Connected and Thriving:

A Policy Toolkit for Expanding the Use of Restorative Practices in School Districts

Tamar Mendelson, Laura Clary, Melinda Scott, and the Restorative Practices Toolkit Advisory Committee

JOHNS HOPKINS
BLOOMBERG SCHOOL of PUBLIC HEALTH
Center for Adolescent Health

Contributors

This toolkit was developed by researchers and staff at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, in collaboration with the Restorative Practices Policy Toolkit Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee was comprised of members of the Baltimore City Trauma Informed Care Task Force, including practitioners of restorative practices, members of local agencies serving young people (Baltimore City Department of Public Health, Baltimore City Public Schools), researchers, and young people.

Bloomberg School of Public Health Team

- **Laura K. Clary,** PhD, Assistant Research Professor Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
- **Tamar Mendelson,** PhD, Bloomberg Professor of American Health and Director, Center for Adolescent Health, Departments of Mental Health & Population, Family and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
- **Krishna Johnson,** MScoSC, Youth Engagment & Qualitative Research Manager, Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
- **Catalina Ortuzar,** MPH, Research Associate, Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
- **Melinda Scott,** Research Program Manager, Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Restorative Practices Toolkit Advisory Committee

- Dave Brown, Principal Consultant/ Senior Associate, Echo Resource Development/Danya Institute
- Alana Calhoun, Policy & Oversight Coordinator, Office of the Baltimore City Council President
- Presence Dow, Youth Leader, Healing Cities Baltimore
- Katrina Hauschildt, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine, Oregon Health and Science University
- Katrina Jones, MHS, Assistant Director, Office of Youth & Trauma Services, Baltimore City Health Department
- Philip Leaf, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, School of Education, School of Nursing, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Johns Hopkins University
- Ebone Smith, MS, Community & Youth Engagement Coordinator, Baltimore City Office of Sustainability
- Corey Witherspoon, Senior Mentor, Seeds of Promise, Baltimore
- Mollie Young, MPH, CCLS, Child Life Specialist II, PRN, Johns Hopkins Children's Center, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine

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Reviewers

- Fuad Bangura, Youth Leader, High School Student, Columbus City Schools
- Dave Brown, Principal Consultant/ Senior Associate, Echo Resource Development/Danya Institute
- airick journey "aj" crabill, Senior Coach at Effective School Boards and Director of governance for the Council of the Great City Schools

- Rebecca A. Cruz, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Innovation Teaching & Leadership, School of Education, Johns Hopkins University
- Jamari Fleshman, Youth Leader, College student, Ohio University
- Olivia Marcucci, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Advanced Studies in Education, School of Education, Johns Hopkins University
- Elise Pas, PhD, Research Professor, Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins Blooomberg School of Public Health
- Jade Peronne, Youth Leader, High school student, Columbus City Schools
- Amber Humm Patnode, PhD, Acting Director, Proving Ground, Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University
- Kimberly Saunders, MA, MSW, LSW, Social Worker and Restorative Practices Coach, Restorative Practices Consulting Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

K–12 education has the potential to support young people's positive development by promoting their acquisition of social-emotional skills, such as self-regulation, empathy, and accountability, that are essential for a healthy transition into adulthood. Yet schools face challenges in providing opportunities for student social-emotional growth, including the persistence of punitive approaches to student behavior. Many young people in the United States do not currently feel connected to people at their school,[1] leading to poor mental health, problematic substance use, risky sexual behavior, missed school,[1] and lower academic achievement.[2]

School-based restorative practices have potential to address this public health problem. Restorative practices teach individuals how to communicate clearly, strengthen relationships, and create a community where all members are valued. Originating in Indigenous cultures, restorative practices have been adapted for use in K–12 education in the U.S. and other countries to improve school climate and student success. A growing evidence base suggests that, when delivered effectively, these practices can produce significant benefits for school climate and connectedness and student academic success, prosocial behavior, and social-emotional growth.[3-7]

State and district policies. Exclusionary disciplinary strategies, such as suspension and expulsion, create a punitive school climate that negatively impacts student behavior, achievement, mental health, and connection to school and peers.[8,9] Our policy scan of 20 U.S. school districts and their states indicated substantial variability in the policies regarding the use of exclusionary approaches to address nonviolent student behavior, highlighting opportunities for policy reform. While the policies recommending or requiring restorative practices have increased, these policies vary in their scope and content. Our policy scan highlights the need for clearer, more rigorous policies on restorative practices, as well as a stronger emphasis on their use in schoolwide community building.

Recommendations for school district policy. To benefit schools and students, restorative practices must be delivered effectively, inclusively, and equitably. The following recommendations for district policy, derived from our review of the research evidence, scan of regionally diverse policies, and discussions with constituents, are designed to maximize quality implementation of restorative practices. District policy should:

1. **Communicate clearly with families, staff, and students about the goals, content, and implementation of restorative practices.** School district policy should clearly define "restorative practices," specific practices that will be used (e.g., "community-building circles"), and goals of the practices because many parents and school personnel have not yet been educated about restorative practices.
2. **Allow schools to choose whether they will adopt restorative practices.** When school leaders do not wish to adopt restorative practices, it is likely that the practices will not be implemented well, and desired goals will not be achieved. Districts can and should provide encouragement and support for the adoption of restorative practices.
3. **Require schools that adopt restorative practices to aim for schoolwide implementation and incorporate input from families.** To meaningfully impact school climate and student skills, restorative practices should be implemented across the whole school. Engaging the whole school takes time. Initial adoption can be effective without universal participation if school leaders are fully engaged, "early adopter" staff are identified, and parents are given opportunities to provide feedback.
4. **Require that schools adopting restorative practices offer education on restorative practices and related competencies for all school members.** All adults in a school should be educated about restorative practices, including administrators, teachers, and other staff members. School members should receive education about trauma-informed care and implicit biases, as well as multiyear professional learning in restorative practices. Coaching and ongoing professional learning are also essential.
5. **Establish student leadership roles in restorative practices.** Leading restorative practices teaches students to develop critical social-emotional skills, including emotion awareness and regulation, meta-cognitive awareness, active listening, and empathy. All students—including those with behavioral, attendance, or academic issues—should have opportunities to learn about restorative practices and lead circles.
6. **Require that restorative practices are offered across four domains.** Restorative practices should be offered for (1) community building to strengthen communication and relationships at a universal level (e.g., community-building circles), (2) responding to conflicts to prevent rule violations or interpersonal harms (e.g., mediation circles), (3) responding to rule violations or more serious conflicts (e.g., restorative circles or conferences), and (4) reintegration to help welcome a student back into the community

following a significant absence, such as a suspension (e.g., welcome circles).

7. **Restrict the use of exclusionary discipline.** Exclusionary discipline removes students from school, which disrupts their learning and undermines the goals of restorative practices, including accountability to community members and opportunities to repair harm. Schools should limit the use of suspension, expulsion, and other forms of exclusionary discipline to situations that threaten safety or involve illegal activities. Districts should offer a spectrum of options, such as mediation and restorative circles, for responding to lower-intensity but high-frequency behaviors.
8. **Provide resources and tools to support schools in implementing restorative practices.** Districts should provide:
    a. **Funding.** Funding is needed to cover the ongoing costs of restorative practices training and coaching for teachers, staff, and students. Sources of funding may include state, district, and/or philanthropic funds.
    b. **Partnership with restorative practices organizations or experts.** Partnering with local or national organizations or experts to provide education about restorative practices and related competencies—as well as ongoing professional learning and coaching on restorative practices—is essential.
    c. **Infrastructure support.** The district should identify or hire a staff member to oversee restorative practices across district schools. This staff member will assist schools in accessing professional learning, help to address implementation challenges, and work collaboratively with schools on quality improvement.
    d. **School self-assessment guidelines.** Schools should be given guidelines for assessing their own readiness to adopt restorative practices, including leadership buy-in, plans for monitoring implementation, and funding for costs of restorative practices not covered by the district. School readiness should be reviewed and approved by district leadership. District leaders should not approve schools to adopt restorative practices unless and until they are well positioned to do so.
    e. **Clear goals.** Clear goals for the practices must be established and monitored. These goals should target enhancement of school climate, community building, and, most importantly, student social-emotional and academic outcomes. District policy should specify these goals and how to operationalize them.
    f. **Assessment measures and guidelines.** Districts should provide measures to assess both fidelity of implementation and targeted school and student outcomes, as well as guidelines for data collection and analysis. Schools should also use these measures to collect data for quality improvement, as described below.
9. **Require use of data to drive quality improvement.** Regular review by school and district leaders of implementation fidelity and school and student outcomes, including whether all students benefit from restorative practices equitably, should be mandated to guide improvements to how restorative practices are delivered.

Strategies for creating change in district policy.

1. Learn about district policies and review district- and state-level data for context on how student outcomes in the district compare to state outcomes.
2. Talk to key constituents, including parents, students, and teachers, to understand their experiences with current school practices and unmet needs that may be addressed by adopting or expanding restorative practices.
3. Form a coalition with students, parents, teachers, school mental health providers, principals, and other partners to shape district policy recommendations and to help guide effective implementation of restorative practices.
4. Engage with the school board and district administrators, and use data to advocate.
5. Publish op-eds or commentaries to raise awareness and interest.
6. Be patient and persistent; change takes time.

2

INTRODUCTION

Toolkit goal. This policy toolkit's primary goal is to support school district leaders and other constituents to build healthy school communities and promote positive outcomes for K–12 students through restorative practices. The toolkit presents information, resources, and recommendations for integrating restorative practices into district policy and school practice, including an evidence summary, a policy scan of 20 geographically diverse U.S. school districts and their states, recommendations for how to design school district policies on restorative practices, and strategies for creating policy change.

Rationale for the toolkit. Social-emotional skills—including self-regulation, metacognition, active listening, empathy, accountability, and responsibility—are critical for positive youth development and a healthy, productive adulthood. These skills support youth mental health and well-being, healthy relationships, civic engagement, and academic success.[10-12] Communities where young people feel connected and supported are a key context for the development of these skills, and schools have the potential to provide this kind of community for students. Many U.S. students, however, currently do not feel a sense of belonging at their school. According to recent data, 45% of high school students do not feel connected to people at their school,[13] and nearly 30% are chronically absent.[14] Low levels of school connectedness have been linked with poor mental health, substance use, risky sexual behavior, missed school, and academic difficulties.[1,2]

Restorative practices. Restorative practices teach individuals how to communicate clearly, form and strengthen relationships, and create a community where all members are valued. These practices include facilitated circles in which relationships are strengthened, conflicts and harms are prevented or repaired, and members are reintegrated into the community after an extended absence due to suspensions, expulsions, or other reasons. Originating in Indigenous cultures, restorative practices have been adapted for use in K-12 education in the U.S. and other countries to improve school climate and student success. A growing evidence base indicates that, when delivered effectively, restorative practices can produce significant benefits for students and schools.[7,15]

Restorative practices support community connection and social-emotional growth. State and district education policies typically describe restorative practices as a type of student behavioral support or alternative to traditional discipline strategies. Although restorative practices do reduce conflicts and behavior problems when implemented effectively, their fundamental focus is on belonging, connection, and reparation. Restorative practices can be integrated across K–12 education to support a positive school climate and culture in which teachers, staff, and students feel a sense of belonging and accountability. Participation in this kind of community creates an optimal environment for learning, fosters positive peer networks, and builds student social and emotional skills critical for success.

Student-led restorative practices enhance student learning. When students lead restorative practices, they have the opportunity for deeper experiential learning through the development and practice of self-regulation and interpersonal skills in real time, supporting their long-term success and well-being across diverse contexts. As an added benefit, student leadership also reduces burden on adults in a school. This toolkit recommends incorporating student leadership as a component of restorative practices to enhance the benefits of these practices for students and schools.

Intended audiences. This toolkit aims to guide school district leaders in how to develop district policies that enhance K–12 school climate and student outcomes through restorative practices. The toolkit is also intended for a range of key partners—including school board members, school administrators, school mental health providers, teachers, parents, students, and other advocates for youth—who want to spur policy change at the district level to expand the use of restorative practices. While the toolkit focuses primarily on policy at the district level, members of state departments of education may also find it useful for informing the development of state education policies and the provision of infrastructure and implementation supports.

How to use the toolkit. This toolkit can be read from start to finish to provide background, data, and recommendations to inform school district adoption or expansion of restorative practices. Readers can also select individual sections to review independently. For example, district administrators may be particularly interested in Section 5 on Designing School District Policy to Support Restorative Practices; Section 6 on Creating School Policy Change may be especially relevant for parents, teachers, and students interested in spurring change at the district level.

3

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE: OVERVIEW AND EVIDENCE SUMMARY

What Are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practices in schools are relationship-centered processes that proactively build community and respond to conflicts by repairing relationships and restoring trust. Restorative approaches are rooted in Indigenous traditions and worldviews emphasizing relationships, community, and repair.[16,17] These practices represent a broad set of strategies that proactively build community, prevent conflicts, and repair relationships in which conflict has occurred.[17-20]

Restorative Practices in Education

Implementation guides for restorative practices typically describe three domains of practices: community building, restorative, and reintegration. Based on feedback from young people who facilitate restorative practices (Fuad Bengura and Jemiri Fleshman, personal communication, March 28, 2026), we categorized the practices into four domains to highlight that addressing low-level conflicts to prevent future harms is distinct from responding to harms that have already occurred. The four domains are listed below.

1. Community building strengthens communication and relationships at a universal level (e.g., community circles). Community building involves *promotion* of belonging and connectedness among members of the school community. This is an essential component of restorative practices and should be practiced daily through facilitated classroom community circles. Community circles typically involve community agreements about how members of the circle will treat one another, use of a "talking piece" to indicate who is speaking, and opportunities for all students to participate by listening and, if they wish, speaking. These circles often involve a "check-in" with members through open-ended prompts designed to strengthen relationships (e.g., "What's something that made you smile this week?", "What's your favorite food?"), and a closing reflection or "check-out." Community circles can be a forum for celebrating student successes and for expressing gratitude.

   Community building also includes additional elements. For instance, adults in a school implementing restorative practices generally promote daily community building by greeting students warmly when they enter the school and the classroom. Teachers and administrators also build positive connections with parents by calling home to share student successes. Community building cultivates the mutual respect, trust, and accountability that supports positive school climate and student social-emotional growth.[21] Community building makes possible the use of restorative practices in the other domains.
2. Responding to conflicts involves addressing low-level conflicts for *prevention* of future rule violations or interpersonal harm (e.g., mediation circles). While teachers or other school staff members can facilitate mediation, it is preferable to give students an opportunity to play an active role in this domain. Students may be trained to lead mediation circles or mediation conferences to work with a student, students, or student and teacher who have been engaged in a low-level conflict. Mediation typically ends with an agreement between parties about how to move forward and one or more check-ins over the following days or weeks to monitor whether the agreement is working or may need modification. One way to implement student facilitation of mediation, as well as restorative circles (see #3 below), is for a school to dedicate study halls in every period in which mediation and restorative circles are held. Trained students who are available in each period can be called on to lead practices, with a teacher present.
3. Responding to rule violations or more serious conflicts (e.g., restorative circles or conferences) is a form of *intervention* to address harm that has already occurred. The procedures for conducting restorative circles or conferences are similar to those described above for mediation, including the potential to involve student facilitators. The positive foundation laid through community-building activities supports the success of these restorative efforts.
4. Reintegration welcomes a student back into the community following a significant absence from school, such as a suspension, expulsion, stay in juvenile detention, illness, or injury (e.g., welcome circles). Reintegration practices focus on *reconnection* of students who were absent to re-establish their link with the community. If a student left school without resolving conflicts or harms, their return also offers the opportunity for repairing harms as a part of their reconnection process.

Alignment With Other School Programs and Systems

School programs that promote social-emotional skills are a valuable complement to restorative practices. These include Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)[22,23] and Second Step,[24,25] and mindfulness programs, such as yoga, meditation, and MindUp.[26] Schools that offer SEL or mindfulness provide students with skills that can enhance their capacity to engage with restorative practices. Critical social-emotional skills taught through SEL or mindfulness programs include emotional awareness (accurately identifying what one is feeling), emotion regulation (managing difficult or painful emotions), effective communication (being able to ask for what one needs and respond to others' requests skillfully), and problem solving (identifying potential ways to resolve a dilemma or conflict).

Restorative practices also align well with Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS),[27] such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS promotes positive student behavior and school climate by acknowledging positive behavior and using data for decision-making. Where MTSS offers a broad framework encompassing academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes through the universal (Tier 1), targeted (Tier 2), and intensive (Tier 3) levels of support, PBIS has historically focused on behavior and climate at these three tiers (recently, there is work to better incorporate SEL programming and mental health through the Integrated Systems Framework).[28] Restorative practices similarly include tiered supports, with community-building practices addressing Tier 1 goals, mediation practices addressing Tier 2, and restorative practices addressing Tier 3.

Restorative practices can also complement trauma-informed approaches and school mental health services. Restorative practices should be delivered in a trauma-responsive manner, building trust and acknowledging ongoing stressors and adversities in students' lives. Mental health services can improve students' stress management and interpersonal skills, enhancing their capacity for community connection through restorative practices.

Research on Restorative Practices

Over the last two decades, schools that implemented restorative practices have seen promising results including a reduction in suspensions,[3,5,29-37] discipline referrals,[29,31,37-39] expulsions,[36,40] school-based arrests,[36] drop-out rates,[41] absenteeism,[35] tardy rates,[35] severity of discipline problems,[5] aggression,[42] and cyber bullying.[43] Additional improvements have included academic achievement,[4,41,44] teacher-student relationships,[3] social relationships,[38] school climate,[5,15,43,45] connectedness,[43] social skills,[42,43] and emotional skills.[7] For example, in California public school samples, exposure to restorative practices was associated with improvements in math and English standardized test scores,[4] GPA,[44] reading level,[41] and graduation rates.[41]

When implemented well, restorative practices have reduced discipline referrals for Black and Latino students, students of color perceived teachers as more respectful, and teachers reported more positive relationships with diverse students.[46] Improved academic achievement across all races has also been observed,[44] with pronounced improvement among Black and Latino students.[4] In some studies, however, racial disparities in exclusionary discipline persisted or widened, even as overall rates of suspensions and expulsions decreased,[29,32,36,47] highlighting the importance of monitoring and addressing inequities in outcomes. Failures to close the racial gap in disciplinary disparities likely occur not because of an inherent failure in restorative programming, but because of ineffective implementation, specifically around racialized mindset-shifting.[47,48]

Emphasis on Punishment in U.S. Education

In contrast to the emphasis in restorative practices on community building and reparation, U.S. schools have traditionally pursued a punitive approach. An important aspect of traditional U.S. public school education is punishment of student misbehavior, including both minor infractions and more serious offenses, with exclusionary discipline.

What Is Exclusionary Discipline?

Exclusionary discipline refers to any removal of a student from the classroom or school environment as a punishment for their behavior and includes:

- **In-school suspension** – A student is removed from the classroom and instructional activities but remains in the school building with supervision from an adult.
- **Out-of-school suspension** – A student is banned from attending their school and school activities for a specified length of time.
- **Expulsion** – A student is banned from attending their school and school activities permanently or for an extended length of time.
- **Referral to law enforcement** – School administrators contact police or juvenile justice authorities to address a student's behavior. This can result in the student's removal from school.
- **School-based arrest** – A student is arrested on campus, often by a school resource officer (SRO), a law enforcement officer in the school setting.
- **Physical or mechanical restraint** – A student is restrained by physical means (e.g., pinned down by another person) or with equipment (e.g., handcuffs).
- **Seclusion** – A student is confined by themselves in a room or space they cannot leave.

Out-of-school suspension is the most commonly used form of exclusionary discipline in U.S. public schools, followed by in-school suspension.[49] In the absence of federal law on this issue, approximately 46 states have legislation surrounding the use of restraint and seclusion, although there is substantial variability in how states regulate the use of these methods;[50] fewer than half of states ban mechanical restraint, and a small minority ban seclusion.[51]

Background

The use of exclusionary school discipline became increasingly common following the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling that led to the desegregation of U.S. public schools.[52] Research indicates that Black students were disproportionately subjected to suspensions and expulsions as a means of racial control, to remove them from integrated schools.[52] These trends continued during 1960s and '70s and became even more pronounced during the 1990s–2000s with the rise of zero-tolerance policies requiring automatic suspension or expulsion for a range of nonviolent behaviors.[52] Nonviolent student misbehavior was increasingly criminalized, with students of color disproportionately targeted, in a pattern often referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline."[52] The 2000s–2010s witnessed the peak use of exclusionary discipline, with millions of students suspended annually, and ever-widening discipline disparities between Black and white students.[52] From the 2010s to the present, reforms have been undertaken, including the adoption of restorative practices in various forms in many regions, and suspension rates have decreased in some states, although racial disparities persist.[53,54]

Research on Exclusionary Discipline

National data indicated that 5% of K–12 students received suspensions from 2017–2018 and 2021–2022.[55] A longitudinal study found an estimated one in ten children in large US cities received exclusionary discipline by age nine.[57]

Use of exclusionary discipline as a primary strategy for addressing student misbehavior and rule violations has negative short- and long-term impacts on student behavior, learning, and achievement. Documented harms of exclusionary discipline have included decreases in grade point average (GPA)[8] and standardized test scores[58] and increases in mental health issues,[9] dropout rates,[58,59] delinquency,[60] aggression,[57] and subsequent justice system contact.[61] Receiving early exclusionary discipline (kindergarten through 5th grade) has been associated with long-term negative outcomes including reductions in successful high school completion,[59] higher rates of substance use, and increased risk for adult arrest and incarceration.[60,62] Zero-tolerance policies are particularly harmful; these policies have increased suspensions for all children, and disproportionately for youth of color.[63,64]

Inequities in the application of exclusionary discipline have been extensively documented with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability status, and other sociodemographic factors. Schools with more racial and ethnic minority students were found to deliver a higher number of disciplinary sanctions.[58] Data suggest boys experience the starkest racial disparities. Findings in large U.S. cities indicate that by age 9, approximately 8% of non-Hispanic white boys have received exclusionary discipline versus 40% of non-Hispanic Black boys.[57] Girls are also subject to racial bias, with Black girls receiving disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline than white and non-Black girls of color.[63,65] In large U.S. cities, approximately 15% of non-Hispanic Black girls received exclusionary discipline sanctions by age 9, in comparison with only 2% of non-Hispanic white girls.[57] In national estimates from 2020-2021, inequitable application of exclusionary discipline in grades K-12 was seen for Black boys (8% of enrollment vs. 18% of in-school suspensions, 22% of out-of-school suspensions, and 21% of those expelled), Black girls (7% of enrollment vs. 11% of in-school suspensions, 13% of out-of-school suspensions and 13% of those expelled), Hispanic boys (15% of enrollment vs. 16% of in-school suspensions, 16% of out-of-school suspensions, and 17% of those expelled), white boys (23% of enrollment vs. 27% of in-school suspensions and 24% of those expelled), and boys of two or more races boys (2% of enrollment vs. 3% of in-school suspensions, 4% of out-of-school suspensions, and 3% of those expelled).[13] Data indicate that Black and Hispanic students receive more severe exclusionary discipline sanctions than white students for the same infractions.[66] These inequities are linked with significant disparities in educational outcomes. For example, Black and Latine children have been found to experience more exclusionary discipline and subsequent decreased GPA as compared to White children.[8]

Compared with secondary school students without disabilities, those with disabilities were found to miss twice as many school days due to exclusionary discipline.[67] Students with emotional or intellectual disabilities were found to receive more severe punishments for the same infractions than students without these conditions.[66] Similarly, LGBTQ students are subject to disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline than heterosexual students, with particularly pronounced disparities for LGBTQ girls and youth with intersectional identities.[68] Economically disadvantaged students were found to be more likely than their economically advantaged peers to be suspended across all types of offenses.[69]

4

A POLICY SNAPSHOT OF 20 SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR STATES

Although the goal of school-based restorative practices is to cultivate school community and support positive youth development, those areas are not typically the focus of state or district policies. Rather, state and district policies primarily address disciplinary sanctions and student behavioral supports. This section of the toolkit explores state and district policies on (1) *exclusionary school discipline practices* and (2) *alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including restorative practices.*

How Do State and District Policies Shape School Practices?

State educational policies set basic requirements for school practices. For instance, a state policy may cap the amount of time a student can be suspended or may specify a minimum number of days of suspension for a particular offense. Similarly, state policy may require or prohibit the use of exclusionary school discipline for certain offenses and may require the use of alternative disciplinary strategies as a first-line response to certain types of behavioral issues. Thus, state policies are relevant to district policies and may constrain those policies to some extent.

School district policies build on the state requirements, providing more detailed and comprehensive guidelines for disciplinary sanctions and student behavioral supports. Whereas state educational policies typically set the "floor" for what is minimally required, districts determine the "ceiling." For instance, a state policy may allow for, or recommend, the use of alternatives to exclusionary discipline; district policy can require their use and can specify which alternatives should be offered and how.

School district policies are the focus of this toolkit because students, teachers, parents, and administrators who want to make improvements to their school may be most effective when they target school district policies. District administrators typically have extensive knowledge about, and familiarity with, the communities they serve, as well as the challenges and strengths of their individual schools. District leadership is also well positioned to develop detailed plans for adoption, implementation, and sustainment of restorative practices and other student behavioral supports.

That said, being informed about state policies is important for informing the scope of district reforms. In some cases, if state policies restrict the potential for reform at the district level, state policy change may be necessary before district change is possible (for instance, if a state mandates that exclusionary discipline must be used even in cases of minor infractions). In other cases, state legislation may provide dedicated funding or infrastructure to support district initiatives, including restorative practices.

Trends in School Disciplinary Policies

Over the past 15 years, school discipline policies in the United States have shown a gradual shift from punitive to restorative approaches. School districts and state educational policies are increasingly recommending the use of restorative practices, often as an alternative to exclusionary discipline for more minor infractions. State or district policies that prescribe student social and emotional supports may also specify or recommend the use of restorative practices. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 59% of public schools and 72% of charter schools implemented some form of restorative practices in 2021–22,[70] illustrating a growing policy emphasis on prevention, relationship building, and inclusion.

State policies vary widely in their support of restorative practices: Some states do not restrict exclusionary discipline, others require or recommend alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and others recommend restorative practices specifically (Education Commission of the States, 2021). Despite gains in support for restorative practices, exclusionary discipline measures such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion remain commonplace in many states, and severe practices, such as corporal punishment, which are still legal in 18 states.[71] Nearly all states have statutes or regulations that permit some form of exclusionary discipline, such as in- or out-of-school suspension, and most states grant local districts broad discretion to determine disciplinary procedures. In fact, fewer than 30 states place clear limits on the use of suspension or expulsion for subjective or minor offenses, such as "disruption" or "defiance,"[72] which has been shown to underlie most disproportionality in school discipline.

Selected Scan of District and State Policies

Our team conducted a scan of current policies on *exclusionary school discipline* and *restorative practices* for a sample of U.S. cities and their states. As not all regions we scanned included specific policy references to restorative practices, we also reviewed state and district policies on *alternatives to exclusionary discipline*, which involve limits to the use of suspension and expulsion and suggested or required alternative approaches. Alternatives to exclusionary discipline may, but do not necessarily, include restorative practices.

Findings are intended to inform interested parties in the 20 regions we scanned about where policy change may be beneficial. More broadly, the scan provides readers with a snapshot of current policies that are relevant to restorative practices. Readers can use our methods to rate policies in other regions of the U.S. and to check for updates in the areas we scanned (see Appendix B for a description of how the scan was conducted).

District Selection

With the assistance of our advisory group, we selected 20 districts for the policy scan with the intention of sampling diverse geographic regions, levels of economic well-being, and school district sizes. School districts selected were in the following cities: Atlanta, Baltimore, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Durham, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Rochester, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. The cities represent 13 states (California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas) and the District of Columbia.

Scoring

Five metrics were used to calculate total scores for *exclusionary discipline*:

1. Are serious (violent or illegal) behaviors required for use of exclusionary discipline?
2. Are there protections for younger students?
3. What is the maximum suspension time for non-violent incidents?
4. Are alternatives required before the use of exclusionary discipline?, and
5. Is expulsion allowed for nonviolent incidents?

The possible range for total scores was 0 to 6, with higher scores indicating more extensive use of exclusionary discipline.

Two types of metrics were used to calculate total scores for *alternatives to exclusionary discipline* and *restorative practices* respectively:

1. Are alternative disciplinary approaches required or suggested instead of exclusionary discipline for minor infractions?
2. Does the policy (a) mention provision of resources for restorative practices (e.g. guidelines, trainings, etc.) or (b) encourage use of restorative practices without mentioning provision of resources?

The possible range for total scores was 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating more extensive policy support for alternatives to exclusionary discipline/ restorative practices.

The scoring system is described in more detail in Appendix B.

Figure 1. State and District Policies on Exclusionary School Discipline

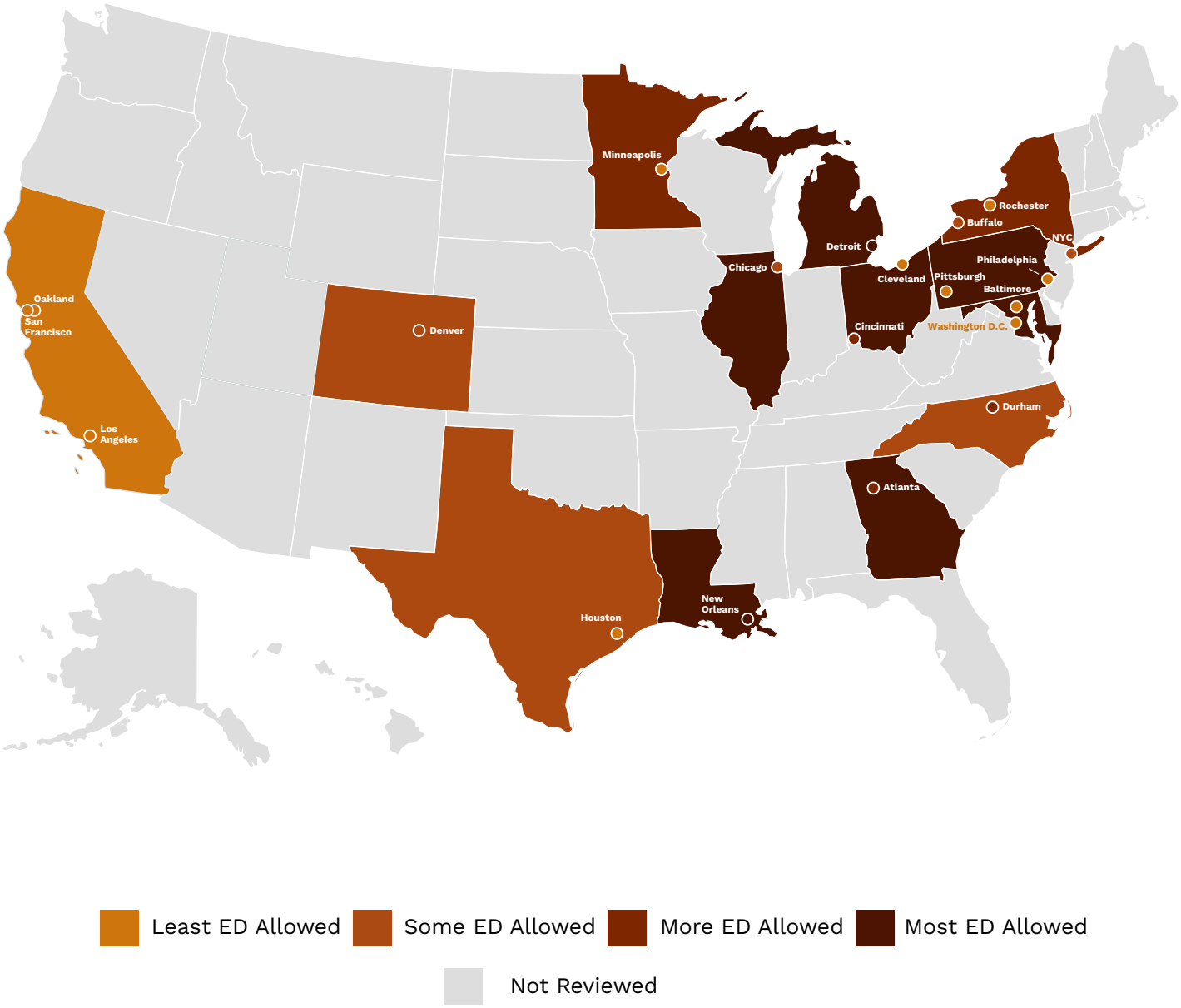

Figure 2. State and District Policies on Exclusionary Discipline Alternatives, Including Restorative Practices

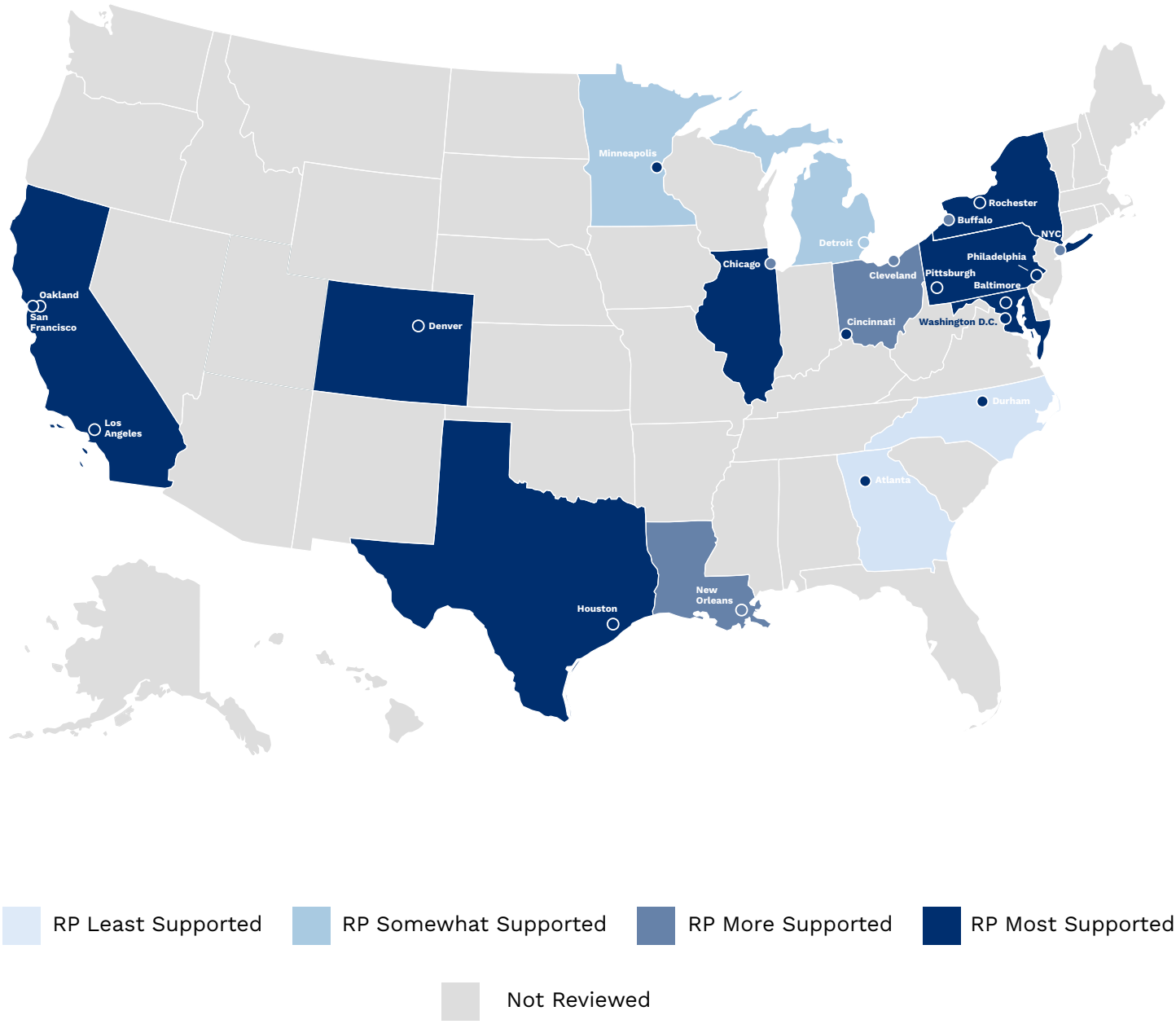

Table 1. State and District Scores for Policies on Exclusionary Discipline

Possible total score range (e.g., the higher the score, the more punitive):
0–1 = Least ED | 2–3 = Some ED | 4–5 = More ED | 6 = Most ED

Location	Serious behavior required	Age protections	Max suspension (non-violent)	Alternative required first	Expulsion allowed (non-violent)	Total Score
California	✓	✓	**≤5 days**	✓	✗	**0**
Los Angeles	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
Oakland	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
San Francisco	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
Colorado	✗	✓	**≤5 days**	✓	✓	**2**
Denver	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✓	2
Georgia	✗	✓	**≤10 days**	✗	✓	**4**
Atlanta	✗	✓	≤10 days	✓	✓	3
Illinois	✗	✗	**≤10 days**	✓	✓	**4**
Chicago	✓	✓	≤10 days	✓	✓	2
Louisiana	✗	✗	**≤10 days**	✗	✓	**5**
New Orleans	✗	✗	≤10 days	✓	✓	4
Maryland	✗	✓	**>10 days**	✓	✓	**4**
Baltimore	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
Michigan	✗	✗	**>10 days**	✓	✓	**5**
Detroit	✗	✓	>10 days	✓	✓	4
Minnesota	✗	✓	**≤10 days**	✓	✓	**3**
Minneapolis	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	1
New York	✗	✗	**≤5 days**	✓	✓	**3**
Buffalo	✗	✗	≤5 days	✓	✗	2
New York City	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	2
Rochester	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
North Carolina	✗	✓	**≤10 days**	✓	✗	**2**
Durham	✗	✗	≤10 days	✓	✗	3
Ohio	✗	✓	**≤10 days**	✗	✓	**4**
Cincinnati	✗	✓	≤10 days	✓	✓	3
Cleveland	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	1
Pennsylvania	✗	✗	**≤10 days**	✓	✓	**4**
Philadelphia	✓	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	0
Pittsburgh	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	1
Texas	✗	✓	**≤5 days**	✓	✓	**2**
Houston	✗	✓	≤5 days	✓	✗	1
Washington, D.C.	✓	✓	**≤5 days**	✓	✗	**0**

Table 2. State and District Scores for Policies on Exclusionary Discipline Alternatives, Including Restorative Practices

Possible total score range (the higher the score, the more extensively alternatives practices are recommended or required): 1 = Least | 2 = Some | 3 = Strong | 4 = Most

Note: A single check mark indicates "suggested but not required;" a double check indicates "required."

Location	Alternative discipline required/ suggested	Alternative required/ suggested first	Total Score
California	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Los Angeles	✓✓	✓✓	4
Oakland	✓✓	✓✓	4
San Francisco	✓✓	✓✓	4
Colorado	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Denver	✓✓	✓✓	4
Georgia	✓	✗	**1**
Atlanta	✓✓	✓✓	4
Illinois	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Chicago	✓	✓✓	3
Louisiana	✓	✓✓	**3**
New Orleans	✓	✓✓	3
Maryland	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Baltimore	✓✓	✓✓	4
Michigan	✓	✓	**2**
Detroit	✓	✓	2
Minnesota	✓✓	✗	**2**
Minneapolis	✓✓	✓✓	4
New York	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Buffalo	✓	✓✓	3
New York City	✓✓	✓	3
Rochester	✓✓	✓✓	4
North Carolina	✓	✗	**1**
Durham	✓✓	✓✓	4
Ohio	✓✓	✓	**3**
Cincinnati	✓✓	✓✓	4
Cleveland	✓✓	✓	3
Pennsylvania	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Philadelphia	✓✓	✓✓	4
Pittsburgh	✓✓	✓✓	4
Texas	✓✓	✓✓	**4**
Houston	✓✓	✓✓	4
Washington, D.C.	✓✓	✓✓	**4**

Table 3. Variation in Total Exclusionary Discipline Scores by State and District

Note: Washington, D.C., is counted in this table as a district.

	Frequency (%) for Each Total Score						
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
States	1 (7.7%)	0	3 (23.1%)	2 (15.4%)	5 (38.5%)	2 (15.4%)	0
Districts	7 (35%)	4 (20%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	0	0

Table 4. Variation in Total Exclusionary Discipline Alternatives/Restorative Practices Scores by State and District

Note: Washington, D.C. is counted in this table as a district.

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
States	2	2 (15.4%)	3 (23.1%)	6 (46.2%)
Districts	0	1 (5%)	5 (25%)	14 (70%)

Results

Figures 1 and 2 display variability in state and district policies regarding exclusionary discipline and alternatives to exclusionary discipline respectively, with darker colors indicating greater policy support for each approach. Regions that endorse more widespread use of exclusionary school discipline tend to have fewer requirements for the use of alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including restorative practices. As evident in the figures and tables, substantial variability was observed across districts and states both for exclusionary discipline policies and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Variability is evident both in total scores and the individual domains that contribute to the total scores. For instance, Chicago and Denver each received a total score of 2 for exclusionary discipline, but their scores differ on individual domains. Out-of-school suspensions can last 10 or more days in Chicago, whereas Denver requires that suspensions be of shorter duration. Chicago, however, restricts exclusionary school discipline to severe infractions involving violence or illegal activity, whereas Denver does not. Familiarity with state and district policies is important for understanding barriers to, and facilitators for, the adoption of restorative practices.

Tables 2 and 4 report the number and percentage of states and districts selected for the policy scan that received each possible total score for use of exclusionary discipline and alternative school discipline/restorative practices. Overall, the state and district policies we reviewed endorsed moderate to high levels of restriction on exclusionary discipline and recommended or required use of alternative school discipline at moderate to high levels. None of the states or regions we selected mandated the unrestricted use of exclusionary school discipline (score of 6); only two states and no districts received the lowest score of 1 for recommendations to use alternative disciplinary strategies/restorative practices. Importantly, districts often received different total scores than their states, highlighting that district policies can and do build in meaningful ways on the basic requirements set by states.

Limitations

This policy scan has several limitations. First, as policies were reviewed only for a limited number of regions, our findings do not characterize policy across all U.S. districts or states. Second, it is difficult to capture nuanced differences in policy using a standardized scoring system given the length and variable formats of state and district documents; this scan should be regarded as a basic snapshot, rather than a comprehensive summary. Third, and importantly, this scan was unable to assess how, to what extent, and with what level of quality district policies are being implemented across district schools.

Conclusion

Our scan of 20 U.S. school districts and their states indicated substantial variability in policy support for exclusionary approaches to address nonviolent student behavior, highlighting opportunities for policy change. While many policies recommend the use of alternatives to exclusionary school discipline, including restorative practices, not all require their use. The extent to which policies provide resources for restorative practices and the types of resources proved also differ across the scanned regions. This scan highlights the need for clearer, more rigourous policies on restorative practices, as well as a stronger emphasis on their use in schoolwide community building.

5

DESIGNING SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY TO SUPPORT RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The core focus of restorative practices is on belonging, connection, and reparation. To benefit schools and students, schools must retain this focus, and restorative practices must be delivered inclusively and equitably. Delivering restorative practices without full understanding of, or commitment to, these foundational principles can be ineffective and even harmful. District policy should support schools in delivering restorative practices effectively, sustainably, and with fidelity to these principles.

Recommendations for School District Policy

The following recommendations for district policy are designed to maximize quality implementation of the practices. These recommendations were developed based on review of studies assessing impacts of restorative practices, review of materials from districts deeply engaged in implementing restorative practices, and discussions with educators, students, and experts in restorative practices.

District policy should:

1. Communicate clearly with families, staff, and students about the goals, content, and implementation of restorative practices.
2. Allow schools to choose whether they will adopt restorative practices.
3. Require schools that adopt restorative practices to aim for schoolwide implementation.
4. Require schools that adopt restorative practices to offer education on restorative practices and related competencies for school members.
5. Provide clear guidelines for establishing student leadership roles in restorative practices.
6. Require that restorative practices are offered across four domains.
7. Restrict the use of exclusionary discipline.
8. Provide resources and tools to support schools in implementing restorative practices, including:
    a. Funding
    b. Partnership with restorative practices organizations or experts
    c. Infrastructure support
    d. Clear goals
    e. Assessment measures and guidelines
    f. School self-assessment guidelines
9. Require use of data to drive quality improvement.

These recommendations are described more fully below.

District policy should:

1. **Communicate clearly with families, staff, and students about the goals, content, and implementation of restorative practices.** Clarity is key as school district policies will guide planning and decision making across schools. School district policy should clearly define “restorative practices” and specific practices that will be used (e.g., “community circles”) because many parents and school personnel do not know what these terms mean and what the practices involve. District policies should make clear how restorative practices can produce benefits for students and schools and should dispel possible sources of concern. For instance, a common misperception about restorative practices is that students who misbehave do not receive consequences for their behavior, so schools may become less safe. Ongoing communications about restorative practices with families, staff, and students, including opportunities for feedback, is vital for successful implementation.
2. **Allow schools to choose whether they will adopt restorative practices.** Choice is a core value of restorative practices. Schools should not adopt restorative practices unless they choose to do so. When school leaders do not wish to adopt restorative practices, it is likely that the practices will not be implemented with fidelity and quality, increasing the likelihood that school climate and student outcomes will not improve and may even become less favorable. Districts can and should provide encouragement and meaningful support for the adoption of restorative practices as outlined in other

recommendations. Successful implementation at early adopter schools may motivate additional schools in the district to adopt the practices.

3. **Require schools that adopt restorative practices to aim for schoolwide implementation.** To meaningfully impact school climate and student skills growth, all members of a school should receive education on restorative practices. Engaging the whole school often takes time. Initial adoption can be effective without universal participation if school leaders are fully engaged, "early adopter" school staff are identified, and parents are informed and given opportunities to provide feedback.
4. **Require that schools adopting restorative practices offer education on restorative practices and related competencies for school members.** All adults in a school should be educated about restorative practices, including administrators, teachers, mental health providers, and other staff members, such as janitorial staff, lunchroom staff, school resource officers, and bus drivers. School members should receive multiyear professional learning in restorative practices, and onboarding professional learning should be offered for new staff. Coaching and ongoing professional learning are also essential.

   To lay a foundation that will support healthy relationship building through restorative practices, adults in the school community should first be educated about trauma-informed approaches and how to combat implicit bias. This professional learning can help adults to engage with restorative practices in a way that benefits all students and will minimize potential for harm to students.

- Professional learning for trauma-informed approaches involves education about the effects of extreme or continuing stress on a child's developing brain and body, including how stress exposure can interfere with learning, memory, and trust in others. Learning also includes strategies for how to respond compassionately and effectively to challenging behaviors or academic problems among students who have experienced trauma.
- Implicit bias education helps adults identify their assumptions, often unconscious, about students of different identities, including students of color, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities, and provides strategies for adults to challenge these biases.

   Students should also be educated about restorative practices, as outlined below.

5. **Provide clear guidelines for establishing student leadership roles in restorative practices.** Most schools implement restorative practices by supporting teachers in delivering the practices to students. In other words, teachers lead, students participate. This is a top-down model in which students do not get the opportunity to facilitate practices themselves. Experts in restorative practices, however, recommend that students take active leadership roles in schoolwide implementation of restorative practices.[73]

   Leadership promotes learning by doing. When students are given the skills to lead, as well as participate in, restorative practices, they learn key social-emotional skills more deeply, develop greater "ownership" of the practices, and become leaders in the school community. These experiences may amplify the valuable skills students can learn from restorative practices, including accountability, responsibility, self-regulation, metacognition (awareness about one's own thinking), active listening, and empathy.[73] These social-emotional skills are critical for academic success, strong interpersonal relationships, positive mental health, and civic engagement, supporting young people's long-term success and well-being across diverse contexts.

   Student leadership of restorative practices can also have positive impacts on school culture and climate. These impacts may include improvements in student-teacher relationships and students' relationships with one another due to teachers' willingness to support student leadership and students' increased accountability, responsibility, and interpersonal skills.[74] Student leadership can also reduce burden on adults in a school to address day-to-day student conflicts.

   All students can benefit from this leadership experience and all students—including, and perhaps especially, those with behavioral, attendance, or academic issues—should have the opportunity to receive education in restorative practices and opportunities to lead circles. Before educating students in restorative practices, approximately a third of adults in the school should be educated so that adults can structure and support student-led practices (a.j. crabill, personal communication, March 25, 2026).

Student-Led Restorative Practices (SLRP) is a model developed by A.J. Crabill that centers student-led restorative practices as a critical approach for promoting student social-emotional skills for long-term success and well-being. SLRP involves teaching students about restorative practices. Trained students who are interested in facilitating practices take a leadership role in responding to student conflicts or incidents by facilitating mediation and restorative circles.

Learn about SLRP here: *https://studentledrp.org*
Resources include a book (Our Tools They Deserve, 2024), an SLRP Implementation Instrument, and additional information.

6. Require that schools adopting restorative practices offer the practices across four domains. Restorative practices should be offered for the four domains described in Chapter 3: (1) Community-building to strengthen communication and relationships at a universal level (e.g., community building circles), (2) Responding to conflicts to prevent rule violations or interpersonal harm (e.g., mediation circles), (3) Responding to rule violations or more serious conflicts (e.g., restorative circles or conferences), and (4) Reintegration to help welcome a student back into the community following a significant absence from school, such as a suspension, expulsion, stay in juvenile detention, illness, or injury (e.g., welcome circles).
7. Restrict the use of exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline strategies remove students from school, which disrupts student academic learning and undermines the goals of restorative practices, including accountability to community members and opportunities to repair harm. Schools should limit the use of suspension, expulsion, and other forms of exclusionary discipline to situations that are a threat to safety or involve illegal activities. Districts should offer a spectrum of options, such as mediation and restorative circles, for responding to lower-intensity but high-frequency behaviors. When restorative practices are delivered effectively, student behavior problems decrease.
8. Provide resources and tools to support schools in implementing restorative practices. Districts should provide:
    a. **Funding.** The district should obtain funding to cover the ongoing costs of restorative practices professional learning and coaching for teachers, staff, and students. Sources of funding may include federal, state, district, and/or philanthropic funds. At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes Title II, Part A, which provides funding "to improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, principals, and other school leaders,"[75] and Title IV, Part A, which provides funds to "provide all students with access to a well-rounded education" and "improve school conditions for learning."[75] Funds can also be earmarked at the state and local levels for restorative practices. Some states have funding to support mental health and wellness or to support disadvantaged students. For instance, Ohio offers Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid and Student Wellness and Success Funds.[76] Some private foundations and nonprofit organizations offer grants that can fund restorative practices.

    Other costs can be covered by individual schools, including a stipend for a teacher(s) to oversee restorative practices and dedicated rooms for mediation and restorative circles.

    b. **Partnership with restorative practices organizations or experts.** School districts should partner with local or national organizations or experts to provide learning sessions on trauma-informed care, implicit bias, and restorative practices, as well as ongoing professional learning and coaching on restorative practices, in district schools. These organizations may operate at the local (e.g., Partnership for Los Angeles Schools), state (e.g., the Maryland State Department of Education offers a Restorative Practices Collaborative), national (e.g., National Association of Community and Restorative Justice; NACRJ), or international level (e.g., International Institute for Restorative Practices; IIRP).

    c. **Infrastructure support.** The district should identify or hire a staff member to oversee restorative practices across district schools. This staff member will assist schools in accessing professional learning, help to address implementation challenges, and work collaboratively with schools on quality improvement.

d. **Clear goals.** For restorative practices to be effective, clear goals for the practices must be established and monitored. These goals should target enhancement of school climate, community building, and, most importantly, student social-emotional and academic outcomes. District policy should specify these goals and how to operationalize them.

e. **Assessment measures and guidelines.** Districts should supply implementation fidelity rating measures and measures to assess the targeted school and student outcomes, as well as clear guidelines for how to collect data and analyze findings. Schools should use these measures to collect data for quality improvement, as described below.

f. **School self-assessment guidelines.** Schools should be given guidelines for assessing their own readiness to adopt restorative practices, including leadership buy-in, schedule of ongoing professional learning and coaching, plans for overseeing and monitoring implementation, and funding for costs of restorative practices not covered by the district (e.g., stipend for school champion). School readiness should be reviewed and approved by district leadership. District leaders should not approve schools to adopt restorative practices unless and until they are positioned to do so well.

9. **Require use of data to drive quality improvement.** Using district guidelines and assessment tools, schools should be required to collect data on restorative practices at consistent intervals (e.g., semi-annually). Data are critical for checking that restorative practices are being delivered as intended (fidelity of implementation), testing whether restorative practices are achieving the intended benefits (student and school outcomes assessment), and monitoring whether all students are benefitting equitably (equity assessment). Schools and districts should collect and analyze the following:

   - **Fidelity of implementation – Data on fidelity track how well restorative practices are being implemented. For example, are community circles being held consistently? When community circles are held, are they facilitated in a way that effectively builds community? Tracking fidelity of implementation involves specifying the practices to be delivered, as well as clear metrics for evaluating whether the practices are delivered as intended (adherence) and with skill (quality). If fidelity of implementation is not assessed, schools and districts cannot judge whether restorative practices are beneficial because it will not be clear to what extent students were exposed to the practices.**

     Resources:

     - **The Student Led Restorative Practices Implementation Instrument is a tool for identifying implementation strengths and weaknesses.[73] This instrument can be adapted to fit the needs of a district or school: https://studentledrp.org/instrument/**
     - **The RP-Observe protocol is an observational tool to assess quality and fidelity of restorative practices circles: https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/pa13-handout-gregory-davis.pdf**

   - **Outcome assessments – It is vital for districts and schools to identify what outcomes they are targeting with restorative practices and to assess whether these outcomes are in fact being achieved. The most important outcomes are those that "describe what students know or are able to do and are observable."[73] Outcomes should be SMART: specific (clearly defined), measurable (quantifiable), attainable (realistic to achieve), results-focused (targeting change in student outcomes), and time-bound (achieved by a deadline).[73] Districts should require the assessment of outcomes that go beyond disciplinary measures to include aspects such as student belonging, teacher satisfaction, peer relationships, and student mental health.**

   - **Equity assessments – When monitoring the impacts of restorative practices on student outcomes, it is critical to evaluate whether all students are benefitting equitably. Thus, in addition to tracking outcomes for the whole student body, outcomes should be compared across students with different characteristics (for instance, comparisons based on student disability status, race/ethnicity, and gender). If inequities in outcomes are documented, these should be addressed in partnership with district leadership, as discussed below:**

Data analysis is critical for informing potential refinements or revisions to how restorative practices are implemented so that they can be optimized to achieve the desired outcomes. Schools should be required to share findings with district leadership for ongoing quality improvement. Regular review of findings by school and district leaders should be mandated to identify problems and guide quality improvement. Shortcomings identified in fidelity, outcomes, or equity across students should inform modifications to how restorative practices are delivered to address the problem. Findings should also be regularly shared with the school community, including teachers, students, and parents, and input should be solicited from these interested parties to support improvements.

OAKLAND AND MINNEAPOLIS: EXAMPLES TO GUIDE DISTRICT POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Oakland and Minneapolis have each implemented districtwide approaches to restorative practices. The excerpts below contain sample language for describing the purpose and core components of restorative practices that district leaders can consider adapting for their own contexts.

Oakland Unified School District

An Integrated, Schoolwide Approach (The Restorative Justice Initiative):

Restorative Justice builds a school community's social emotional intelligence, relationships, and capacity to address challenges together. It helps create a community where healing is possible. RJ not only strengthens relationships between adults and students but also among adults and among students. In this way, RJ creates a positive, inclusive school culture, enhances teaching and learning, and acts preventatively so that school communities are better equipped to prevent conflicts or resolve them as they appear, before they escalate.

RJ does not push out existing school initiatives, including promising and evidence-based programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Those initiatives complement restorative practices, and all programs can strengthen school communities together.

The language above was adapted from Oakland Unified School District's description of programs and services: https://www.ousd.org/restorative-justice/programs-and-services

Oakland's approach includes:

1. *Professional development and coaching support to almost 40 RJ sites throughout the District.*
2. *Implementation of trauma informed restorative practices*
3. *Integration of Positive Behavioral Supports, targeted strategies for equity, and Social Emotional Learning at participating sites.*
4. *Inclusion of parents and families to engage them in school climate and discipline issues.*
5. *Alignment with City of Oakland's 'Oakland Unite' programs including community crisis response & support network, conflict mediation, street outreach, and Juvenile Justice re-entry to schools.*
6. *Engaging youth leadership in restorative practices through the Peer RJ program.*

https://www.ousd.org/restorative-justice/programs-and-services

The Minneapolis Public School District

Restorative practices support the overarching goal of strengthening school climate by changing mindsets, building community and repairing relationships. In a restorative school, relationships are fostered with the same emphasis as academic skills. Central to restorative practices are the beliefs that all people are worthy and relational, and that we must build, maintain, and repair relationships. A restorative practices implementation journey must center equity.

The statement above was developed by the Minnesota Department of Education.

https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=MDE089351&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

The Minneapolis Public School District further defines the practices as follows:

- *Practices that develop the restorative mindset:*
  - *Build community among adults*
  - *Examine your own relationship to harm*
  - *Explore implicit bias, historical trauma and resilience*
- *Practices that build community:*
  - *Empathetic communication, which includes listening with care and curiosity, and speaking using the language of feeling, of empathy*
  - *Circles to build and maintain relationships, to teach, to meet, to problem-solve, to provide ongoing support*
- *Practices that respond to harm:*
  - *Restorative questions used in a chat or conversations with one or two people*
  - *Circle or conferencing with a group of people affected by harm, using the restorative questions.*

These practices are used to build healthy relationships and to create community in school, develop a positive school climate, prevent bullying and harm, and help repair harm. Restorative practices apply equally to everyone in the school community: students, adults, families and community members.

https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/ed

6

CREATING SCHOOL POLICY CHANGE

You can be an agent of change whether you are a student, a parent, a teacher, a counselor, a principal, or another member of the community. Changing school policy starts with becoming informed about existing policies and then deciding on changes you believe are needed. Finally, be strategic: Build a coalition of people who want policy change, use data to advocate for change, and make your case to the school board and district administrators.

Learn About the Policies in Your School District

Public schools in the U.S. are required to provide families with information about their student discipline policies in materials sent home and/or posted online. The school's handbook should also provide information about what alternatives to exclusionary school discipline are used, including restorative practices.

Questions to consider:

- Does the district policy describe the use of restorative practices and if so, which ones?
- Does the school or district report student outcomes, and if so, which outcomes are reported (e.g., feelings of belonging, school connectedness, perceptions of school climate, suspension rates, academic achievement)? Are outcomes also reported across different student subpopulations to assess equity?
- Does the district policy restrict the use of exclusionary school discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, to violent or illegal offenses?

If you have difficulty finding descriptions of school or district policies and procedures, you can contact the school principal or school district to get more information.

Examine Quantitative Data

There are multiple sources of quantitative data (data based on numbers) that can inform you about strengths and needs of local students.

- Individuals can access state- and district-level school data on student achievement, high school graduation rates, attendance, chronic absenteeism, and disciplinary practices through online public data portals and reports.
- School climate and culture measures are also collected in many school settings, as well as measures related to social-emotional learning (SEL), including engagement, sense of belonging, and relationships/ connectedness. Measures on student mental health may also be available through the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).
- U.S. public schools and school districts must report their disciplinary data in aggregate form, without individual student information, to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The OCR produces a Civil Rights Data Collection (CRCD) report every two years, which is posted publicly online at: *https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov*

Review these data to get a picture of how students are doing in the district, including social-emotional outcomes and academic achievement, and to identify how often exclusionary discipline is being used in your district and state. It can also be helpful to look at data in other states and districts that use restorative practices as a comparison.

Talk to Students, Teachers, and Parents

Speaking with these local constituents is another form of data gathering to inform advocacy. Ask students, teachers, and parents what changes they would like to see.

Methods for eliciting people's perspectives on restorative practices include:

- Listening sessions. A listening session brings together people whose input you are seeking, for instance, in a town hall-style meeting. Listening sessions tend to be relatively informal and conversational. A general topic or question is broached in an unstructured way, and people respond with thoughts and open discussion. It is helpful to record the session and take notes to ensure that information is captured.

  Resources for conducting listening sessions are provided below:

  School of Excellence Listening Session Guide developed by the National PTA School of Excellence: https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/files/programs/school-of-excellence/_upcoming-2023-2024/survey-materials/listening-session-guide-2023-24.pdf

  Facilitating Community Listening Sessions: A Guide for PTAs developed by the Center for Family Engagement (a National PTA Initiative): https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/files/cfe/2020/cfe-facilitating_listening_sessions.pdf

- Focus groups and interviews. A focus group is a more structured discussion held with several people (typically 5–8) whose perspectives you want to understand. An interview is a discussion with a single individual to elicit their perspectives. Focus groups are useful when questions are not sensitive or personal and when hearing discussion among several individuals about a topic would enrich understanding. Focus groups can be an effective way to spark conversations among young people who may be less talkative one on one. Interviews are useful when eliciting feedback from professionals with distinct expertise on a topic, when questions are more personal, or when it would be logistically difficult to bring individuals together at a common time.

  A trained individual should conduct focus groups and interviews, generally by following a semi-structured guide that contains pre-specified questions but also allows flexibility for probing responses to learn new information. Focus groups and interviews are typically audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative methods to identify key themes. Focus groups generally require approval by a school district's Institutional Review Board (IRB), including the use of student consent forms for young people age 18 or over and student assent forms and parent permission forms for young people under age 18. Partnership with a researcher is useful for developing an IRB application, designing or editing focus group and interview guides, and analyzing focus group and interview data to inform policy advocacy.

  The Institute for Education Sciences developed guidelines for conducting interviews and focus groups: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/central/pdf/CE5.3.2-Guidelines-for-Interviews-and-Focus-Groups.pdf

  Sample questions for conducting a focus group with students are included in Appendix C.

These qualitative data, in combination with the quantitative data discussed above, can help you identify how you want school policy to be changed and may suggest effective strategies for advocacy.

Form a Coalition

Create a community of people who share your concern about the issue and are committed to policy change. These can be students, parents, teachers, or other community members. Building a coalition that includes people from different groups can show widespread support for your issue. Members of a coalition can work together to advocate for change, which makes it easier to accomplish tasks.

Key steps for forming a coalition include the following:

- Identify coalition members: Build a diverse coalition that represents different sectors and interests. Consider which interested parties are often "not at the table" and which groups of students tend to experience harsher disciplinary sanctions to make sure that their perspectives and interests are represented. Members may include:
  - School principals and teachers who support restorative practices
  - School mental health providers (psychologists, social workers, counselors) and personnel who work with students with disabilities
  - Students and student interest groups (e.g., Gender and Sexuality Alliance)
  - Recent graduates of the school
  - Parents/families
  - Members of local restorative practices organizations that work with schools
  - University research partners
  - Youth organizations and after-school programs
  - Community-based nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and local or state advocacy organizations focused on youth wellness and positive development, including those focused on racial equity
  - Local or state policymakers who support restorative practices
- Clarify shared goals and values: Early coalition meetings should focus on identifying and achieving consensus on coalition values and advocacy goals and on the values guiding this effort.
  - Share information about the importance of restorative practices for building school community and promoting student social-emotional skills critical for long-term success. This may include students, parents, or teachers sharing personal stories or experiences.
  - Discuss the importance of reducing the district's use of exclusionary discipline to support restorative practices.
  - Share best practices from other states or districts with success in delivering restorative practices effectively.
  - Identify common priorities and potential challenges.
  - Establish shared values and commitment to the cause.
- Define roles and responsibilities: A successful coalition has clear roles to distribute work efficiently. Clarifying roles early helps prevent duplication and ensures accountability. It is also important to ensure that each member has a role that is aligned with their skillset and capacity. When including students, ensure they have opportunities to take on meaningful responsibility and leadership to avoid tokenizing members. Some coalition members may struggle with technology or modes of communication and may need additional support to get involved.

  Roles may include:
  - **Lead organizer or coordinator:** Oversee coalition activities and communications
  - **Community outreach leads:** Engage families, schools, and local groups to build broader support
  - **Communications and media contacts:** Manage public relations, social media, and messaging
  - **District liaisons:** Maintain relationships with district administrators

Some resources for identifying different roles one can use within a coalition are listed below (links active as of 4/14/26):

- The Commons Social Change Library "Engagement Pyramid: Visualize the different ways a person might get involved with your Campaign" *https://commonslibrary.org/engagement-pyramid/*
- The Centre for Effective Altruism "The Concentric Circles model *https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/the-concentric-circles-model*
- Develop a strategic plan: Work together to create a coalition action plan, which may include:
  - Timelines for key milestones such as engaging with district leadership
  - Outreach strategies to educate students, parents, and administrators
  - Coalition events, such as community forums, town halls, or letter-writing campaigns
  - Garnering feedback from interested parties–one strategy for doing this is to conduct listening sessions or focus groups
  - Fundraising or resource-sharing strategies
- Maintain communication and engagement: Sustain momentum through regular meetings, updates, and transparent communication. Tools such as email newsletters, group chats, or virtual meetings can keep members informed and connected. Celebrate small wins to maintain enthusiasm. Consider the communication needs of your coalition members and make accommodations as needed (for example: interpreters or using plain language).
- Leverage coalition strengths: Use the diversity of coalition members to reach different audiences and sectors. Leveraging these varied strengths builds a broad base of support and credibility. For example, specific to restorative practices in schools:
  - Student government members and student interest groups can engage students as advocates
  - Parent groups can mobilize families for advocacy days
  - University partners can provide research support
  - Educators can share classroom experiences to illustrate benefits of restorative practices
- Prepare for long-term advocacy: Policy change often takes time and persistence. A sustainable coalition can drive change beyond policy to ensure that policies are implemented effectively. The coalition should be prepared for:
  - Building ongoing relationships with district administrators
  - Responding to opposition or challenges
  - Advocating for quality implementation and monitoring of outcomes once policies are passed
  - Expanding coalition membership to include new partners
  - Adjusting timelines and goals; progress takes time
  - Maintaining flexibility to account for setbacks can sustain motivation among coalition members.

Engage With the School Board and With Administrators

Engaging with the school board and district administrators can be an effective way to enact school district policy change.

There are several ways to engage with your district school board. For example, you can:

- Speak at a school board meeting to present data on the issue and advocate for change
- Email, write to, or meet with school board members individually to advocate for the policy change
- Campaign to elect school board members who support the policy change
- Campaign to be elected to the school board so that you can push for policy change as a member
- Serve on a school board committee or working group to advance policy change

Engaging with school administrators is also an important way to advance school district policy change. Examples are:

- Email, write to, or meet with district administrators to advocate for the policy change, focusing on administrators who address student wellness and student discipline.
- Request to present to members of the district's leadership, possibly at a "lunch and learn" or other gathering.

Posting on social media and publishing opinion pieces in local media outlets can also raise public awareness about the issue, including awareness of school board members and district leadership (see Appendix D on How to Write an Op-Ed).

7

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Toolkit Development

This toolkit was developed by researchers and staff at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, led by Tamar Mendelson, in collaboration with the Restorative Practices Policy Toolkit Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee was comprised of members of the Baltimore City Trauma Informed Care Task Force, including restorative practices practitioners, members of local agencies serving young people (Department of Public Health, Baltimore City Public Schools), researchers, and young people.

Hopkins researchers met twice with the Advisory Committee to refine the goals for the project, identify cities to include in the policy scan, and discuss how to incorporate the perspectives of different constituents on key policy elements and advocacy strategies. Members of the Hopkins team conducted a review of research on restorative practices and exclusionary school discipline, and a Policy Scan Workgroup comprised of six members from the Hopkins team and Advisory Committee was formed to conduct the policy scan, as described in Appendix B.

The toolkit text was drafted by Tamar Mendelson, Laura Clary, and Melinda Scott. The initial draft was shared with the Advisory Committee and was also presented to the Baltimore City Trauma Informed Care Task Force to elicit input and suggestions. In addition, 10 individuals—including practitioners, researchers, and young people—were invited to conduct a close read of the toolkit and provide detailed feedback. Revisions were incorporated into the draft based on the feedback from the Advisory Committee, Task Force, and reviewers.

Appendix B. Policy Scan Methods

Policy Identification and Scoring Procedures. The Policy Scan Workgroup included six members. We developed a written protocol for how to conduct online searches to identify state and district policies, which included a list of authoritative sources to check, including state departments of education, state legislative databases, the National Association of State Boards of Education policy database, and the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments for state policies and district codes of conduct and student discipline policies for district policies.

To start, two cities were selected as "test cases," and all group members independently identified district policies on *exclusionary discipline* and *alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including restorative practices* for those cities, as well as state policies for their states. The group met to check cross-rater agreement, resolve discrepancies, refine the protocol for policy identification, and develop scoring systems to characterize district and state policies (described in the next section). Next, the workgroup was divided into three groups of two to review policies for the remaining 18 cities. Each of the three pairs was assigned to identify policies for six cities and their corresponding states. Each group member independently identified and scored policies for their districts and states, entering the data into a spreadsheet, and met with their partner to review findings and resolve discrepancies. The full group met periodically to review findings and make refinements to the scoring system. Findings were recorded in a master spreadsheet, indicating whether policies existed, summarizing key provisions (such as limits on exclusionary discipline or mandates for alternative disciplinary strategies), and linking to original sources. The policy scan process was completed by January 1, 2026.

Policy scoring systems. We developed separate systems to score policies related to *exclusionary discipline* and *alternatives to exclusionary discipline/restorative practices*. Separate scores were calculated for each district and the district's corresponding state.

Exclusionary Discipline. As shown in Table 1, exclusionary school discipline policies were scored on five domains:

- Serious behavior required: Are serious (i.e., violent or illegal) behaviors required to suspend or expel a student? Answer: YES/NO
- Age protection: Are less serious or shorter disciplinary measures used for younger students? Answer: YES/NO
- Maximum suspension time for nonviolent offenses: What is the maximum suspension time allowed for less serious (i.e., nonviolent, non-illegal) offenses? Answer: < 5 days, < 10 days, or > 10 days
- Alternative disciplinary strategies required before exclusionary school discipline: Are schools required to use alternative disciplinary strategies first before suspending or expelling a student? Answer YES/NO
- Expulsion allowed for nonviolent offenses: Can a student be expelled for a nonviolent offense? Answer: YES/NO

One point was allocated for each domain scored as NO. For the domain of maximum suspensions for minor infractions, 2 points were allocated for maximum suspensions < 5 days, 1 point for < 10 days, and 0 points for > 10 days. Scores were summed across domains for a total score range of 0 to 6, with higher scores indicating more use of exclusionary discipline.

Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline/Resources for Restorative Practices. We scored the following:

- Alternative disciplinary approaches required or suggested instead of exclusionary discipline for minor infractions. A score of 1 was allocated when policies suggested the use of alternative approaches instead of suspension or expulsion; a score of 2 was allocated when alternative approaches were required.
- Policy mentioned provision of resources for restorative practices (e.g. guidelines, trainings) or recommended use of restorative practices without mention of providing resources. A score of 1 was allocated when policies recommended restorative practices but did not mention providing resources; a score of 2 was allocated when policy mentioned provision of resources.

Scores were summed across domains for a total score range of 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating more encouragement for use of alternative disciplinary strategies, such as restorative practices.

Appendix C. Sample Student Focus Group Guide

This document provides sample focus group guide questions. Student focus groups can be conducted with students at a school that already uses restorative practices to explore student perspectives on what is going well and what could be improved, or they can be conducted with students at a school that does not use restorative practices to identify student experiences, needs, and wants that may be addressed by adopting restorative practices.

Before starting the focus group, the facilitator should review the information in the study consent, including the fact that participants can choose not to answer questions and to end their participation at any time, and will check if there are any questions. Each participant will be asked to choose a made-up name to use during the discussion and will be asked not to use their actual name to protect confidentiality during the audio recording. If the focus group is being conducted on Zoom, participants will be told they can keep their cameras off and change their Zoom name label to the made-up name they chose. The facilitator will then let the students know when the audio recording begins.

- The first thing I'm interested in learning about from you has to do with how people treat each other and relate to each other at school. What does it look like when students and teachers have positive relationships with each other?
- What about when students have positive relationships with each other?
- What do you think would be the best way for your school to create positive relationships between students and teachers and across students?
- How much does your school already do this? Rate it from 1–5, with 5 being the best. Hold up 1-5 fingers (if in person) or drop a number into the chat (if online). Then write down why you gave the number you did. (Collect these statements later with nickname on it or have participants message you directly on Zoom.) Let's go around so that people can share your answers if you're comfortable doing that.
  - **What's one thing you wish your school would do differently to create positive relationships?**
  - **What's one thing your school does that you really like?**
- What do you think would be the best way for your school to handle conflict between students or between students and teachers?
- How much does your school already do this? Rate it from 1–5, with 5 being the best. Hold up 1-5 fingers (if in person) or drop a number into the chat (if online). Then write down why you gave the number you did. (Collect these statements later with nickname on it or have participants message you directly on Zoom.) Let's go around so that people can share your answers if you're comfortable doing that.
  - **What's one thing you wish your school would do differently to handle conflict?**
  - **What's one thing your school does that you really like?**
- What do you think would be the best way for your school to handle students who don't follow school rules?
- How much does your school already do this? Rate it from 1–5, with 5 being the best. Hold up 1-5 fingers (if in person) or drop a number into the chat (if online). Then write down why you gave the number you did. (Collect these statements later with nickname on it or have participants message you directly on Zoom.) Let's go around so that people can share your answers if you're comfortable doing that.
  - **What's one thing you wish your school would do differently to handle students who break school rules?**
  - **What's one thing your school does that you really like?**

If conducting the focus group with students at a school that already uses restorative practices, the following questions may also be useful.

- Now I want to switch gears a little and learn about **restorative practices** at your school. What does the term restorative practices mean to you?
- What kinds of practices does your school have? (Can probe specifically about restorative circles, restorative conferences, I statements, other practices.)
  - **Describe what those practices are like.**
  - **When are they used/how are they used?**
  - **Who leads them?**
  - **What do you think the goal of restorative practices is at your school? Why?**
  - **What do most students think about restorative practices at your school? What do you think?**
  - **How much do restorative practices make you feel seen and respected at your school?**
  - **What do you really like about RP at your school?**
  - **What do you wish were different about the way your school does RP?**
  - **How involved are students at your school in making decisions about restorative practices or helping to deliver restorative practices?**
  - **How do you think students should be involved in restorative practices at your school?**
  - **Is there anything else you'd like to share?**

Appendix D. Writing an Op-Ed

The purpose of an op-ed, which is short for "opposite the editorial page," is for someone with either personal experience or professional expertise on an issue–ideally, someone with a vested local interest–to provide a persuasive argument related to the issue. Op-eds can be a useful strategy for shaping public opinion, including boosting awareness and support for changes in school district policies. Below, we share some tips and resources for writing and publishing an op-ed in a local news outlet.

Content

- Op-eds are short (~600–800 words) and are typically authored by just one person (sometimes two)
- Op-eds should be written in plain language, avoiding jargon, with brief, concise sentences
- Essential elements of an op-ed include:
  - **A "hook" to grab your reader and make your piece timely**
  - **Argument or thesis**
  - **Key points (usually ~three pieces of data or evidence) to support your argument**
  - **A statement acknowledging the counterargument**
  - **A call to action at the conclusion, often circling back to your news hook**

Timing

Op-eds can be published at any time to promote the importance of school district policies relating to restorative practices. Op-eds published prior to the adoption of a policy on restorative practices can call attention to the need for such a policy; those published after a new district policy adopting or expanding restorative practices can encourage effective implementation; and those published after a district failed to adopt or expand restorative practices can advocate for revisiting the policy in the future. When writing an op-ed, consider any potential unintended consequences of your argument or call to action, such as whether the piece may alienate potential supporters.

Submission

Local news outlets typically have online portals for op-ed submissions. Follow the directions in the portal. If it is possible, e-mailing an editor directly may increase the likelihood of publication.

The following are general tips of what to say when contacting an editor. Most importantly, be respectful. Email once, upon submission, and follow up one to two business days later if you do not hear back indicating that you are planning to submit elsewhere if they are not interested. If you do not hear back or are rejected, then move on to a new outlet. Do not submit to multiple outlets at once.

- Introduce yourself, including your expertise and local relevance (e.g., "I am an elementary school principal and have worked for X school district in X state for 20 years; I have seen firsthand the positive benefits of restorative practices for students").
- Briefly summarize the argument you make in your op-ed and why it is unique (1–2 sentences).
- Note why this outlet should publish this op-ed (regional relevance, recent relevant publications, etc.)

Your organization may have media liaisons or internal resources for op-ed submissions–these entities are often very helpful in supporting your submission and providing feedback. Anyone can submit an op-ed, as a local expert/citizen even if you are not affiliated with an organization that has media support.

While op-eds are a common format for publishing perspectives, letters to the editor and commentaries are other options that some media outlets offer.

Appendix E. Writing an Op-Ed

Resources with General Tips

- Society for Behavioral Medicine, "Top Sheet: Purpose of an Op-Ed" *https://www.sbm.org/scicomm/guide-to-ops-eds/purpose-of-an-op-ed*
- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; Learner Center for Public Health Advocacy "How to Write an Op-ed or Letter to the Editor" *https://publichealth.jhu.edu/lerner-center/resources/how-to-write-an-op-ed-or-letter-to-the-editor*
- The OpEd Project *https://www.theopedproject.org/resources*
- The Commons Social Change Library, "The Power of Story: The Story of Self, Us and Now": General information on using storytelling in organizing *https://commonslibrary.org/the-power-of-story-the-story-of-self-us-and-now/*

Free Op-Ed Training

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Healthy Eating Research op-ed training for researchers (free): *https://healthyeatingresearch.org/2023/09/writing-effective-op-eds-a-training-for-researchers/*
- Your school district, union, university affiliate (including as alumni), or other collaborating organization may also be able to provide training free of charge.

Appendix E. Model Language for School District Policy

Model policy language is provided below. This language can be tailored as needed by district leaders for their specific context.

ARTICLE I: PURPOSE AND DEFINITIONS

Section 1.1 – Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish a framework for the adoption and implementation of restorative practices in [DISTRICT NAME] schools. This policy is designed to support belonging, connection, and reparation within our school communities; improve school climate; reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline; and enhance student social-emotional and academic outcomes.

Section 1.2 – Definition of Restorative Practices

Restorative practices are relationship-centered processes that develop, maintain, and repair bonds among members of a community. Rooted in Indigenous traditions, these practices proactively build community, prevent conflicts, and repair relationships where conflict has occurred.

Section 1.3 – Core Principles

Restorative practices in [DISTRICT NAME] shall be grounded in the following principles:

- All people should be treated with respect and compassion
- Healthy relationships are the foundation of strong communities
- Relationships must be built, maintained, and repaired
- Accountability should be prioritized over punishment
- Communities play an active role in preventing harm and responding to it

ARTICLE II: COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Section 2.1 – Clear Communication

The District shall clearly communicate with families, staff, and students about the goals, content, and implementation of restorative practices. Communications shall:

a) Clearly define "restorative practices" and specific practices to be used (e.g., community building circles, mediation circles, restorative circles, welcome circles);

b) Explain how restorative practices produce benefits for students and schools;

c) Address common misconceptions, including clarifying that restorative practices do not mean students avoid consequences for their behavior;

d) Provide ongoing communications and opportunities for feedback from families, staff, and students.

ARTICLE III: SCHOOL ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Section 3.1 – Voluntary Adoption

Schools may voluntarily choose whether to adopt restorative practices. District leadership shall provide encouragement and support for adoption but shall not mandate participation. When school leaders do not wish to adopt restorative practices, the practices are unlikely to be implemented effectively.

Section 3.2 – School Readiness Assessment

Prior to adoption, schools must complete a self-assessment of readiness, including:

- Leadership buy-in and commitment
- Schedule of ongoing professional learning and coaching
- Plans for overseeing and monitoring implementation
- Identified funding for costs not covered by the District

School readiness shall be reviewed and approved by District leadership before adoption is authorized.

Section 3.3 – Schoolwide Implementation

Schools that adopt restorative practices shall aim for schoolwide implementation to meaningfully impact school climate and student skills. Initial adoption may proceed without universal participation provided that:

- School leaders are fully engaged
- "Early adopter" staff members are identified
- Families are given opportunities to provide feedback

ARTICLE IV: DOMAINS OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Section 4.1 – Required Domains

Schools that adopt restorative practices shall offer practices across the following domains:

Domain 1: Community Building – Practices that strengthen communication and relationships at a universal level (e.g., community building circles in classrooms).

Domain 2: Responding to Conflicts – Practices to prevent rule violations or interpersonal harms before they occur (e.g., mediation circles or conferences).

Domain 3: Responding to Rule Violations or Serious Conflicts – Practices to address rule violations or more serious conflicts that have occurred (e.g., restorative circles or conferences).

Domain 4: Reintegration – Practices to welcome students back into the community following a significant absence, including after suspension, expulsion, stay in juvenile detention, illness, or injury (e.g., welcome circles).

ARTICLE V: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Section 5.1 – Education for All School Staff

Schools that adopt restorative practices shall provide education on restorative practices and related competencies for all school members, including:

- Administrators
- Teachers
- School mental health providers
- Other staff (janitorial staff, lunchroom staff, school resource officers, bus drivers

Training shall include multi-year professional learning in restorative practices, with onboarding professional learning for new staff. Coaching and ongoing professional learning are required.

Section 5.2 – Foundational Professional Learning Requirements

Prior to adoption of restorative practices, adults in the school community shall be educated on:

a) Trauma-Informed Approaches – Education about the effects of extreme or continuing stress on child development, including how stress can interfere with learning, memory, and trust, and strategies for responding compassionately and effectively to students;

b) Implicit Bias – Education to help adults recognize and combat implicit biases to ensure restorative practices benefit all students equitably and minimize potential for harm.

Section 5.3 – Threshold for Student Education

Approximately one-third of adults in a school should be trained in restorative practices before students are educated, so that adults can effectively structure and support student-led practices.

ARTICLE VI: STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Section 6.1 – Student Leadership Roles

Schools shall establish student leadership roles in restorative practices. Leading restorative practices teaches students critical social-emotional skills including, emotion awareness and regulation, meta-cognitive awareness, active listening, empathy, and accountability and responsibility.

Section 6.2 – Inclusive Participation

All students, including those with behavioral, attendance, or academic issues, shall have opportunities to:

- Learn about restorative practices and how to facilitate them
- Facilitate mediation circles and conferences when trained and interested, with a teacher present
- Facilitate restorative circles and conferences when trained and interested, with a teacher present

ARTICLE VII: RESTRICTIONS ON EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

Section 7.1 – Limitation on Exclusionary Discipline

Schools shall limit the use of suspension, expulsion, and other forms of exclusionary discipline to situations that:

- Pose a threat to safety; or
- Involve illegal activities

Exclusionary discipline removes students from school, disrupting their learning and undermining the goals of restorative practices, including accountability to community members and opportunities to repair harm.

Section 7.2 – Alternative Responses Required

The District shall offer a spectrum of alternative options, such as mediation circles and restorative circles, for responding to lower-intensity but high-frequency behaviors. Schools shall be required to exhaust alternative disciplinary strategies before resorting to exclusionary discipline for non-violent offenses.

ARTICLE VIII: DISTRICT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Section 8.1 – Funding

The District shall fund the ongoing costs of restorative practices professional learning and coaching for teachers, staff, and students.

Individual schools shall cover additional costs, including stipends for school champions and dedicated spaces for mediation and restorative circles.

Section 8.2 – Partnership with Restorative Practices Organizations

The District shall partner with local, state, national, or international organizations or experts to provide:

- Learning sessions on trauma-informed care, implicit bias, and restorative practices
- Ongoing professional learning
- Coaching support in district schools

Section 8.3 – Infrastructure Support

The District shall identify or hire a staff member to oversee restorative practices across district schools. This staff member shall:

- Assist schools in accessing professional learning
- Help address implementation challenges
- Work collaboratively with schools on quality improvement

ARTICLE IX: GOALS, ASSESSMENT, AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Section 9.1 – Clear Goals

The District shall establish and monitor clear goals for restorative practices targeting:

- Enhancement of school climate
- Community building
- Student social-emotional outcomes
- Student academic outcomes

Goals shall be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused, and time-bound.

Section 9.2 – Assessment Measures and Guidelines

The District shall provide:

- Fidelity rating measures
- Measures to assess targeted school and student outcomes
- Clear guidelines for data collection and analysis

Section 9.3 – Data Collection Requirements

Schools shall collect data on restorative practices at consistent intervals (e.g., twice per year), including:

a) Fidelity of Implementation – Data tracking how well restorative practices are being implemented, including whether practices are delivered as intended (adherence) and with skill (quality);

b) Outcome Assessments – Data on student and school outcomes beyond disciplinary measures, including student belonging, teacher satisfaction, peer relationships, and student mental health;

c) Equity Assessments – Data comparing outcomes across students with different characteristics (disability status, race/ethnicity, gender) to ensure all students benefit equitably.

Section 9.4 – Quality Improvement Process

Schools shall share findings with District leadership for ongoing quality improvement. Regular review of findings by school and District leaders shall be required to:

- Identify implementation problems
- Guide quality improvement
- Address shortcomings in fidelity, outcomes, or equity

Findings shall be regularly shared with the school community, including teachers, students, and parents, and input shall be solicited to support improvements.

ARTICLE X: IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

Section 10.1 – Phased Implementation

Schools adopting restorative practices shall follow a phased implementation approach, ideally over a three-year period:

Year 1: Foundational professional learning (trauma-informed care, implicit bias), initial restorative practices training for administrators and early adopter staff

Year 2: Expanded staff professional learning, introduction of student education, initial implementation of community building circles

Year 3: Full schoolwide implementation, student leadership roles established, data collection systems operational

Ongoing: Continuous professional learning, coaching, data-driven quality improvement

ARTICLE XI: POLICY REVIEW

This policy shall be reviewed annually by the School Board in consultation with District leadership, school administrators, teachers, students, families, and community partners to ensure it continues to support effective implementation of restorative practices.

Adopted by the [DISTRICT NAME] Board of Education on [DATE].

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REFERENCES

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