	5.00%
	Unsure	0.00%	5.88%	13.81%	13.33%	12.50%
Creating a re-entry plan when 4+ days of suspensions are imposed	Fully implemented	73.68%	<b>47.06%</b>	<b>32.77%</b>	<b>44.44%</b>	<b>37.62%</b>
	Partially implemented	10.53%	<b>35.29%</b>	18.49%	20.00%	19.12%
	Not implemented at all	10.53%	17.65%	16.39%	22.22%	16.93%
	Unsure	5.26%	0.00%	32.35%	13.33%	26.33%
Total		19	17	241	45	322

As was shown for creating a re-entry plan, more principals (78.95%) than other groups reported that eliminating zero-tolerance policies was fully implemented (vs. 58.82% assistant principals, 54.43% teachers, 55.56% support personnel).

Furthermore, it appeared that more principals than other groups of respondents reported that all six provisions of PA 99-0456 were fully implemented, ranging from 94.74% for limiting expulsions to 73.68% for creating a re-entry plan. Differences between principals and other groups, particularly between principals and assistant principals and teachers, were the sharpest for creating a re-entry plan (73.68% vs. 47.06% assistant principals vs. 32.77% teachers), limiting transfers to alternative schools (78.95% vs. 52.94% assistant principals), and eliminating zero-tolerance policies (78.95% vs. 58.82% assistant principals vs. 54.43% teachers). These

discrepancies will be analyzed further in other survey questions and interpreted in the conclusions.

### Are Educators Receiving Ongoing Professional Development as Required by PA 99-0456?

PA 99-0456 requires that districts provide ongoing professional development to educators on key school discipline topics. The respondents were asked to assess their degree of satisfaction with the ongoing professional development. Overall, the level of satisfaction was low. Fewer than 1 in 7 educators were very satisfied with any of the topics.

As summarized in Table 2, the highest frequency of very satisfied educators (13.98%) was on the topic of developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climate. The topic of adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement had the lowest percentage of very satisfied educators (9.69%).

Table 2. Satisfaction with Professional Development in Topics Recommended by the Reform: Percentages of Frequency Responses by Position

		Principal	Assistant Principal	Teacher	Support Staff	Total
Adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement	Very satisfied	15.79%	5.88%	8.37%	15.56%	<b>9.69%</b>
	Somewhat satisfied	31.58%	29.41%	22.18%	28.89%	24.06%
	Somewhat dissatisfied	21.05%	17.65%	10.88%	8.89%	11.56%
	Very dissatisfied	5.26%	11.76%	12.55%	13.33%	12.19%
	Topic has not been addressed through PD	15.79%	29.41%	42.68%	26.67%	38.13%
	Unsure	10.53%	5.88%	3.35%	6.67%	4.38%
Effective classroom management strategies	Very satisfied	21.05%	5.88%	12.03%	17.78%	<b>13.04%</b>
	Somewhat satisfied	47.37%	35.29%	27.39%	40.00%	30.75%
	Somewhat dissatisfied	10.53%	23.53%	18.67%	15.56%	18.01%
	Very dissatisfied	10.53%	0.00%	21.99%	20.00%	19.88%
	Topic has not been addressed through PD	10.53%	29.41%	19.09%	4.44%	17.08%
	Unsure	0.00%	5.88%	0.83%	2.22%	1.24%
Culturally responsive discipline	Very satisfied	15.79%	11.76%	12.92%	13.33%	<b>13.08%</b>
	Somewhat satisfied	26.32%	29.41%	25.42%	33.33%	26.79%
	Somewhat dissatisfied	31.58%	29.41%	17.08%	17.78%	18.69%
	Very dissatisfied	10.53%	0.00%	17.50%	22.22%	16.82%
	Topic has not been addressed through PD	15.79%	17.65%	24.58%	6.67%	21.18%
	Unsure	0.00%	11.76%	2.50%	6.67%	3.43%
Developmentally	Very satisfied	21.05%	11.76%	12.45%	20.00%	<b>13.98%</b>

appropriate disciplinary methods	Somewhat satisfied	63.16%	47.06%	23.65%	33.33%	28.57%
	Somewhat dissatisfied	10.53%	17.65%	21.16%	8.89%	18.63%
	Very dissatisfied	5.26%	0.00%	21.16%	22.22%	19.25%
	Topic has not been addressed through PD	0.00%	23.53%	20.33%	13.33%	18.32%
	Unsure	0.00%	0.00%	1.24%	2.22%	1.24%
<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>322</b>

In the question, respondents were also asked to assess whether given topics had been addressed through professional development. As Table 2 shows, adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement had the largest percentage of educators who reported that the topic has not been addressed through professional development (38.13%). In addition, 50.32% of respondents responded that it had either not been addressed in professional development or were very dissatisfied with it. As many as 21.1% of respondents reported that the topic of culturally responsive discipline had not been addressed in professional development, and 16.82% were very dissatisfied with it.

Differences among groups were sharp. For example, while no principal (0%) reported that the topic of developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climate had not been addressed through professional development, 23.53% assistant principals and 20.33% teachers reported it had not. Similarly, while only 15.79% principals reported the topic of adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement had not been addressed through professional development, as many as 29.41% assistant principals and 42.68% teachers and 26.67% support personnel reported it had not been addressed. The same was true for the topic of culturally responsive discipline which, although only 15.79% principals reported as not been addressed through professional development, while 24.58% teachers reported it was not.

### **Impact of PA 99-0456 on School Discipline**

Several questions asked respondents about the occurrence of key discipline incidents and whether they perceived that those incidents had declined, because of the implementation of non-exclusionary discipline practices. In Table 3 are summarized frequency percentages of respondents who reported that discipline incidents happened daily and that the same incidents had not declined since the implementation of non-exclusionary discipline practices. The group of principals reported that none of the categories of discipline incidents, except for student bullying and student verbal abuse of teachers happened daily, contradicting the other groups of respondents.

Even for these discipline problems, only one or two principals reported that they were happening daily. By contrast, more than 40% of teachers reported that student verbal abuse of teachers and widespread disorder in the hallways happened daily, as did more than 34% or more of teachers for student bullying, widespread disorder in classrooms, and student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse.



Table 3. Frequency of Discipline Incidents in Respondents' Schools since the Implementation of PA 099-0456

		Principal	Assistant Principal	Teacher	Support Staff	Total
Student bullying/ Intimidation	Happens daily	10.53%	11.76%	37.82%	37.78%	34.80%
	Declined- Not at all	31.58%	23.53%	42.62%	22.22%	38.05%
Widespread disorder in classrooms/ Class Disruption	Happens daily	0.00%	5.88%	34.03%	20.45%	28.62%
	Declined- Not at all	35.29%	35.29%	50.83%	31.11%	46.39%
Widespread disorder in hallways	Happens daily	0.00%	11.76%	40.93%	28.89%	35.22%
	Declined- Not at all	44.44%	35.29%	55.23%	33.33%	50.47%
Student verbal abuse of teachers	Happens daily	5.26%	17.65%	41.60%	31.11%	36.68%
	Declined- Not at all	38.89%	31.25%	50.85%	31.11%	46.33%
Student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse	Happens daily	0.00%	29.41%	35.15%	34.09%	32.60%
	Declined- Not at all	38.89%	46.67%	53.16%	28.89%	48.57%
Physical conflicts among students/ fighting	Happens daily	0.00%	11.76%	17.57%	15.91%	15.99%
	Declined- Not at all	38.89%	25.00%	42.80%	27.27%	39.49%
Total		19	17	241	45	322

The differences were not as large regarding perceptions of decline in discipline incidents because of the implementation of the reform. While the percentage of teachers (as high as 55%) reporting that there was no decline at all was much higher than that of other groups, the other groups did not deny the lack of decline either. Thus, between 31% and 44% of principals reported there was no decline at all, as did the other groups in similar proportions.

Respondents were also asked to assess the impact of the implementation of non-exclusionary discipline practices on other aspects of their school climate (Table 4). The responses were collapsed into two categories: (1) not at all + very little extent, and (2) great extent + very great extent. Of the seven areas in which non-exclusionary discipline practices were expected to have an impact, four garnered more than 60% of respondents

who reported the areas had had no or very little impact— increase in student respect for staff (72.36%), increase in student respect for other students (70.81%), improvement in overall school climate (67.81%), and increase in academic achievement (62.73%).

Table 4. Extent of Success of Non-Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Respondents’ Schools since Implementation of PA 99-0456

		Assistant			Support	Total
		Principal	Principal	Teacher	Staff	
Reduction in suspensions	Not at all + Very little extent	42.11%	35.29%	28.75%	24.44%	29.28%
	Very + Great extent	52.63%	64.71%	52.08%	66.67%	54.83%
Increase in academic achievement	Not at all + Very little extent	73.68%	41.18%	64.73%	55.56%	62.73%
	Very + Great extent	26.32%	52.94%	20.75%	31.11%	24.22%
Increase in student respect for other students	Not at all + Very little extent	78.95%	52.94%	72.61%	64.44%	70.81%
	Very + Great extent	15.79%	41.18%	20.75%	28.89%	22.67%
Increase in student respect for staff	Not at all + Very little extent	63.16%	52.94%	75.52%	66.67%	72.36%
	Very + Great extent	31.58%	35.29%	19.09%	28.89%	22.05%
Increase in staff respect for each other	Not at all + Very little extent	63.16%	29.41%	52.52%	57.78%	52.66%
	Very + Great extent	21.05%	58.82%	31.93%	28.89%	32.29%
Increase in staff respect for students	Not at all + Very little extent	63.16%	35.29%	49.37%	60.00%	50.94%
	Very + Great extent	26.32%	52.94%	36.71%	28.89%	35.85%
Improvement in overall school climate	Not at all + Very little extent	57.89%	52.94%	71.13%	60.00%	67.81%
	Very + Great extent	36.84%	41.18%	23.43%	35.56%	26.88%

For principals, the least positive impact was in increase in student respect for other students which 79% of them reported as having no or little extent, followed by increase in student achievement (73.68%). For teachers, the least impact was in two areas—increase in student respect for staff (75.52%) and increase in overall school climate (71.13%). Assistant principals and school service support staff’s perceptions appeared to fall in the middle, exposing one sharper differences with principals.

Even more concerning is the perception, among teachers and school support personnel, that school is still not a safe place to work. As Table 5 shows, as many as 40.66% teachers reported that a student from their school had threatened to injure them, and 19.17% of them had been physically attacked by a student (vs. 0.0% principals). Whether these percentages reflect over-reporting on the part of teachers, or under-reporting by principals is

another example of sharp differences between the administration and other educators.

Table 5. State of Safety since Implementation of PA 99-0456

		Principal	Assistant Principal	Teacher	Support Staff	Total
Has a student from this school ever threatened to injure you?	Yes	21.05%	23.53%	<b>40.66%</b>	20.00%	<b>35.71%</b>
	No	78.95%	76.47%	59.34%	80.00%	64.29%
If yes, has a student in this school threatened to injure you in the past 12 months?	Yes	26.67%	16.67%	<b>37.69%</b>	21.21%	<b>33.98%</b>
	No	73.33%	83.33%	62.31%	78.79%	66.02%
Has a student from this school ever attacked you physically?	Yes	0.00%	5.88%	<b>19.17%</b>	13.33%	16.51%
	No	100.00%	94.12%	80.83%	86.67%	83.49%
If yes, has a student in this school attacked you physically in the past 12 months?	Yes	0.00%	12.50%	13.68%	8.33%	12.10%
	No	100.00%	87.50%	86.32%	91.67%	87.90%
Total		19	17	241	45	322

## Discussion

The implementation of PA 99-0456 was signed into law in August 2015. It was rolled out statewide by September 2016. As such, the reform is relatively new. Therefore, the main purpose of this survey is to gauge what provisions of the reform schools and school districts have prioritized and what preliminary outcomes have been achieved. It would have been unreasonable to expect all the provisions of the reform to be in place, or to anticipate tangible outcomes only two years after it was launched. However, not all provisions are equal; provisions such as eliminating zero-tolerance policies are at the heart of non-exclusionary discipline practices and cannot be left behind without jeopardizing the reform. Along the same line, it seems important to question who the real gatekeeper of discipline is. Whose perceptions best inform collection of data on discipline practices, the people who work directly with students, or the administrators?

### Policy Adoption and Implementation at the Administrative vs. Instructional and Community Concerns

For this report, it appears necessary to differentiate between non-exclusionary discipline practices as a state policy for the principal to enforce, and the same practices as tools at the disposal of the teachers and the administration to strengthen and repair harms to relationships between educators and students without excluding the students from the educational process. Therefore, the principals are accountable to the district and state for the extent and quality of the implementation, and as such, they reported that the reform had been fully implemented in close to 3/4 of participating schools. The only problem is that, if assistant principals and other educators are, in any way, similarly accountable for enforcing the policy within the school community, then, there is an apparent disconnect. Better communication channels must be established, and policy makers ought to evaluate why only 47% of assistant principals, only 44% of service support personnel, and less than 1/3 of teachers reported that creating a re-entry plan when four days or more of suspensions are imposed was fully implemented.

Equally sizable proportions of assistant principals, teachers and support personnel thought that the provisions of limiting disciplinary transfers to alternative schools or eliminating zero tolerance policies were not fully implemented. These three provisions being the core of the reform; failure on part of the state to focus its policy review and assessment on the apparent resistance to them and its own lack of accountability measures will jeopardize the purpose of the reform. The review and assessment ought to give a deep grounding in the philosophy of non-exclusionary discipline practices.

### **Teachers' High Stakes in Discipline**

The disconnect between principals and other educators in the implementation process is also evident in the enforcement of professional development as a provision of PA 99-0456. The personnel in charge of the policy adoption and implementation at the state and district level ought to be concerned that teachers reported that the following topics had not been addressed through professional development—adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement (42.68%), culturally response discipline (24.58%), and developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climate (20.33%). Once again, this disconnect may translate that adoption of policies at the main office level (i.e., principal's office) does not necessarily dictate the speed with which the end-users—teachers—will practice the prescribed practices, or even dictate the speed to which the principals will evaluate that the practices are being utilized in the classrooms.

### **Principals' Conservatism and Cautious Reporting**

Finally, like the literature reviewed, this survey has heightened a disconnect between principals and other educators. In reading principals' self-ratings, one would infer that the implementation of the non-exclusionary discipline practices had solved all discipline problems in schools and had been implemented in almost all schools with a few exceptions. The principals' responses also suggested that the reform had positively impacted discipline outcomes. Notably, all principals reported that no student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse or physical conflicts or fighting among students happened daily, in sharp contrast to teachers' reporting to the contrary. However, even principals failed to support that the implementation of non-exclusionary discipline practices had resulted in positive outcomes for students, such as increase in student achievement or student respect for other students. This embellished reporting on part of the principals could only be viewed as wishful reporting or lack of connection to what is really going on in school hallways and classrooms. The principals do not know best; the teachers who manage harms to relationships in the classrooms, and school support personnel who have direct contacts with students can also gauge the extent of school safety and discipline. The latter's views count.

### **Is it Still a Discipline Incident if it is not on an Office Referral?**

The discrepancy between principals and other educators regarding their assessment of discipline practices may lie in the use of the information collected. The principal, as the chief instructional leader, has the responsibility

of reassuring the school stakeholders that they have everything under control and that all rules and regulations have been implemented and monitored. Their reporting could, therefore, cause the school to be reprimanded or commended. As such, if disciplinary infractions or problems were thwarted or happened not to be recorded, the school would be spared. Most importantly, if parties to incidents solved their problems without submitting an official record, that also would spare the principal the pain of reporting them.

Teachers and other key gatekeepers—school counselors, social workers, etc.—by contrast, are the troops in the trenches. They probably will not report to the principal every single incident, because either that they solved, or can solve, it themselves, or found that they would be found incompetent to manage instructional situations in their care. Whether they choose to fill out an office referral or not ought not to mean that incidents did not occur; it reflects their professional growth and competency to manage those incidents as educators. Therefore, it seems that the teachers' perspectives would present a more accurate picture of the safety and climate prevailing in the schools. However, the discrepancy between teachers and principals may reveal a much deeper, unintended consequence of the reform than a simple dichotomy.

The principals appear pressured to show the state and their districts that all provisions of the reform have been implemented. In their views, the lower the expulsions and suspensions, the better their schools are. By contrast, the teachers feel pressured by their principals and districts to practice non-exclusionary practices they do not believe in yet, and without much preparation. To resist the policy, they may over-report discipline problems as a way of telling their administrations to not rush the implementation. At the same time, the teachers might also keep the problems they face daily to themselves out of fear for appearing incompetent, which might lead to them receiving a lower rating from the principal. On either side, the true question becomes the extent to which the philosophy of non-exclusionary discipline practice has been absorbed before the reform was set in motion.

## **Conclusion**

The sample surveyed, particularly the group of principals, is relatively small. However, the information collected is relevant. It translates a dichotomous perspective regarding the use of self-reporting of discipline problems and practices. On one hand, the administration seemed to be on the defensive, presenting an embellished positive façade of their schools to the outside world. The teachers and other educators, on the other hand, appeared eager to expose the hardships a policy they did not understand was causing on them. However, beyond the differences in intentions between the principals and other educators, the survey showed that the implementation of the provisions of the school discipline reform, as well as the subsequent alternative discipline practices in the State of Illinois, had not yet been fully implemented.

Most importantly, all groups of respondents, with teachers even more so than principals, thought that exclusionary discipline practices were still prevalent. Limiting student transfers to alternative schools, eliminating zero-tolerance policies, and creating re-entry plans for cases of students with four or more days of suspension, were the least implemented. More concerning was that the recommendation of PA 99-0456 that schools and districts should provide professional development on pivotal topics about non-exclusionary

discipline practices—adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement, culturally responsive discipline, and developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climate—still had not taken place in many schools. In addition, the respondents indicated that the reform had not improved safety and climate in schools, as the incidence and prevalence of discipline problems had not changed.

Finally, one must use caution in making sense of the implications from this study. What is causing the principals to embellish their assessments and the teachers and other educators to paint a darker picture of the state of the implementation of non-exclusionary discipline practices is evidence of a philosophy that is still being processed. The main concern that such embellished reporting on part of the principals will cause is that policy makers may be tricked into thinking that compliance was achieved, and not feel it necessary to honor, or support, requests and efforts from teachers and communities at the local level, including students and support personnel, to review and assess the reform. At the same time, heeding to poorly informed voices of resisting teachers may cause the state to alter or derail a promising, but still untested philosophy. Ultimately, the implication of this survey for practice is that self-reports on the implementation of policies ought to be read with caution, unless the reader fully appreciates the intentions of the groups surveyed. Therefore, this study suggests that more emphasis in Illinois and other states be put on ensuring understanding of the law and its rationale, clarifying the concept of non-exclusionary discipline practices. Otherwise, forcing the policy onto principals, teachers and school service support personnel who have not fully bought into it will only plunge the educational system in disarray.

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