



Increasing Success for African American Children and Youth

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GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

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Grand Challenge: *Achieve equal opportunity and justice*

GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

The Grand Challenges for Social Work are designed to focus a world of thought and action on the most compelling and critical social issues of our day. Each grand challenge is a broad but discrete concept where social work expertise and leadership can be brought to bear on bold new ideas, scientific exploration and surprising innovations.

We invite you to review the following challenges with the goal of providing greater clarity, utility and meaning to this roadmap for lifting up the lives of individuals, families and communities struggling with the most fundamental requirements for social justice and human existence.

The Grand Challenges for Social Work include the following:

- Ensure healthy development of all youth
- Close the health gap
- Stop family violence
- Eradicate social isolation
- End homelessness
- Promote smart decarceration
- Reduce extreme economic inequality
- Build financial capability for all
- Harness technology for social good
- Create social responses to a changing environment
- Achieve equal opportunity and justice
- Advance long and productive lives

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The low high-school graduation rate among African American students is a major barrier to their personal and professional success, and it has broad implications for society. With under 65% of African American youth graduating from high school nationwide, the rate is on the decline, and there are states with rates lower than 50%. Low graduation rates are particularly common in urban school districts (Heckman & Lafontaine, 2010). These rates are due in part to cultural and racial bias, excessively strict policies, and cultural misunderstandings, which together result in school suspensions and expulsions that remove too many African American students from school. Such disciplinary measures increase their chances of falling behind, dropping out, and even going to jail. Coupled with these challenges is the ongoing overreferral of African American children and youth to special education programs, where they receive disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and placement in alternative school settings. Racially disproportionate use of suspension and expulsion is a grand challenge for social work, which is well positioned to address the challenge because of the key roles that social workers play in schools. Evidence-based approaches to reducing the harshness of school discipline can create safer educational environments for all children and ensure that African American students achieve at higher levels.

Key words: African American children, African American youth, American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, cultural bias, education, exclusionary discipline, and exclusionary expulsion, Family and School Partnership Program, Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, racial bias, related service personnel, restorative justice, suspension, zero tolerance.

DISPARATE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Educational attainment is perhaps the greatest indicator of success and progress toward achieving the American dream, and high school graduation is one of the most important benchmarks in the reduction of individual lifetime poverty (Haskins & Sawhill, 2009). Although de jure legal segregation and barriers to educational attainment for African Americans were declared unconstitutional with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), access to quality education still eludes many African American children and youth (Fenning &

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Rose, 2007; Halpin, & Agne, 2014; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). School segregation and its inherent inequalities persist (Vasquez Heilig & Holme, 2013). School litigation has succeeded in tying local school funding to the revenue from taxes on nearby properties: The high property values in wealthy areas generate ample tax revenue for local school funding, but low values in poor areas generate insufficient funding for area schools. Because of such efforts, educational inequality continues for many African American children some 60 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Disproportionality in the rates of school suspension and expulsion is a key factor in any discussion of African American educational attainment.¹ In every state in America, rates of school suspension and expulsion are higher for African American children and youth than for their counterparts in other groups (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). Suspensions and expulsions lead to a host of negative academic and social outcomes. School suspension removes students from the classroom, increasing the probability that they will fall behind academically and the probability of school failure (Losen et al., 2015). Nationally, the social cost of school dropout is estimated to exceed \$90 billion annually. In part, this cost reflects the link between high levels of out-of-school suspension and entry into the prison-industrial complex (Skiba et al., 2015). According to data from the Civil Rights Project, approximately 68% of state-prison inmates lacked a high school diploma in 1997 (Wald & Losen, 2003). However, a recent nationwide study conducted by the Civil Rights Project revealed that school “suspensions in 10th grade alone produced more than 67,000 dropouts in the U.S. and generated social costs to the nation of more than \$35 billion” (Rumberger & Losen, 2016, p. 2).

In this paper, we assert that eliminating disproportionality in the use of exclusionary discipline policies—particularly disproportionality in their use with African American children and youth in public school settings—is a grand challenge for the social work profession. Research findings indicate that racial bias coupled with cultural misunderstandings, outright draconian approaches to school discipline, and other social and cultural challenges factor into the oversuspension of school-aged African American children and youth (Campbell, 2015; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Losen et al., 2015; Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Skiba, Horner, et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Complicating oversuspension is the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of African American children and youth placed in special education programs (Maydosz, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). These findings suggest that the discussion must include an examination of the role and function of school social workers as related services personnel. By helping school-based professionals to engage in culturally competent and evidence-based practices, social workers can facilitate the elimination of such practices from schools, transform the climate in schools, and help alter the educational trajectories of many African American youth (Armour, 2013; Kelly, et al., 2015; Teasley, Archuleta, & Miller, 2014).

¹School suspension refers to a disciplinary action involving the short-term removal of a student from school (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009). School expulsion refers to the removal of a student from school for a longer period of time and may involve decision making by school superintendents or school boards (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Racial disproportionality, the difference between a racial group’s representation in a service population and its representation in the general population, often signals unfairness or nonresponsiveness to the needs of a minority racial group.

DISPARATE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

Racial disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion rates can be found even in school districts where African Americans comprise a small percentage of the student population (Skiba et al., 2009; Smith & Harper, 2015). For example, African Americans make up 52% of all suspended students in San Francisco school districts but only 16% of the student population in those districts (González, 2012). A recent study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education examined school suspension and expulsion rates in 13 Southern states. It found that, on average, African Americans make up 24% of the public school population in those states but 50% of the students expelled from school (Smith & Harper, 2015). In 132 of the 3,022 school districts evaluated, African Americans were “suspended at rates five times or higher than their representation in the student population” (Smith & Harper, 2015, p. 1). African American children and youth were 100% of those suspended from schools in 84 districts, 75% or more of those suspended in 346 districts, and 50% or more of those suspended in 743 districts.

The study also examined expulsion rates and found the following: In 77 of the observed school districts, the percentage of African Americans among expelled students was five times higher than the percentage of African Americans in the student population. African American students were 100% of those expelled in 181 districts, 75% or more of those expelled in 255 districts, and 50% or more of those expelled in 484 districts (Smith & Harper, 2015). The study concluded that the findings “go beyond student misbehavior and bad parenting – they also are attributable to racist practices and policies in K-12 public schools across the South” (Smith & Harper, 2015, p. 1).

There are many reasons for the overuse of suspension and expulsion. Cultural bias in the classroom is a salient and long-standing challenge that continues to mediate educational opportunities and outcomes for many African American children and youth (Campbell, 2015; Richardson et al., 2014). Racial disproportionality in school suspensions also stems from the advent of so-called zero tolerance policies, which have led to widespread application of exclusionary discipline consequences as the “the primary medium used once students are sent from the classroom” (Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 536). Tough and inflexible rules on school discipline are not consistent with a quality education; instead of achieving the intended results—correcting undesirable behaviors and facilitating a safe school environment—they hinder academic productivity (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba & Sprague, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Finally, the task of developing public-school educators and other school-based professionals who can identify and reduce racial bias and racial disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion remains a priority within the American educational enterprise. By enabling teachers, school social workers, and other school-based personnel to engage in culturally competent and evidence-informed practices, it is possible to prevent biased and harsh disciplinary outcomes for African American children and youth (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009; Nelson, Bustamante, Sawyer, & Sloan, 2015; Teasley et al., 2014). This also includes the use of such practices in managing school climate and moving away from authoritarian approaches to student behavioral problems.

Evidence on disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions has been building for over three decades (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Compared with counterparts from every other ethnic group,

African American children and youth are suspended from school at far greater rates (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba, Horner, et al., 2011; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Prevailing social attitudes and perceptions hold that African American youth are prone to problem behaviors in schools, but “investigations of student behavior, race, and discipline have yielded no evidence that African American overrepresentation in school suspension is due to higher rates of misbehavior, regardless of whether the data are self-reported” (Skiba et al., 2009, p. 1088). In terms of gender differences, Smith and Harper’s (2015) report on school suspension and expulsion reveals that African American girls account for 56% of all girls suspended from K–12 public schools in the United States and 45% of all girls expelled from such schools. Similarly, African American boys account for 47% of suspensions and 44% of expulsions.

ADDRESSING THE UNDERLYING ISSUES LEADING TO DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Cultural and Racial Bias and School Discipline

Multiple social and cultural factors contribute to racial disparities in rates of suspension and expulsion: Class size, school funding, administrative policies, pedagogical practices, school climate, and classroom management skills are all relevant. Nevertheless, African American children in public education settings face greater negative perceptions, bias, and stereotypes than White children do (Campbell 2015; Ferguson, 2003; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015). Some evidence for this can be found in a national study that used a demographic match between 10th grade students and teachers to examine systematic bias: Gershenson et al. (2015) found that teachers’ educational expectations for African American students were significantly lower among non–African American teachers than among their African American counterparts.

Attitudes and perceptions about students, particularly about their ability to learn, affect how school personnel use discipline and who receives particular types of punishment. A study by Skiba et al. (2015) examined the use of suspension in Indiana. They found that, “after controlling for race and poverty and other significant factors, one variable stood out as the strongest predictor of both suspension rates and disparities in suspension by race: principals’ attitudes toward the use of harsh discipline” (as cited in Losen et al., 2015, p. 7). Investigating teacher biases in judgment of pupils’ reading and math ability and attainment at age 7, Campbell (2015) found that gender, ethnicity, special education needs, and income levels all factor in forming biases that affect judgments about students’ ability.

There is solid evidence to support the notion that racial bias is a factor in the use of disproportionately harsh discipline for African American children and youth. For example, a study of discipline in Texas schools covering 62% of the student population in the state’s school districts found that, in predominantly White schools, African American and Hispanic students are more likely than their White counterparts to be punished for a given infraction; moreover, the punishment received by African American and Hispanic students for a given infraction is harsher than that received by White students (Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Although this finding was not statistically significant for Hispanic students, it was for African American students, who were

disproportionately subjected to harsh disciplinary practices by school administrators. Tajalli and Garba conclude that “one may interpret this finding as proof of racial discrimination in disciplinary decisions on the part of school administration” (p. 628).

The Development of Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies emerged in the mid-1990s as a method of reducing gun violence and other serious behavioral challenges in schools (e.g., possession or use of guns, drug use and solicitation, and participation in violent crimes). Such policies were applied broadly to address a wide range of behaviors as tough-on-crime policies found their way from the streets into public school settings (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Now, many public school systems rely on mandatory student suspensions as the primary means of addressing behavioral challenges. This is despite research showing that “zero tolerance policies are ineffective in the long run and are related to a number of negative consequences, including increased rates of school dropout and discriminatory application of school discipline practices” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008, p. 1; see also Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Skiba et al., 2009; Skiba, Shure, Middelberg, & Baker, 2011). Rather than increasing safety, zero tolerance policies have resulted in the indiscriminate use of suspension and expulsion for both serious and mild infractions, particularly for infractions by minorities and individuals with disabilities (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). Zero tolerance policies “are often enacted through rigid practices and predetermined consequences that greatly limit discretion in individual cases, usually remove students from schools, and occasionally involve law enforcement personnel” (Smith & Harper, 2015, p. 3).

The challenge of disciplinary disproportionality, a challenge substantially attributable to the widespread use of zero tolerance policies, has gained the attention of education policymakers (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education announced that it would investigate possible civil rights violations in the school suspension policies of school districts throughout the country, including districts in Oakland, CA; Fall River, MA; and Seattle, WA. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan observed that there is no serious discussion on the problem of zero tolerance in schools, or on its link to the school-to-prison pipeline in America, without a discussion about race. One third of boys who are suspended for 10 or more days end up in the criminal justice system (Morgan et al., 2014; Skiba, Horner, et al., 2011).

The Role of Related Services Personnel

Researchers have established that suspension and expulsion from school are positively associated with enrollment in special education programs, particularly for students diagnosed with emotional, behavioral, or learning disorders (Maydosz, 2014). “Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%)” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014, p. 1). Nationally, African American youth outpace their counterparts from all racial and ethnic groups in the rates

at which they are diagnosed with mental-health disorders, and these students are disproportionately suspended and expelled from schools (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Compared with White peers, African American youth are 2.7 times more likely to be diagnosed with emotional disabilities and twice as likely to be diagnosed with cognitive impairment (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement ACT (2004) was developed to protect the rights of children with disabilities. The act requires special education services to ensure that school-aged children and youth with disabilities have access to “a free appropriate public education” regardless of ability (§ 1400(d)(1)(A)). It mandates that these services be provided in the “least restrictive environment” (§ 1406(b)(2)). Essential to the Act’s execution are “related services personnel” (§ 1412(a)(14) (B)): designated school psychologists; social workers; school counselors; school nurses; providers of audiology services; physical and occupational therapists; and others engaged in delivering developmental, corrective, recreational, and therapeutic services for school-aged children and youth with identified disabilities. In general, teachers and administrators refer students to these personnel for classroom behavioral problems and student special-education needs (Allen-Meares, 2010). Related services personnel also are involved in the development, support, and implementation of corrective services to improve the psychological and social functioning of students in the school setting. Central to their function is the task of facilitating teaching and learning to help children and youth make satisfactory adjustments to the school environment. These personnel work to coordinate and influence the efforts of the school, the family, and the community in ways that serve the best educational interests of students referred to them (Teasley & Cruz, 2014). As behavioral health professionals, related services personnel are often involved in issues concerning school discipline; attendance; community engagement; school diversity, mental health assessment, diagnosis, and treatment; behavior management; crisis intervention; and student referrals to outside agencies (National Association of Social Workers, 2002).

Sullivan and Bal (2013, p. 476) describe disproportionality in the targeting of services “as a paradox of special education in that identification is meant to allocate necessary and appropriate services and additional resources for students with disabilities” but may lead to stigma, stereotyping, segregation, exposure to low expectations, and subsequent constraints on postschool outcomes. Although the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004) requires that related services personnel make use of scientifically supported interventions in the assessment and diagnosis of students with special education needs, minority children and youth—particularly African American children and youth—are disproportionately identified for special education services and placed in special education programs. Yet, among school-based professionals, including school administrators, teachers, and related school-services personnel, none gives a clear indication of accountability for the disproportionality of African American children and youth in special education programs. In order to identify specific mechanisms and roles in the disproportionality process, “School officials should reexamine their beliefs about class, culture, race, ethnicity, and gender and the impact each poses on their decision making, especially in the area of discipline” (Torres & Callahan, 2008, p. 401). Therefore, examining the link between special education placement and disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion is critical for related services personnel. Because of their work with students who have

behavior problems and learning disabilities, they are positioned to lead efforts to overcome disproportionality in school disciplinary outcomes. Although no research documents bias in practice by related services personnel or establishes their relationship with disproportionality, there also is no documentation on their use of evidence-informed intervention methods for reducing disciplinary disproportionality.

Although innovative methods are certainly needed, overcoming the challenge of eliminating disparities in school suspension and expulsion rates for African American children and youth requires dedication to revamping aspects of school-based services. The status quo in the operation of school environments that produce disciplinary disproportionality must be examined and modified (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). This includes the need to appropriately modify professional development for all school-based professionals involved in student discipline practices (Maydosz, 2014). Related school-services personnel should be cognizant of suspension and expulsion disparities within their scope of practice, and they should advocate for reform within schools and society (Dupper et al., 2009). Among their ranks and in tandem with other school-based professionals, related services personnel must take on the challenge of reducing cultural bias in school discipline—bias that leads to greater disciplinary referral rates for African American children and youth (Losen et al., 2015). This is not only a lingering and unresolved problem; it is a social justice issue because it impedes academic success and upward mobility. The grand challenge of eliminating disciplinary disproportionality will require greater collaboration, innovation, and training in the use of evidence informed practices among school administrators, teachers, and related services personnel.

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES TO REDUCING SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSION

A host of innovative approaches to reducing school suspensions and expulsions show promise but require additional testing, implementation, and documentation. These include restorative justice practices, the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports model (PBIS), behavioral health-service teams (BHTs) and data-driven decision making, and other promising evidence-informed practices. All of these approaches require collaboration among related services personnel, teachers, administrators, communities, and families. Two common threads are characteristic of these programs and practices: (a) the use of data to inform training of essential personnel in techniques that improve school climate, and (b) the use of alternatives to harsh punishment as a response to disciplinary problems in schools. The use of innovative, evidence-informed approaches can facilitate the elimination of disciplinary disproportionality and its effects on African American children and youth.

Restorative Justice and Schools

Restorative justice (sometimes referred to as restorative discipline) is an evidence-based alternative to a zero tolerance approach to school discipline. The goal of restorative justice is to repair, to the extent possible, the harm done by problematic behavior and wrongdoing. Restorative justice practices attempt to improve discipline by strengthening relationships,

reducing violence, and decreasing disruptive behaviors. Thus, the approach serves to reintegrate students into the school community rather than engaging in separation or removal (Armour, 2013; González, 2012). The approach to school discipline is one of collaboration among school administrators, teachers, staff, related services personnel, parents, local community members and students. It presents a way of bringing together stakeholders to address the needs of students in order to create a school climate that facilitates education and students' emotional development.

“Restorative dialogue,” a key component of restorative justice, takes several forms in the school setting (Armour, 2013, p. 6). A “victim-offender mediation” panel may be used to help offending students understand the consequences of their actions (González, 2012, p. 301). “Peer juries” bring together student volunteers who determine the consequences for an infraction (Armour, 2013, p. 14). The restorative “circle” (González, 2012, p. 301) is a forum for discussing a wide range of student misbehavior and for resolving conflict. “Family and group conferencing” are other elements of restorative justice practice; members of the school community (teachers, coaches, administrators, students) and other “family members of those involved are invited to participate” (González, 2012, p. 301). As a whole, restorative justice is a movement away from authoritarian control and zero tolerance to an approach that emphasizes student retribution and accountability, rehabilitation, and community engagement as methods to work holistically to resolve interpersonal conflict leading to problem behaviors (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

To be effective, restorative justice plans require the following: a full-time restorative coordinator, a school-wide strategic plan, ongoing training for all stakeholders, youth and parental leadership, and systematic collection and monitoring of data (Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice, 2010). The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue (n.d.) has drafted a concept summary for schools interested in developing restorative justice practices. Referred to as restorative discipline in schools, the approach involves 13 key concepts that are quoted below from the Institute's (n.d.) website:

- Restorative Discipline is a philosophy and system-wide intervention that places relationships at the heart of the educational experience.
- The goal of Restorative Discipline is to change the school climate rather than merely respond to student behavior.
- Restorative Discipline requires a top down commitment from school board members and administrators.
- Restorative Discipline uses a whole school approach. All administrators, teachers, all staff, and students should be exposed to and/or trained in restorative processes with periodic boosters.
- Restorative Discipline engages parents/caregivers as integral members of restorative conferences and circles.
- Restorative Discipline uses an internal leadership response team to spearhead the implementation and help support necessary dialogue.

- Restorative Discipline calls for an outside restorative justice coordinator to serve on site.
- Restorative Discipline has a data system to analyze trends and inform early interventions.
- Restorative Discipline focuses on the harms, needs and causes of student behavior, not just the breaking of rules and dispensing of punishment.
- Restorative Discipline places a fundamental attention on harm and the subsequent needs of the victim.
- Restorative Discipline places an emphasis on meaningful accountability in matters involving harm and conflict.
- Restorative Discipline takes time. It is dialogue driven and rests on the steady establishing and deepening of relationships.
- Restorative Discipline calls for collaboration with community-based restorative justice programs, local businesses, and agencies that serve youth, including community and faith-based programs, law enforcement, and public health and mental health entities, local Community Resource Coordinating Groups, justice system representatives and other stakeholders.

Addressing racial and ethnic disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions is an explicit aim of restorative justice practices (González, 2012; Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice, 2010). A developing body of research demonstrates the effectiveness of restorative justice practices in the substantially reducing overall suspension and expulsion rates in schools (González, 2012; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Successful restorative justice projects have taken place in school districts throughout the country. González's (2012) review of restorative justice practices cites successful programs in Oakland and San Francisco, CA; Peoria, IL; Denver, CO; Everglades City, FL; Portland, OR; Baltimore, MD; Des Moines, IA; Lansing, MI; St. Louis, MO; Santa Fe, NM; and Philadelphia, PA. For example, city officials in San Francisco, CA, credit restorative justice practices by an organization called Safe and Supportive Schools for a significant drop in suspensions of African American students (from 2,298 in the 2011–2012 school year to 1,081 during the 2013–2014 year). The organization's program offered alternatives to school suspension, a framework for supporting positive behavioral intervention, and trauma-sensitive practices. There were more than 69,000 suspensions within the New York City school system during the 2011–2012 academic year, but the number of suspensions from schools that implemented restorative justice practices was 35% lower than the number in those schools during the 2010–2011 school years (Armour, 2013). Similarly, restorative justice practices were responsible for a decrease of nearly 50% over 3 years in school suspension rates at a junior high school in St. Paul, MN (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Three years after implementation of restorative justice practices, the Denver Public Schools Restorative Justice Project reported a district-wide 40% reduction in out-of-school suspensions. Minnesota has adopted a statewide restorative justice effort, with approximately half of the state's school districts making some use of restorative practices (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

In 2014, a working group developed *Restorative Practices: Fostering Health Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools; A Guide for Educators* (Anderson et al., 2014). The guide's purpose is to help educators move away "from zero tolerance discipline policies and ramp up efforts to strengthen safe and supportive schools, address conflict, improve school climate, and build a positive school culture" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 1). In the call for broader implementation of restorative justice practices in school settings, it is important to stress that school-based professionals will require additional training on the use of negative behavioral and disciplinary referrals, particularly in urban areas (Teasley & Cruz, 2014). Restorative-justice practice techniques are closely linked to the skill sets of school social work practitioners and are consistent with an ecological perspective that views the child, school, home, and community as parts of a continuum. To maximize the effect of restorative justice interventions, efforts to implement the interventions should target urban areas where high numbers of African American children and youth attend public schools and are disproportionately suspended and expelled from schools (Kidde & Alfred, 2011).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports model is another evidence-based approach that is applicable in efforts to address the challenge at hand. Used in over 7,500 schools nationwide, PBIS employs a whole-school approach and positive reinforcement to prevent student behavioral problems (Bradshaw et al., 2009): This noncurricular prevention strategy promotes positive change in student and staff behavior as a way to modify the school environment (Bradshaw et al., 2009). It makes use of behavioral and social-learning strategies as well as organizational behavior principles aimed at preventing problem behaviors while promoting protective factors in the school setting. At the model's core is a three-tier structure. Tier 1 focuses on fostering a universal or school-wide environment of support: The model seeks to prevent or minimize behavioral problems by creating a positive, supportive environment in schools. Universal strategies are effective in combating high rates of school suspension and expulsion (Dupper et al., 2009; Losen, 2011; Silvia et al., 2014). Tier 2 involves individualization of targeted interventions that provide specialized services for identified youth who do not respond to Tier 1. Efforts in Tier 2 aim to reduce negative behaviors before they become long-term impediments to academic achievement. Tier 3 involves intensive clinical intervention, including individualized mental health services (Losen, 2011).

Some state laws require the use of PBIS to combat excessive suspensions in schools. For example, the state of Maryland requires the use of PBIS if school suspension levels reach 10% of an elementary school's enrollment (Losen, 2011). In many states that have implemented PBIS, there have been reductions in school violence, bullying, special education placements, school suspension, and expulsion (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Horner et al., 2005; Skiba et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2014). In addition, a growing number of studies show that PBIS has promising results. For example, Bradshaw and colleagues (2009, p. 100) used data from reports by staff in a "group-randomized controlled effectiveness trial of PBIS" within 37 elementary schools to examine the impact of PBIS on school climate and organization. Longitudinal multilevel analyses of the data collected from 2,596 school personnel over the 5-year trial period indicated that use of PBIS has

significant effects on affiliation among staff, collegial leadership, overall organizational health, resource procurement, and institutional integrity. Moreover, the study found that baseline levels of organizational health were higher in schools that adopted PBIS training faster and that “later-implementing schools tended to experience the greatest improvements in organizational health after implementing PBIS” (2009, p. 100).

Despite evidence that PBIS makes a difference and despite the model’s widespread use, no solid body of research demonstrates a clear pathway for using PBIS to reduce disciplinary disproportionality for African American school-aged children. Nevertheless, PBIS can be part of innovative efforts to address cultural bias among teachers, exclusionary discipline, hyperdisciplinary referrals, low expectations for academic achievement, and overreliance on special education placement. All of these are common in the educational experiences of African American children.

Multidisciplinary Behavioral Health-Service Teams and Data-Driven Decision Making

Behavioral and mental-health services are provided in schools by multidisciplinary service teams that possess expertise in assessment and development of such services (Lardieri, Laskey, & Raney, 2014). These teams typically include clinical counselors, clinical social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses, though teachers, administrators, community providers, and other related-services personnel also play roles (Kelly et al., 2010). Practitioners on BHTs often make use of PBIS. They can be instrumental in developing programming aimed at ameliorating disproportionate use of suspension and expulsion. As a component of integrated behavior health service, BHTs make use of cross-training in team development, embrace nonhierarchical structures in developing a shared vision for leadership, and rely on collaborative processes in working with service providers and community members. Each of these areas involves substantive objectives, and an assessment of progress toward those objectives generates evidence-informed practice (Lardieri et al., 2014). Because they foster multidisciplinary collaboration, BHTs can facilitate the development and implementation of the innovative approaches required by this grand challenge. If used as part of a broad effort, they can be effective in ameliorating disciplinary disproportionality.

Hundreds of studies have detailed the effectiveness of BHTs in prevention, successful interventions, and building collaborative practice (Lardieri et al., 2014). In addition to being cost effective, BHTs are central to successful assessment of risk and protective factors. They also are critically important in the development and implementation of strategies for addressing problems that can impede students’ educational progress. For some time, scholars have called for greater use of multidisciplinary BHTs in schools (Lardieri et al., 2014).

Many PBIS frameworks rely on a separate BHT for each tier (Tiers 1, 2, and 3). These teams meet regularly and use data in pursuing specific behavioral, social-emotional, and academic goals. Although strong, emerging evidence has shown that PBIS is associated with declines in discipline problems as well as with improvements in key academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes, little evidence documents the effects of these frameworks on disciplinary

disproportionality (Bradshaw et al., 2009). The innovative BHT model takes the PBIS team process further, seeking to create an ongoing team context in which to develop effective, early interventions for students who show some academic, social, or emotional difficulty. Coupled with restorative justice practices, BHTs can address school challenges faced by African American children and youth. The teams employ some key components of PBIS (universal screeners, targeted interventions, parent engagement, and teacher consultation) but focus on specific students (and groups of students) who might otherwise be referred for disciplinary measures. Such referrals represent the typical intervention process, which helps to supply the school-to-prison pipeline through suspension, expulsion, and special education referrals. By creating a meaningful, data-driven, and culturally responsive team process for working with these students, teachers, and parents, BHTs seek to create contexts in which African American youth can get the help they need without facing unnecessary disciplinary actions or special education labeling (Losen et al., 2015).

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies and the Good Behavior Game

Other evidenced-based approaches offer promising ways to reduce disciplinary disproportionality in schools. For example, the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program has been used at the preschool and elementary levels (Patras et al., 2008). (School suspensions and expulsions do take place at these levels.) The program is designed to work with children on socioemotional development, social skills training, self-control, self-awareness, emotional awareness, friendship development, problem solving, aggression reduction, and role modeling. It involves direct discussion, storytelling, modeling, direct instruction, role-play, and video presentations. It has been used with 865,000 students in the United States and in nearly 11,000 classrooms outside of the United States. It is a proven deterrent for problem behaviors in schools (Patras et al., 2008).

The Good Behavior Game is another classroom behavior-management strategy that is shown to be effective. In a study with 2,311 urban African American males (aged 19–21) who displayed disruptive behavior and aggression, the implementation of the game in the school reduced rates of violence, criminal behavior, and aggression (Patras et al., 2008). The PATHS program and the Good Behavior Game are two proven approaches that, if implemented in conjunction with other evidence-informed efforts, will help prevent out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

Family and School Partnership Program

Education scholars and school mental-health professionals are increasingly assertive about the crucial need for stronger preservice training and training in evidence-informed, data-driven work. Such training is required if related services personnel are to lead efforts to reduce disciplinary disproportionality (Kelly, Bluestone-Miller, Mervis, & Fuerst, 2012). Programs such as Loyola University Chicago's Family and School Partnership Program (FSPP) offer a way to deliver this important training (Kelly, et al., 2012). Started in 1996, the FSPP has delivered advanced consultation and training to over 800 school-based mental-health professionals. In

addition to providing a professional learning community and opportunities to gain supervisory hours that are applicable for clinical licensure, FSPP groups offer in-depth training in data-driven work and the strengths-based intervention strategies employed by BHTs (Kelly et al., 2012; Kelly, Kim, & Franklin, 2008). Recognizing the need for intensive training, the FSPP recently created a 15-credit certificate in advanced school mental-health practice for masters-level practitioners. Trainees come to the FSPP from a range of school contexts and are often trying to deal with disciplinary disproportionality. They and the FSPP can demonstrate the ways in which frontline practitioners acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to begin to address disciplinary disproportionality.

The FSPP represents a promising practice that can be part of an innovative model for retraining social- and behavioral-science practitioners in evidence-based approaches to eliminate excessive school suspension and expulsion practices. Chicago has the largest and most-organized population of school social workers in the country. Thus, Loyola University Chicago's research on the FSPP can be highly instrumental in retraining a cadre of school-based practitioners who work with African American families.

THE SOLUTION TO THE CHALLENGE REQUIRES SIGNIFICANT INNOVATION

The urgency of the need to reduce racial disproportionality in public-school discipline has gained national attention. In July 2015, the White House Convening to Rethink School Discipline focused on evidenced-based methods in the design of programming to reduce disciplinary disproportionality in schools and to close the school-to-prison pipeline. The conference was part of the U.S. Department of Education's newly developed Rethink Discipline campaign. The campaign's goals include "creating a supportive school climate—and decreasing suspensions and expulsions," and the department recognizes that the undertaking will require "close attention to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, para. 1). The campaign works from the premise that teachers and students deserve a safe and supportive school environment that is conducive to classroom education. The conference emphasized evidence-based approaches to reducing disciplinary disproportionality in schools.

As part of this national effort, there is a need for innovative strategies involving advocacy for reform in traditional school discipline practices. Such strategies should consist of multidisciplinary collaboration in the promotion of evidence-based practices to reduce disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion. Despite the roles played by social workers as school-based professionals, the social work profession has not formed a specific focus on addressing the disproportionality of exclusionary discipline practices in schools. The challenge of reducing disciplinary disparities for African American children and youth in urban schools represents the greater challenge in the movement to eliminate excessive uses of exclusionary discipline practices in schools (Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011; Smith & Harper, 2015). A key factor is that there should be no one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, innovation involves identifying what works for specific locations through the development of translational intervention approaches based on evidence informed methods. In short, intervention plans should be developed with attention to the dynamics of a particular community and school setting.

Although decreasing the overall use of suspension and expulsion should also reduce the disproportionate use of these coercive and ineffective methods, it should be understood that the African American experience with public education continues to include the experience of racial and cultural bias. Thus, the challenge for stewards of evidence-based practices, such as restorative justice, PBIS, BHTs, PATHS, and other promising interventions, is to demonstrate their worth to urban America, where it remains challenging to produce generalizable evidence of effectiveness. Education, training, and professional-development opportunities for school-based professionals are broadly needed, and these offerings must be inclusive of the general education experiences of African American children and youth. Key to such efforts are the translation of evidence-based methods to the specific needs of communities and schools and the catalysis to make it happen.

MONITORING AND REPORTING ON MEANINGFUL AND MEASURABLE PROGRESS: ADVOCACY TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE

Nationally, the catalysis to eliminate disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion is already underway. Evidence-based approaches, including those cited in this document, are part of ongoing and innovative programming aimed at reducing such disproportionality. However, no entity monitors the cumulative progress of ongoing efforts in urban areas from a national and regional perspective. The majority of school suspensions and expulsions take place in urban contexts (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Nor has there been a concerted effort by the social work profession to take a leadership role in addressing the challenge of exclusionary discipline disproportionality in schools. As we take on these tasks as part of our grand challenge, part of our efforts will be to monitor and report on ongoing federal, state, and local efforts aimed at eliminating exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools, with a focus on urban areas. The research team, including the authors involved in this grand challenge, will also engage in policy advocacy and the promotion of professional development for related services personnel. This professional development will provide training in evidence-based practices aimed at the elimination of disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion for African American children and youth.

The research team assembled for this effort will develop a set of criteria for reviewing ongoing state and local programs that produce evaluation findings on projects to reduce excessive suspension and expulsion practices in schools. A committee, consisting of several of this paper's authors, will engage in an electronic literature search for the purpose of identifying reports that provide evidence of project findings. This will include state surveillance reports as well as reports sponsored by the federal government, philanthropic organizations, think tanks, policy institutes. It will also include findings from efforts by education policymakers to evaluate, monitor, and/or report on school-based suspension and expulsion programs. As part of our process to develop an annual report, the research team will review and adopt existing criteria for assessing program efforts. The criteria will be identified in research literature. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014) produced *State and Local Action to Prevent Expulsion and Suspension in Early Learning Settings*, which details innovative policies

and strategies for eliminating suspension and expulsion in early learning settings at state and local levels. The report also provides several recommendations for federal policy: (a) “Establish fair and appropriate policies and implement them without bias”; (b) “invest in a highly skilled workforce”; (c) gain access to “specialized supports for administrators and educators”; (d) strengthen family and school partnerships; and (e) set goals and track data (2014, p. 2). The research team will use strategies from this document and others to establish criteria for reviewing national, state, and local efforts to eliminate disciplinary disproportionality.

Goals toward the elimination of disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices in schools will be established with the development of baseline data from ongoing studies. A timeline based on specific aims and goals will be developed by the research team in order to accomplish the tasks required to develop the report. In essence, the research team will use data from existing reports to develop an annual school-suspension report card that ranks *progress* and *effort*. Here, *progress* refers to change over a defined period; *effort* refers to the methods and resources dedicated to a given project. The report will highlight programming successes and continuing challenges. It will make strategic suggestions for eradicating exclusionary discipline practices. Those suggestions will be based on evidence-informed methods and innovative practices.

Another component of efforts to address this grand challenge will be the research team’s promotion of the policy recommendations identified within the developed annual report. This will require the formation of a second committee from within the research team of contributing authors. This committee will draft policy briefs on best practices, disseminating the briefs to appropriate and targeted entities. These policy briefs will capture national, regional, and state numerical trends, and will also discuss programming aimed at eliminating school suspension and expulsion disproportionality. Again, a high emphasis will be placed on urban schools because of the traditionally high numbers of African American children and youth enrolled in them.

A national strategy for dissemination of the report will be developed by the research team. Report dissemination will target media outlets as a form of advocacy and in an effort to spotlight school suspension and expulsion reform efforts. This will consist of announcement and distribution to news media outlets, policy think tanks, and major professional organizations for school-based professionals, including related school-services personnel. Schools of social work that have concentrations in school social work practice will be identified and receive the report when it is disseminated. Moreover, the research team will seek and participate in calls to submit proposals for presentations to national and regional conferences for school-based professional organizations. Through these presentations, the team will promote opportunities, awareness, advocacy, and outreach to address this grand challenge.

Within a decade, it is possible to sizably reduce the rates of disproportionate suspension and expulsion for African American children and youth. In order to measure progress, it will be necessary to monitor ongoing efforts while capturing the impact of new initiatives aimed at eliminating disproportionality in exclusionary school-discipline practices. Doing so will require the use of interdisciplinary collaborative networks with evidenced-based practices tailored to the particular needs of a given location. In generating the impetus to form such a network, our approach is to promote greater awareness and engage in ongoing advocacy for reform. Through

these efforts, we will work to generate attention at the national, regional, and local levels for the elimination of disciplinary disproportionality. Our efforts will also focus on the promotion and the expansion of training for related school-services personnel in evidence-informed practice aimed at eliminating the excessive use of exclusionary discipline in schools.

THE ROLES OF SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONALS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

Another component of the research team's efforts will be to engage in collaboration that facilitates and expands training opportunities for related school-services personnel. Research conducted by the Century Foundation documents several common strategies and highly successful collaborations that have improved academic achievement in low functioning schools (Anrig, 2015). The strategies are consistent with restorative justice practices and PBIS: (a) an intensive focus on improving classroom instruction through data gathering; (b) systemic efforts to create a safe school environment; (c) dedicating more time to instruction and tutoring in core academic areas; (d) outreach to develop strong ties with parents, local service providers, and community groups; and (e) reliance on outside experts to "jump start" changes in school leadership by working with teachers and administrators on how to sustain improvements in the learning environment (Anrig, 2015). These strategies are consistent with findings discussed in our review of research literature: In failing school systems, changes in school climate and improvements in academic achievement can strengthen school discipline and reduce the need for school suspension or expulsion (Skiba & Sprague, 2008; Simson, 2012).

Gaining momentum in this effort will require coalition building and collaboration with ongoing projects conducted by organized groups and organizations that have vested interest in the removal of disciplinary exclusion from schools. The purpose of this coalition building is the development of a collaborative network that shares intervention methods; problem-solving efforts; and project details, results, and goal-setting objectives. Part of this process will involve identifying and inviting individuals with specific expertise to share ideas, consult, and promote the efforts of the research team; this will include collaboration with organizations that are currently addressing the issue of disciplinary exclusion in schools. In this capacity, the research team will work closely with the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at the University of Texas. One of the authors from this research team is the executive director of the Institute, which has ongoing intervention projects based on restorative justice practices for training, evaluation, and research. An example is the 3-year, grand-funded project taking place in San Antonio, TX, at a local middle school that is known for high rates of school suspension and expulsion (Armour, 2013). For this project, implementation of restorative justice practices led to collaboration with individuals from the University of Texas at San Antonio and a local high-school principal. Program personnel are working with the same students over a 3-year period (from sixth through eighth grades). In an attempt to change school climate, the project provides training in restorative justice practices for all teachers and other school-based personnel. Currently in its third year, the middle school project has generated preliminary data that demonstrate its success in reducing school suspensions and exclusions (Armour, 2013).

The research team for this work will be assembled through interdisciplinary collaboration with scholars from the disciplines of social work, criminal justice, law, education, psychology, anthropology, communications, urban studies, and school counseling. The research team will seek to develop projects that promote the goals of the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue in its efforts to advocate for the elimination of disciplinary disproportionality. Local, national, and state organizations will be recruited to collaborate with the Institute in order to implement more training and evaluation of restorative justice practices in schools. Part of this work will include advocacy and capacity building to develop agreements to promote restorative justice practices with school boards, school principals, and others within educational systems. In this effort, the research team will attempt to develop multisite intervention programs that collaborate with the Institute.

CONCLUSION

Given our review of research findings, it is obvious that the challenge of disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices in schools has its greatest effect on African American children and youth, particularly those in urban school settings. Yet, although efforts are underway to address the challenge of exclusionary discipline practices in schools, none focuses on the specific need for intervention with African American children and youth. Our research team will develop an annual report card that highlights efforts and trends in working toward the elimination of disproportionality in exclusionary disciplinary practices for African American children and youth. The research team will promote evidence, inform methods and strategies, and market the report as part of its advocacy campaign and strategically planned dissemination. With identified goals and recommendations based on best practices, the report will serve as a barometer on the progress to eliminate excessive exclusionary discipline practices in schools.

Strategically, the research team will tap into and advance the growing momentum to eliminate exclusionary discipline practices in schools. This includes engaging in collaboration and capacity building at local, regional, and national levels. Planned political advocacy is central to our efforts; it is necessary to promote greater awareness, generate program implementation, advance policy recommendations, and place a continuous spotlight on the challenge of school suspension and expulsion disproportionality in urban America.

The promotion of training and professional development opportunities for related school-services personnel and other school-based professionals is another component of our strategy. Related school-services personnel can collaborate with teachers, administrators, juvenile- and criminal-justice professionals, and other school-based personnel in the implementation of evidence-based practices that meet the specific needs of a given location. As stewards of social justice in public K–12 educational settings, school social workers should have great interest in attempts to eliminate disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion. Promoting training through collaborative university partnerships, such as those with Loyola University Chicago’s Family and School Partnership Programs and the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at the University of Texas in Austin, can be instrumental in the professional development of related services personnel and in eliminating disciplinary disproportionality in schools.

There are a host of evidence-based approaches that can facilitate efforts to eliminate disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion practices. The use of restorative justice practices is expanding across the United States, and outcome studies from projects are providing evidence of their success (Simson, 2012). Similarly, comprehensive structural-reform models for school discipline, models that weave in implementation trials using evidence-based interventions “such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or Safe and Responsive Schools, have yielded promising results in terms of reductions in office referrals, school suspensions, and expulsions, and improved ratings on measures of school climate” (Skiba et al., 2009, p. 1078). By advocating for the use of restorative justice and other evidence-based practices outlined in this paper (e.g., PBIS, BHTs, and PATHS), our research team can facilitate a strong and sizable effort to eliminate disciplinary disproportionality for school-aged African Americans children and youth.

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