

2022

## Administrators' Perspectives on Discipline Interventions for Prekindergarten Through Second Grade Students

Arlene Nicole Moore  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Arlene Moore

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Administrators' Perspectives on Discipline Interventions for Prekindergarten Through  
Second Grade Students

by

Arlene Moore

MA, Towson University, 2002

BS, Lincoln University, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2022

## Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was that although administrators in a rural northeastern Maryland school district are complying with state Senate Bill 651 by not suspending students in prekindergarten through second grade, administrators continue to struggle with preventing severe offenses from happening and reducing office referrals. The conceptual framework was based on Hannigan and Hannigan's alternative discipline framework. The conceptual framework focused on administrators' beliefs, implementation of discipline practices, and intervention use. The research question concentrated on administrators' perspectives about exclusionary discipline and interventions to prevent severe behaviors. In this basic qualitative study, data were collected through semistructured interviews with 12 rural northeastern Maryland current or former principals and assistant principals directly involved in the exclusionary discipline or decision-making procedures. The data analysis consisted of coding interview transcripts using value coding and axial coding to find similar themes and concepts. Several participants identified interventions methods such as positive behavior programs to manage behaviors other than using exclusionary discipline. Further recommendations include establishing relationships with community-based mental health programs to assist students and families. The findings of this study have potential implications for positive social change by identifying antecedents of behaviors for primary students and by identifying interventions to prevent behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline.

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## Dedication

Completing this doctoral degree was one of the toughest accomplishments of my educational career, but it also showed me that I can overcome so many obstacles that may try to hinder me from reaching a goal. I first want to give honor to God for giving me the strength to continue this journey. To my husband, Hayes: I know it has been a lot of nights of me stuck in my office, not coming to bed, and I appreciate you making the sacrifice by helping with our children and letting me have my quiet time.

To Kyle and Kennedy (the twins), thank you for understanding when Mommy spent hours in the office and was not able to take you to practice or spend time with you. I never let obtaining this degree stop me from coming to a game or family function—even though at times my laptop came with me. I hope seeing me go through this process will encourage you to keep learning and reaching your highest potential. To Marcus, who knew that you would become a teacher? I am so proud of all your accomplishments and proud to call you my son. I am looking forward to the day when I call you “Dr. Frazier.”

To my sisters, Ramona, Arnetta, and Rosalyn, and bonus sister Penny, thank you for the words of encouragement, for proofreading my papers, and for helping with Kyle and Kennedy. You all are truly my best friends, and I share this degree with all of you. Mom, Joyce Hall (Queen J), Grandma Joyce, thanks for praying with me, encouraging me, and telling me to just get it done. I appreciate the tough love and you believing in me. To my four-legged son, Brody, thanks for keeping me company and for never leaving my side. To Kendra, Aaron, Christy, and Tessa, thanks for supporting me and answering questions related to the doctoral program. I am forever grateful!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Exclusion, such as suspension and expulsion, has been a staple of public-school discipline (Curran, 2019). Legislation and the United States of America Department of Education have developed policies related to reducing acts of violence in schools that interfere with creating a safe learning environment and often result in suspension or expulsions (Curran, 2019; Kodelja, 2019; Ritter, 2018). During the 1980s, the perception of urban schools was that of dangerous environments due to drugs and gun violence (Ritter, 2018). To address these concerns, the National Education Goals passed PL 103-382, the Gun-Free Act, which required schools to establish a zero-tolerance policy for students, which included at least 1 year of expulsion for students who have a firearm in their possession on school campuses (Babb, 2019; Ritter, 2018).

School shootings in the late 1990s, such as Columbine High School located in Littleton, Colorado, exemplified the need for harsher disciplinary actions because of the increasing number of school shootings (Ritter, 2019). From 1993 to 2007, there was an increased number of suspensions in public schools from 15.2% in 1993 to 21.6% in 2007 (Ritter, 2019). The number of expelled students doubled from 1.5% to 3.4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). School districts needed to comply with this change in policy or risk not receiving federal funds provided by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Kodelja, 2019). This law's development was a historic move for state legislation to interfere in administrations' ability to discipline students. As the ESEA Act has evolved, school districts have included other offenses in their

disciplinary policies such as all weapons, fights, truancy, insubordination, dress code violation, and swearing (Kodelja, 2019). The zero-tolerance terminology was adapted from the criminal justice system's policies related to drug and weapon violations (Curran, 2019).

Educational policy began to reflect these disciplinary practices, like school districts and some states adopted the term *zero tolerance* and policies that favored punitive approaches—mainly, exclusion for behavioral infractions (Curran, 2019; Kodelja, 2019). The zero-tolerance policy had many problematic outcomes, such as racial inequities, inconsistent implementation, reduced performance, and increased dropout rates (Curran, 2019; Kodelja, 2019; Ritter, 2018). Data collection related to this policy is often inaccurate due to unclear coding of the discipline codes (Curran, 2019). A review of the data from the principal and school disciplinarian survey on school violence discovered that 80% of states had a law mandating expulsion for firearms, 32% had such a law for other weapons, and 10% had such a law for possession of drugs at the school level (Curran, 2019). In the state of Maryland, zero-tolerance policy was misused for disciplinary behaviors such as truancy and insubordination (Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE], 2020). Since 2013, only seven states still include discipline policies that retain zero-tolerance terminology, and 15 states still require exclusion for physical harm (Curran, 2019).

Suspension and expulsions, which were once the norm, are being replaced by alternative forms of discipline to improve student outcomes for exclusionary discipline. During the 2015–16 school year, 23 of the United States' largest school systems had

amended policies to include nonpunitive discipline strategies and reduce suspension use (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2018). Since 2017, state and city boards of education, including those in Arkansas, Maryland, Texas, Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia, have passed legislation restricting suspensions for students in primary grades (Ritter, 2019). To suspend or expel students in primary grades, school-based administration must consult with a school psychologist or other mental health professional to affirm the decision (Puckett et al., 2019); children cannot be suspended for more than 5 school days (Kodelja, 2019; Puckett et al., 2019; Ritter, 2019). Despite the etymology of *discipline* being *to teach*, school discipline policies have become penal.

According to MSDE (2020) Senate Bill 651 (SB 651), schools are required to consider interventions and supports to reduce imminent threat or harm. Additionally, the Maryland Senate Bill requires school districts to provide consultation, including administration documentation of interventions and supports and a formal threat assessment or a referral to a mental health provider (MSDE, 2020). The drawbacks of this policy include the timeframe and good use of support for a school while awaiting a mental health evaluation of the student and how to continue to manage students who have aggressive behaviors (Sutherland et al., 2019). Another disadvantage is a lack of funding to adequately staff school psychologist and behavior specialist positions (Camacho & Krexmien, 2020).

For school discipline policies to be effective, they must support all stakeholders, including families, students, staff, and administration. As an administrator, I have disciplined students using zero-tolerance methods. The trend in data shows that these



methods do not change student behavior and often target minority and low socioeconomic status students (Babb, 2019; Kodelja, 2019; Puckett et al., 2019). Since additional policies have been introduced to reduce the number of suspensions, administrators must discover preventive measures to manage discipline. New preventive strategies could include proven approaches, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) for a tiered intervention program to promote positive behavior or a restorative justice model for a more comprehensive initiative (Gage et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018). The first step in preventing violent conduct is building solid relationships with students and intentionally shifting mindsets for students, teachers, and parents through curriculum, culture, and climate. In addition to these programs, school districts should be mandated to have a full-time school psychologist, who would serve in need of escalation of crisis episodes and other mental health supports (Green et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2019). Parent and teacher involvement in monthly training centered around engaging family partnerships is an essential component of any proactive strategy (Gage et al., 2018). Such a strategy comes with financial commitments but reducing violent actions and behaviors may reduce the school-to-prison pipeline, dropout rates, and other financial strains on communities.

Positive social change is essential to research for leaders and those studying leadership. According to Walden University's Center for Social Change (2020), positive social change is defined as a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and societies. Social change can alter school climate

by transforming human relationships and experiences, especially for underserved members, including people of color (African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics), and immigrants. Developing an understanding of administrator perspectives about discipline can reveal the root causes of disparities in discipline outcomes. Balancing school safety and discipline is a policy challenge with significant education and social equity implications (Welsh & Little, 2018).

This chapter will include background information about this research, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. The research questions, the conceptual framework, the purpose of the study, definitions, and terminology related to my research will also be included. Assumptions, scope and delimitations, significance, and a summary of the study will conclude this chapter.

### **Background**

Researchers have studied school discipline for secondary schools, but a focus on prevention, interventions, and policy impact is limited for elementary schools. Jacobsen et al. (2019) focused on exclusionary discipline in elementary school and found inequality in disciplinary actions. Jacobsen et al. (2019) revealed that more than 2.6 million children are removed from school each year for out-of-school suspension. More than 40% of these students received at least one additional suspension during the same school year (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Harsh punishments such as suspensions and expulsions often cause a negative self-image and delayed academic performance, contributing to stress and frustration at home, especially if parents must take time off from work (Farr et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019). Suspension and expulsions, which

were once the norm, are now being replaced by alternative forms of discipline. Revised mandates have caused school personnel to consider alternative behavior and discipline theories to design custom alternatives for the learning environment. Additionally, school systems provide interventions such as positive behavior interventions, behavior intervention plans, referral to a student support team (SST) or an individualized education program, or community-based services (MSDE, 2017).

Data provided to Maryland lawmakers revealed that more than 2,300 expulsions and suspensions statewide were students in prekindergarten through second grade for the 2015–2016 academic school year in Maryland public schools (Ryan, 2017). Disciplinary infractions included hitting, talking back, physical attacks, and disruption of school property. The School Superintendents Association surveyed regarding discipline reform and reported that over half of the 464 districts surveyed revised their student code of conduct to include changes in the use of nonpunitive responses to misbehavior, reducing the length of suspensions (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). Since the decrease in-school suspensions, there has been limited empirical evidence on the impact of district reform (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).

When Maryland SB 651 was passed in 2017, the bill excluded suspensions for minor discipline infractions such as disruptions and disrespect but did not exclude suspensions infractions such as attacks, threats, or fighting. According to MSDE (2020), during the 2017–2018 school year, 2,311 students were suspended or expelled in grades prekindergarten through second grade after implementing SB 651, as compared to 4,228 during 2016–2017. The 2018–2019 school year saw a decrease in suspensions for

offenses such as classroom disruptions; however, out-of-school suspensions for disruptions and disrespect rose slightly from 26% in 2018 to 29% in 2019 (MSDE, 2020). Before SB 651, the number of suspensions for students' prekindergarten through second grades in 2015 was 69 students in one local school system. (Supervisor of Student Services- Mental and Behavioral Health, personal communication, September 11, 2021). During the first year of the new bill's implementation, 20 students were suspended, which indicated that Maryland school districts were adhering to the new policy of not suspending students in the primary grades (K. Muniz, personal communication, September 11, 2021). Behavioral referrals in this same school system reported over 3,064 discipline referrals during the 2016–2017 school year: 3,129 in 2017–2018, and 3,033 for the 2018–2019 school year from a local rural public school. For the local rural school district, attack on staff, physical attack, and unsafe behavior were the three categories that received the most referrals from a local rural school district. There is substantial literature on administrators managing student behaviors. Yet, there remains a gap in educational leadership literature about specific approaches to intercept severe offenses from occurring, specifically for primary students. The study is needed to identify the perspectives of administrators to discover alternatives to exclusionary discipline for students in grades pre-kindergarten through second grade.

### **Problem Statement**

In this study, I sought to address the problem that although elementary school administrators in Maryland school districts are complying with SB 651 by not suspending students' prekindergarten through second grade, these districts are struggling with

preventing severe offenses from happening. For this study, *administrators* include elementary school principals, assistant principals, or elementary school administrators.

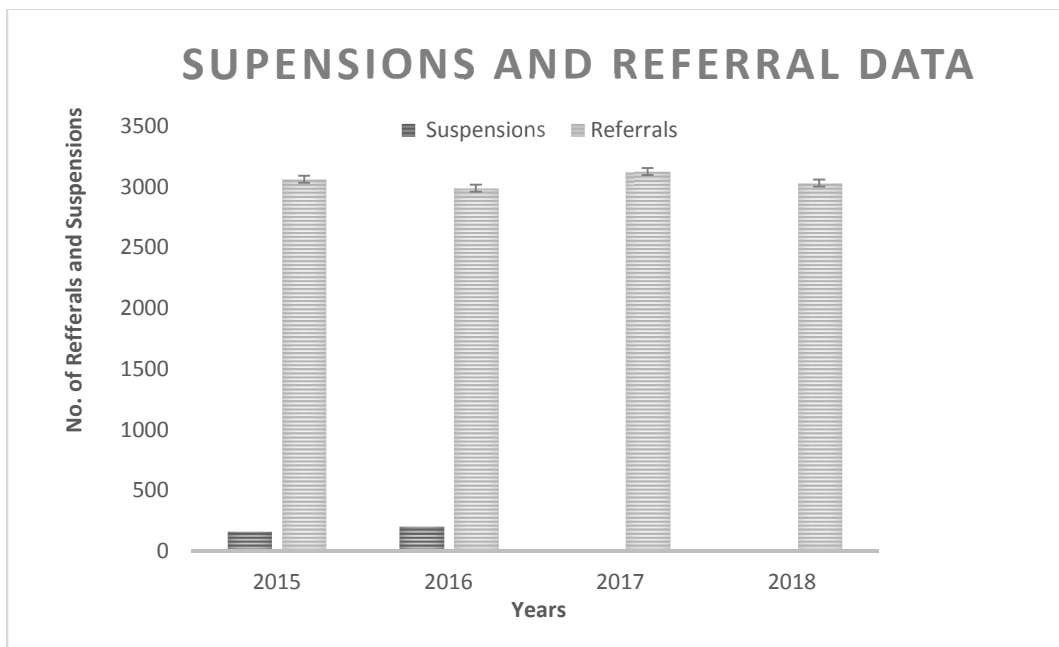
SB 651 was introduced in the Maryland Assembly in 2017. It was an amendment to Education Article 7-305 of 1996, which guided school boards to allow administrators of schools to suspend with cause for no more than 10 school days for any enrolled student (MSDE Policy, 2018). In 2017, SB 651 was introduced and prohibited any student enrolled in a public prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, or second grade from being suspended or expelled with limited exceptions such as carrying a firearm on school property. This bill also allows a student to be suspended in consultation with a school psychologist or mental health provider for no more than 5 school days per incident unless there is an imminent threat of serious harm to students or staff other interventions and supports cannot resolve (MSDE Policy, 2018). States such as Texas, California, Ohio, New Jersey, Georgia, and cities such as Philadelphia and Denver have passed legislation similar to Maryland's SB 651 to eliminate students' suspension in primary grades (Puckett et al., 2019). Exclusionary reform bills reflect shifting ideology in education, where alternative forms of discipline are encouraged, and suspension and expulsion are reserved for the most extreme violations.

Even though there is evidence of a decline in suspension rates since SB 651, discipline referrals in one rural northeastern school district in Maryland continue to rise for discipline offenses such as physical attacks, disruptions, and fighting. Administrators comply with the discipline mandate by not suspending primary students, but that does not curtail severe offenses from reoccurring, nor does it reduce the frequency of occurrences.

In one rural northeastern Maryland school district, the total number of students suspended decreased from 2015 to 2017. Still, the number of students receiving office referrals for similar offenses continued to increase despite the school district adhering to the new policy. Figure 1 shows the decrease in suspensions and how behavior referrals remain elevated.

**Figure 1**

*Local Rural School District's Comparison of Suspension and Referrals*



For the same school district, attacks on staff, attacks on students, and unsafe behavior were the three categories that received the most referrals for the district. Even though the data show a decline in overall suspension rates from 2016 to 2018, discipline referrals in the school district increased for discipline offenses such as physical attacks, disruptions, and fighting. Administrators at the school district have complied with the discipline mandate by not suspending primary students, but current discipline practices

are not preventing severe offenses from occurring. A rural northeastern Maryland school district's student support supervisor reported inconsistencies with school administrators following interventions outlined in the county's protocol for preventing severe behaviors from happening (Supervisor of Supervisor of Student Services- Mental and Behavioral Health, personal communication, September 11, 2020). There is substantial literature on administrators managing student behaviors. Yet, there remains a gap in educational leadership literature about specific approaches to intercept severe offenses from occurring, specifically for primary students.

Camacho and Krezmein (2020) conducted a statewide analysis of school discipline policies and suspension practices for Maryland school districts by examining district handbooks, administrator discretion, race, and disability. The researchers examined whether there were various consequences for repeat offenses and whether the administrator had any choice in assigning consequences (Camacho & Krezmein, 2020). The results indicated that each handbook stated administrator discretion, which permitted additional consequences for repeated behaviors. Across school districts, administrator discretion varied for repeat offenses, but there was apparent progressive discipline each time a behavioral violation happened (Camacho & Krezmein, 2020). Researchers concluded that more studies should be conducted to examine school district handbook policies and administrator discretion when assigning consequences, focusing on the methods used to determine the result. Lastly, local education agencies should focus on school climate by implementing interventions and preventions focused on discipline

policies to reduce the use of ineffective exclusionary practices (Camacho & Krezmein, 2020).

There is substantial literature on administrators managing student behaviors; however, there is a shortage in research focused on the nuances of preventive measures for the youngest public-school children that would comply with Maryland's SB 651. Administrators should be empowered to customize strategies based on their individual school's needs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my research was to explore northeastern Maryland elementary school administrators' perspectives about preventing behaviors from occurring and to identify which interventions were effective at reducing suspensions or expulsions from school. Maryland SB 651 prohibits schools from using suspension or expulsion as a form of discipline for students in prekindergarten through second grade. For this study, I interviewed 12 rural elementary school administrators from a rural northeastern school district in Maryland to understand how they manage discipline for students with documented behavioral concerns to prevent behaviors that may result in exclusionary discipline. Interview questions will consist of identifying which interventions have been used as a preventive strategy to exclusionary discipline. The administrators' perspectives may also disclose what informs their decisions for disciplinary actions, particularly for suspensions and expulsions.



### **Research Question**

What are rural northeastern Maryland public elementary school administrators' perspectives about discipline interventions as a strategy to prevent the use of exclusionary discipline for prekindergarten through second-grade students?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework will focus on Hannigan and Hannigan's (2019) "Don't suspend me" alternative discipline framework. The conceptual framework will focus on administrators' beliefs, implementation of discipline practices, and policy influences. Administrators' beliefs will be characterized by either *traditional* or *innovative*, as defined by Hannigan and Hannigan. Hannigan and Hannigan (2016) defined a traditional disciplinarian as one who is concrete in their thinking and views situations through a black and white lens, supports exclusionary discipline, and inconveniences the parents. A traditional disciplinarian also believes that suspensions will change behaviors, often faces pressures to use exclusionary discipline to make teachers feel supported, prefers sending students home instead of using alternative approaches, and does not prioritize building positive relationships with students. In contrast, innovative disciplinarians support teaching behavior by implementing and monitoring interventions, reflecting on behaviors, collaborating with the parents and teachers, fostering relationships with students, and developing the staff's capacity of effective alternatives for suspensions and expulsions. Implementation of preemptive discipline interventions is essential to reducing office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

An administrator's role in implementing discipline practices is often based on guidance and support provided by their local school district, knowledge of alternative methods, and internal resources. Since May 2015, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have reformed discipline policies from zero-tolerance to more inclusive practices, such as using restorative justice, schoolwide PBIS, and comprehensive support services for students (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). School leaders are charged with executing policy reform as directed by state and local school districts. Still, a disconnect often exists between school-based administrators' and district policymakers' goals for reducing the use of suspensions (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). For school leaders to honor the state's mandate, funding and resources are needed.

Implementation of school-based administration policies often involves collaboration with local school district leaders to clarify new policy execution and to establish clear expectations. Administrators are usually directed to reinforce policy changes and become the barrier between themselves, staff, and the policy, which also includes making adaptations to meet staff and student needs while implementing the policy with fidelity (Leithwood, 2018). Changes to discipline policies can bring welcomed and much-needed changes to systems operating with the zero-tolerance platform. However, for successful implementation administrators need systemic thinking and the ability to facilitate organizational learning for staff. According to Leithwood (2018), practices such as establishing the vision, developing people, reshaping the organization, and improving teaching and learning need to be distributed among many people throughout the school, not only those in leadership positions. The interdependence

of these ideas is required to develop the framework for this study. This framework shapes a resolution to the problem because the identified literature provides a road map for how administrators can begin unpacking their own beliefs about discipline to manage student behaviors.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this qualitative study data were collected through interviews with elementary administrators from a rural northeastern Maryland school district. My research study's methodology was based on a general qualitative study and included data collection through 12 interviews of elementary school administrators and data analysis through coding. The qualitative research was based on understanding how administrators' discipline beliefs impact their decisions for managing behaviors and complying with state mandates for suspensions and expulsions. During the research, I gathered data from interviews with administrators about their understanding of the student discipline code, how they determine discipline consequences, and their strategies to reduce suspensions and expulsions. Based on the data collected from the individual experiences shared, the results were gathered into a shared experience description.

### **Definitions**

The following terms will be referred to throughout this study and will impact the overall understanding:

*Discipline reform*: Establishes strategies that keep students in schools and counteract disparities using program and policy-based interventions (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017).

*Exclusionary discipline:* Practices that remove students from their original school learning environment through out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or alternative placement (Maeng et al., 2020).

*Expulsion:* Exclusionary discipline that results in the removal of a student from their regular instructional setting for the remainder of the instructional year and possibly longer. Depending on the student's eligibility, educational services may or may not continue (e.g., placement at an alternative school setting) during duration (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

*Maryland Senate Bill 651 (Chapter 843):* Became effective in 2017 and prohibited a child enrolled in a public prekindergarten program, kindergarten, first grade, or second grade from being suspended or expelled from school, subject to exceptions (i.e., carrying a firearm on school property; MSDE, 2018).

*Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS):* A multitiered approach used to generate a positive school climate, in addition to supporting behaviors to reduce challenging behaviors and increase academic performance (Gagnon et al., 2018).

*Prekindergarten:* Preschool programs and services for children between ages 3 and 5 who have not yet enrolled in kindergarten programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

*Program-based interventions:* Focus on initiatives that try to (a) improve school culture for the entire school and (b) provide school personnel with skills in behavior management and school discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018).

*Restorative justice*: An approach to conflict that emphasizes mitigating harm, attending to root causes of conflict, and fostering relationships, empathetic dialogue, and community accountability (Sandwick et al., 2019).

*Suspensions*: The removal within the school building of a student from the student's current education program for up to but not more than 10 school days in a school year for disciplinary reasons by the school principal (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

*Zero-tolerance policy*: A philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (Curran, 2019).

### **Assumptions**

My assumptions for this study are that the administrators selected to participate in this study know the importance of adhering to the requirements for meeting the participation criteria. The expectation was that the interviewees' responses would be honest and reflective of their experiences, knowledge, and emotions related to the research. Nonetheless, administrators can be cross-referenced by public data in the Maryland Report Card portal and local school district's school improvement plans. Finally, I assumed that participants would not have extraordinary circumstances, such as a being paid to implement an intervention by a private company outside of the school district, that could interfere or distract their responses.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study's scope and delimitations reflects the perspectives and practices of current elementary school-based administrators who are or were employed in a rural northeastern public school district in Maryland. The perspectives and practices of the participants who contributed to this study are their sole perspectives and do not characterize all school-based administrators in a rural northeastern Maryland school district. The results are specific to this cohort of elementary administrators' perspectives and may not be generalizable to additional settings. Although to a select group of participants, the conclusions may be beneficial to inform elementary administrators by focusing on prekindergarten to second grade discipline, as it relates to the current Maryland legislation.

### **Limitations**

One limitation might be about how frequently educational discipline policy changes or that this study was squarely focused on MSDE expectations. The study evaluated rural northeastern administrators' responses from Maryland and did not include other regions. A second limitation is that the perspectives from this administrator sample may not be the broader perspective of all elementary administrators in other states or throughout the state of Maryland. Additionally, the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, school counselors, or school-based psychologists at the elementary level were not considered for this research. In turn, knowledge of the contextual factors that influence reducing severe behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline methods in primary grades is restricted to the administrators' perspectives and practices included in

this research. Future researchers should also investigate elementary teachers' perspectives for the prevention of behaviors, the role of elementary school-based counselors and psychologists for supporting interventions, and the role of parents and/or guardians. As an elementary school principal, I considered my own biases, especially my affinity for interventions that I currently have in place at my school and my own discipline practices.

### **Significance**

In this study, I explored how administrators in a rural northeastern Maryland school district are preventing and responding to severe behaviors for students in prekindergarten through second grade to comply with Maryland SB 651. The study is significant to understanding how or if school administrators are using early interventions to create a safe school environment, to reduce loss of instructional time, to reduce stress on teachers, and to ensure equity in assigning disciplinary consequences (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Green et al., 2017). Administrators spend a substantial amount of their workday managing student behaviors instead of focusing on instruction (DeMatthews et al., 2017).

Maryland administrators are often faced with the decision of how to respond to students who exhibit extreme behaviors when suspensions and expulsions are banned in grades prekindergarten through second grade (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Puckett et al., 2019). Current state legislation requires school districts to provide professional development on topics related to school exclusion, effective classroom management, culturally responsive discipline, and developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods to encourage positive and safe school climates (Reed et al., 2020). Leadership development is crucial to building the capacity of administrators to manage student behaviors

effectively. Professional development programs focused on school discipline transformation are vital to any inclusive approach to improving educational equity. Training should include various components such as discipline and root cause analysis, restorative practices, discipline policy, and application activities (Reed et al., 2020).

Developing an understanding of administrators' perspectives about discipline can shed new light on disparities in discipline outcomes. According to Welsh and Little (2018), variations in the attitudes of administrators shape the rates of exclusionary discipline, and the evidence suggests that administrators who consider the context and have a clear philosophy that guides discipline use exclusionary discipline less often relative to administrators who strictly adhere to the disciplinary policy. Striking a balance between school safety and school discipline is a policy challenge with significant educational and social equity implications (Welsh & Little, 2018).

Research data will provide valuable information for resources needed to support education, such as funding for school personnel including school psychologists and other mental health providers, or to establish or build partnerships with local agencies (Puckett et al., 2019). Through social change oriented professional learning for school leaders and teachers in a rural northeastern Maryland school district, as well as parental supports, school communities can design alternatives to suspensions. Supporting change begins with providing aid such as school resources, training opportunities, and staff perception to discipline analysis, and engaging stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, and families) to better understand discipline reform (Reed et al., 2019).



## **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study, provided background information from the research literature, presented the problem and purpose statements, described the nature of the study, and highlighted the research questions. Additionally, I described the conceptual framework, defined the meaning of crucial words included in the study, and identified assumptions, limitations, scope, delimitations, and the significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I included current research literature about discipline policies, administration perspectives and training, interventions for exclusionary discipline, and identification of gaps in the literature.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

School districts across the United States have experienced an increase in the number of students, grades prekindergarten through second grade, who have demonstrated severe behaviors resulting in disciplinary actions (Bolt et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2020; Sutherland et al., 2019). School discipline policy was developed for schools to create and sustain a safe learning environment for all students.

The problem addressed by this study was that administrators in Maryland school districts are complying with SB 651 by not suspending prekindergarten through second grade students, but these administrators are struggling with preventing severe offenses from occurring. In 2017, Maryland SB 651 was passed to prohibit students in primary grades prekindergarten through second grade from being suspended or expelled except for issues of school safety, such as carrying a firearm on the school campus (Dresser, 2017). Since implementing this bill, school districts have developed new policies prohibiting students' suspensions and exclusions, consulted with mental health providers, or implemented the latest research on intervening with severe behaviors.

In Chapter 2, I provided context and articulate current development and research found in the literature about topics within this study by reviewing the professional literature about exclusionary practices and administrators' understanding of preventing severe behaviors. Chapter 2 includes an analysis of the current gap in practice discovered in the literature by reviewing research related to administrators' use of interventions to address severe behaviors. The conceptual framework included how policies, beliefs, and

interventions impact how administrators manage student behaviors to provide alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. This literature review will consist of an all-inclusive analysis of research, journals, and literature on research topics including (a) the effects of state mandates of (b) school district policies, (c) administrators' beliefs, (d) administrators' training for managing discipline, (e) influence of school culture, and (f) alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Each of these themes will be supported through the literature to inform the study and research questions. Finally, a summary of findings will connect the problem in this study to the conceptual framework this study is grounded on.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategies encompassed a comprehensive search using Walden University's library research databases. The electronic search included the following databases: EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, U.S. Department of Education, ERIC, and Education Source. The search terms for this research included *administrator's beliefs about discipline, discipline mandates, zero-tolerance policy, behavior in primary grades, PBIS, restorative justice, schoolwide interventions, social-emotional learning, administrator training, exclusionary discipline, behavior management, and preschool behaviors*. Additional research was warranted to include new searches for *student-teacher behavior, school culture, behavior individualized plans, applied behavior analysis, discipline reform, professional development for administrators, school leaders and discipline, school leaders and policy, misconceptions suspensions, and alternatives to exclusionary*

*discipline*. Articles included in this literature review were published within the last 5 years.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was focused on administrators' beliefs, implementation of discipline practices, and the influence of policies. Administrators' beliefs can be characterized as either *traditional* or *innovative* as defined by Hannigan and Hannigan (2019). A traditional disciplinarian does not have flexibility in their thinking, views circumstances as either right or wrong, and favors exclusionary discipline that can cause hardship for parents, instead of recognizing the school behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). A traditional disciplinarian believes that suspensions will change behaviors, uses exclusionary discipline to make teachers feel supported, prefers sending students home instead of using alternative approaches, and neglects to build positive relationships with students. In contrast, an innovative disciplinarian supports teaching behavior by implementing and monitoring interventions, reflecting on behaviors, collaborating with parents and teachers, building a relationship with students, and building teachers and staff understanding through effective use of alternatives to suspensions and expulsions (Green et al., 2018; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Consistent implementation of discipline interventions is essential to reducing office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Gage et al., 2018; Gahungu, 2018).

The administrator's role in implementing discipline practices is often based on their local school district's guidance and support, knowledge of alternative methods, and internal resources. Since May 2015, all states and the District of Columbia have reformed

discipline policies from zero tolerance to laws reducing exclusionary practices and using interventions such as restorative justice, schoolwide positive behavioral interventions, and comprehensive services for students (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Wiley et al., 2018). School administrators are charged with enacting policy reform as directed by state and local school districts. Still, there is a disconnect between school-based administrators' and district policymakers' goals for reducing the use of suspensions (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). For behavioral discipline mandates to be effective, school leaders must employ the service of preventive and not exclusionary practices (Horner & Macaya, 2018; Nese, et al., 2020). Additionally, schools will need increased funding and resources provided by local school districts to reduce suspensions.

Implementation of school-based administration policies is a commitment that involves collaboration with local school district leaders to clarify the new policy and laws in action and to establish clear expectations. Often administrators reinforce changes to discipline policies policy with fidelity (Leithwood, 2018; Wiley et al., 2018). Policy changes to discipline practices can bring welcomed and needed changes to systems that have been in place since zero tolerance was standardized.

## **Literature Review**

### **Impact of Discipline Policies on Student Discipline**

The history of debate about public-school discipline extends back to 1975 following *Goss v. Lopez* (1975), which created a process for schools that ensured all students be provided due process before exclusion. After this landmark case, suspensions and expulsions continued to rise, and traditional forms of discipline such as corporal

punishment diminished (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018; Wiley et al., 2018). Policies related to school violence have evolved since the 1970s ranging from zero-tolerance approaches to restricting the suspension or expulsion of students in prekindergarten to second grade (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018). In the early 1980s, a shift in discipline policies saw the adoption of zero tolerance related to suspension and expulsions for violence and drug or weapon violations in schools. In 1994, the Guns-Free Schools Act (GFSA) passed federal law to provide mandatory expulsion for any student who possessed a firearm on school property (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018).

### **Zero-Tolerance Policies**

During the 1990s, states passed legislation and laws similar to GFSA about the possession of drugs and weapons. Zero-tolerance policies are often described as a catchall for suspension students involving guns and other weapons or just for disrupting the classroom or campus (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018; Wiley et al., 2018). During the 2009 school year, over 1 in 3 schools used suspensions, expulsions, or other exclusions from the classroom or school as disciplinary action (Wiley et al., 2018). As outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004), federal law enforces restrictions and protections for students with individualized educational programs (IEPs) from school exclusion for disciplinary reasons.

Previous studies have revealed that discipline reform movements often explain the gap between policy and actual strategies (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018; Leithwood, 2018; Wiley et al., 2018). A letter from the Department of Justice and the

Department of Education addressed to educational institutions in 2014 recommended local school districts revise discipline procedures to provide classroom teachers with professional learning for classroom management, develop individualized behavior interventions, and design a system to analyze discipline data (Wiley et al., 2018). As a result of acquiring a method to analyze discipline data, unfair practices related to norms, politics, beliefs, and lack of resources were exposed. Since the letter, states such as California and cities and counties such as Denver, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles have encouraged school districts to monitor and reduce the number of suspensions for minor offenses. The study of discipline policies is essential to ensure that policies are equitable for all students. In many school districts, school-based administration's implementation involves collaboration with local school district leaders to clarify the new policy execution and to establish clear expectations (Puckett et al., 2019; Wiley et al., 2018).

### **Maryland Senate Bill 651**

As the state site of this study, Maryland has also changed its focus on student discipline. In 2017, SB 651 was passed to prohibit students in primary grades prekindergarten through second grade from being suspended or expelled from school except for imminent danger, such as carrying a firearm on the school campus (Dresser, 2017). States, such as Arkansas, Texas, California, Ohio, New Jersey, and Georgia and cities, such as Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, and the District of Columbia have passed similar legislation to Maryland's SB 651. These bills reflect shifting ideology in education, where alternative forms of discipline are encouraged, and suspension and expulsion are reserved for extreme violations.

Suspension and expulsions, which were once the norm, are being replaced by alternative forms of discipline to improve student outcomes. These mandates have caused school personnel to review theories related to behavior and discipline to provide alternatives. Additionally, school systems now engage in preemptive strategies such as positive behavior interventions, behavior intervention plans, referral to student support teams, an IEP or community-based services (MSDE, 2017).

The School Superintendents Association surveyed regarding discipline reform and reported that over half of the 464 districts surveyed revised their student code of conduct to include changes in the use of nonpunitive responses. Expulsions, length of suspensions, and decreased in-school suspensions are practical strategies that have impacted district reform for discipline (Lace & Steinberg, 2018). Maryland SB 651 was passed in 2017 and prohibits suspensions for disruptions and disrespect but allows school exclusion for attacks, threats, or fighting. Policy changes to discipline practices can bring welcomed and needed changes to systems that have been in place since zero tolerance was reformed. School-based administrators must first identify their own beliefs toward discipline policy reform to implement policy changes effectively (Curran, 2019).

### **Administrators' Beliefs Toward Discipline**

An essential role of administrators is to manage student discipline: to reinforce policies related to student conduct and assign disciplinary actions. Variations in the attitudes of administrators shape the rates of exclusionary discipline. The evidence suggests that administrators who consider the context and have a clear philosophy that guides discipline use exclusionary discipline less often relative to administrators who



strictly adhere to disciplinary policy (Welsh & Little, 2018). An administrator's individual beliefs often determine their decisions to use corrective actions such as suspensions and expulsions (Gahungu, 2018; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019).

Administrators' beliefs regarding alternative or proactive methods are also connected to their behaviors toward discipline practices. Accepting alternative discipline practices with more effective discipline alternatives is vital to supporting teachers and staff by implementing training and providing appropriate resources (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019).

Two types of discipline approaches by administrators are traditional and innovative. Both influence a leader's decision to use suspensions and expulsions or to instead apply alternative approaches to managing discipline. Administrators with a traditional view believe that suspensions will change behaviors, use exclusionary discipline to make teachers feel supported, prefer sending students home instead of using alternative approaches, and do not build positive relationships with students. In contrast, innovative disciplinarians support teaching behavior by implementing and monitoring interventions, facilitating practitioner reflections, connecting families and teachers, building a relationship with students, and building teachers' and staff's knowledge of effective use of alternatives suspensions and expulsions. The dominant trend separating the two groups' beliefs is that traditional administrators believe consequences are sufficient, whereas innovative administrators focus on teaching desired behaviors (DeMatthew et al., 2017; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Research conducted by Hannigan and Hannigan concluded that using a traditional style of discipline induces

violence and destructive behavior and severely affects academic achievement (Gage et al., 2018; Green et al., 2018; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019; Re et al., 2018).

Administrators' beliefs about alternative approaches to discipline are connected to how they assign disciplinary actions. A survey was conducted of over 300 principals from California attending the Don't Suspend Me! Alternative Discipline Framework workshop about their beliefs regarding school discipline using the discipline belief self-inventory developed by Hannigan and Hannigan in 2016. The workshop focused on inequities and inconsistency in school discipline, especially with students of color (African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics) and special education students. The results of the survey revealed that principals who believe in alternative practices, adequate resources, training, and providing a space for difficult conversations were less likely to use exclusion as a solution for disciplinary infractions (Feuerborn et al., 2019; Green. et al., 2018; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019).

### **Race and Bias Beliefs**

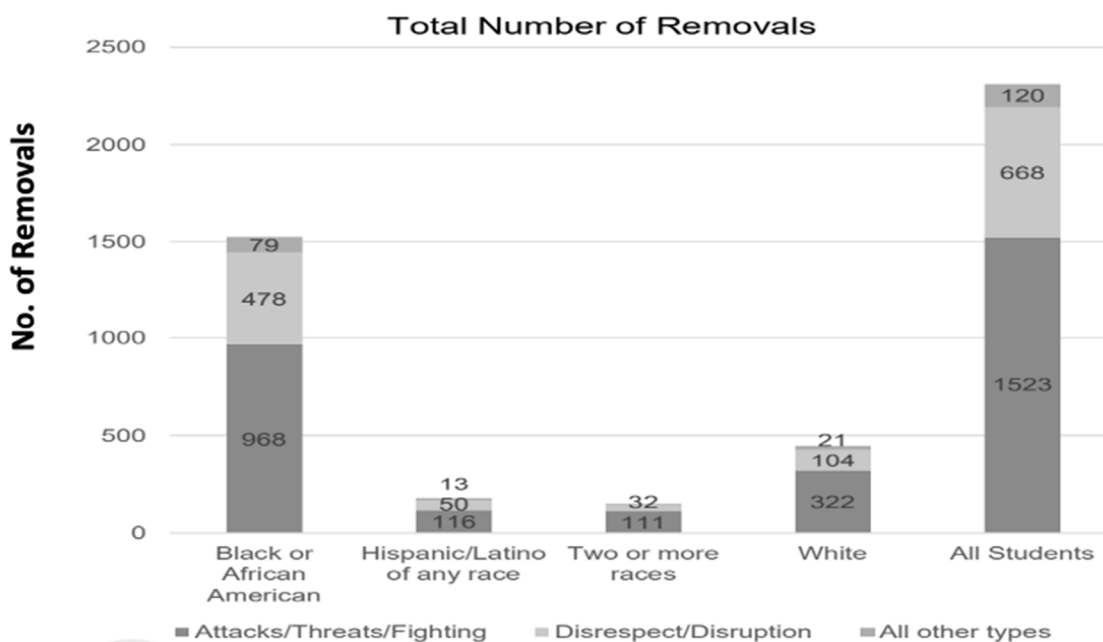
Black and Latinx students are more likely to be suspended than their White peers, despite evidence showing their White peers are often misbehaving more frequently (Kodelja, 2019; Reno et al., 2018). After zero-tolerance policies were implemented, a study by the Civil Rights Project from Harvard University concluded that a disproportionate number of African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic students are wrongfully being punished by zero-tolerance policies (Kodelja, 2019). In another study, principals' perceptions toward discipline were evaluated using critical race theory

(CRT) to explore leadership practices toward discipline (Anderson, 2020; DeMatthew et al., 2017; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019; Reno et al., 2017).

According to the MSDE (2020), for the school year of 2019, when analyzing out of school suspensions and expulsions by incident type, the data revealed that student groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander were suspended at various rates. Figure 2 shows the discrepancy between how African Americans compared to other races are suspended at higher rates.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of Suspensions by Race*



*Note.* This graph was adapted from the Maryland State Department Office of Research and Strategic Data Use (2020).

According to the research, administrators fall into one of two types of disciplinarian based on their beliefs, those who enforce discipline through harsh

punishments based on fairness, consistency, and racial bias often use exclusion for their disciplinary action and those who challenge traditional bias about students, resist institutional racism, and defy the status quo by identifying the antecedents of a student's behavior, choosing to instruct students about their behavior (DeMatthew et al., 2017). Exclusion and punitive school discipline have been determined to ineffective approaches to change discipline, and often are not equitable (Curran, 2019; Kodelja, 2019; Laco, & Steinberg, 2018). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights addressed the racial gap between minority students and White peers by writing a letter expressing concern that schools may be participating in racial discrimination against African American students because of (DeMatthew et al., 2017). Assigning disciplinary actions in most schools is the principal or the assistant principal's responsibility, as their role is to provide a safe learning environment for all students. Policies and cultural norms often place African American and Hispanic students at risk for academic failure and exclusion from school (Anderson, 2020; DeMatthew et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Stereotypes about African American and Hispanic students by teachers and administrators include describing students as threatening, loud, disruptive, and disrespectful compared to their White peers (DeMatthew et al., 2017; Feuerborn et al., 2018; Green et al., 2018). These tropes can influence an administrator's decision to use suspension based on their own biases. Additional research investigating racism for school-based leaders finds that racism is often overlooked and does not recognize racial disparities within the school environment (DeMatthew et al., 2017). When school administrators identify racism as a problem within the school, they can

either identify specific teachers or determine if racism is a systemic problem enhanced by societal issues embedded in school policies and practices (DeMatthew et al., 2017).

Administrators' practices can affect closing the discipline because they make the decisions for suspensions, alternative school placements, and expulsions (DeMatthew et al., 2017; Lacoë, Steinberg, 2018; Leithwood, 2018;). Reducing the discipline gap by acknowledging racism and other biases, equitably addressing student misconduct, and providing professional development will improve the overall culture by creating a welcoming and positive environment.

## **Culture**

Improving a school's culture is connected to student behavior and administrators, teachers, parents, and students' beliefs. Student suspensions resulting from negative behavior are often reflective of how a school treats student (Feberborn et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2018; Puckett et al., 2019). A focus for schools is to improve the culture by creating a school-wide vision and mission connected to the district's strategic plan and focused on a belief system that all students feel valued and supported. The school improvement plan (SIP) should also include Multiple-Tiered Systems to provide a leveling system to support student discipline options and promote a positive school environment (Puckett et al., 2019). Since zero-tolerance policies have ended, suspensions have not reduced or prevented behaviors from reoccurring, and additional interventions are warranted (Gahungu, 2018; Green et al., 2018; Puckett et al., 2019). During 1999-2000 and 2011-12, the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) and the Schools and

Staffing Survey (SASS) was provided to over 101,310 teachers and principals nationwide.

The results of the survey revealed that, the attitudes of students, teachers, and school-based administrators towards discipline practices and shows improvement since 2009, as indicated by a decrease in the number of disruptive offenses such as student victimizations, physical fights and use of alcohol and drugs on school campuses (Gahungu, 2018). Improving school culture is also dependent on fairness and equity to create a positive school atmosphere. Providing training for school administrators, teachers, and other school staff to increase their knowledge of their own biases and perspectives towards equity in discipline practices, is one of the first steps to changing culture. (Puckett et al., 2019). In addition to training, involving all stakeholders such as parents and community members to review policies, procedures, monitoring the school improvement plan, and analyzing data will allow for transparency in behavior management.

### **Professional Development for Administrators**

Legislation in many states require school districts to provide professional development on topics related to school exclusion, effective classroom management, culturally responsive discipline, and developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods to encourage positive and safe school climates (Reed et al., 2020). Administrative training is crucial to building the capacity of principals to manage student behaviors effectively. Professional development programs focused on school discipline transformation are vital

factors of any inclusive approach to improving educational equity (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019; Reed et al., 2020).

Training should include various components, such as discipline and root cause analysis, restorative practices, discipline legislation and policy, as well as application activities (Reed et al., 2020). Professional learning consists of using coding scenarios to train staff for different infractions and assign consequences to ensure that policies are addressed. This professional development would provide the participants with the rationale of why specific consequences are given to behavior or why one was not. (Puckett et al., 2019). For administrators' development to be successful, programs must also explore racism within the school campus, staff, and the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2017).

In Illinois in August of 2015, a school discipline reform bill was passed, that requires school districts to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and placements to alternative schools, and instead utilize preventive measures and interventions (Reed et al., 2020). School districts across the United States have adopted similar discipline reform. They include legislation for districts to provide professional development on effective classroom management, culturally responsive discipline, and developmentally appropriate discipline methods (Reed et al., 2020). A group of organizations including law professionals, special education advocates, school psychology, and restorative practices, created the Transformational School Discipline Collaborative (TSDC) targeted to support school districts during the discipline reform process. (Reed et al., 2019). The academy workshop was a required professional

development for every administrator to attend at least one academy to maintain their credentials. The academy's purpose was to analyze discipline literature, root causes, restorative practices, and discipline legislation and policy (Reed et al., 2020). Participants were to complete a pre-workshop survey utilizing disaggregated suspension and expulsion data by race and ethnicity, special education, and priority discipline referrals in addition to reading the book *Closing the School Discipline Gap* (Reed et al., 2020).

The academy results revealed several areas of concern, such as school districts requiring intense support for technical assistance for implementing discipline reform and understanding state and legal guidelines and mandates (Curran, 2019; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018; Reed et al., 2020). Most school teams used data-informed methods to identify common student misconducts but struggled with identifying root causes. During the academy, 42% of school teams were able to draft new discipline policies and noted many differences from the current policies in place compared to 31% who reported only minor differences (Reed et al., 2020). To improve policies, the researchers suggested making changes to their current policies, changing the district's approach from punitive policies to include preventive strategies, and a variety of disciplinary responses more aligned to legislation. To create systematic change, district and school leaders must have an open dialogue with teachers, parents, and students to have buy-in to support discipline reform.

### **Supporting Teachers**

School-based administrators are responsible for ensuring that teachers and staff understand discipline policies and responsive classroom management techniques as well as assign corrective actions. Identifying root causes for classroom behaviors can assist



administrators in providing support and professional development for teachers. One of the root causes of classroom disruptions is influenced by the instructional practices of teachers. (Müller et al., 2018; Puckett et al., 2019). In a recent study, the focus was on how students perceived support from teachers, how academically engaging topics were, whether they were different, peers' influence on disruptive behaviors, and emotional supports (Müller et al., 2018). Student's perception of teacher support is often influenced by how teachers assist students with their questions, providing feedback for incorrect answers, and being optimistic when students share their ideas for solving a problem (Müller et al., 2018). When teachers offer genuine support to students, academic support assistance will focus students on their academic achievement.

In contrast, unresponsive support could contribute to students' negative attitudes and seek out disruptive peer influences (Müller et al., 2018). Research has proven that exclusionary discipline is not adequate for altering student behavior, and often causes social and behavioral dysfunction, and can impact a student's academic performance and create gaps in learning (Kodelja, 2019; Nese et al., 2020; Puckett, 2019 et al; Wiley et al., 2018). One misconception is that removing a student from the classroom is warranted to improve the classroom environment. There are many factors to consider when implementing alternatives to exclusionary practices, such as enhancing instructional practices to prevent behaviors (Gage et al., 2018). Engaging students in highly motivating instruction using various instructional strategies, methods, examples, and pictures can limit students' distractions and decrease students' seeking various peers' (Müller et al., 2018).

**Instruction**

Additionally, providing instruction that is differentiated to meet individual student needs by assigning tasks and assignments based on students' instructional needs can help reduce disruptive behaviors (Gage et al., 2018). Teachers need continue to create a positive atmosphere for all students to ensure that low- academic performing students do not compare themselves to their peers and seek misbehavior because they are at a lower academic level (Müller et al., 2018). Other students' behaviors in the classroom can predict how students respond to each other and determine the classroom environment. In classrooms that exhibit an increased number of disruptive behaviors, not imitating these harmful behaviors is often interpreted as deviating from the social norm, and peers may respond negatively (Müller et al., 2018). Student behaviors are highly motivated by peer pressure and particular characteristics such as gender, impulsivity, popularity, and parents' supervision (Müller et al., 2018).

Administrators can assist classroom teachers by providing on-going professional development to help teachers develop supportive classrooms that promote proactive classroom management and uplift teaching behavioral expectations (Green et al., 2018). To efficiently change how teachers manage classroom behaviors, developing a multi-tiered framework for enhancing educators' classroom management should also include support and assessing how acquired practices are being utilized (Green et al. 2018; Kodelja 2019; Nese et al., 2020). Administrators are responsible for selecting professional learning topics, as well as gathering data through informal observations to identify teachers who could benefit from more assistance and additional resources.

Resources can include funding for books, journal articles, self-monitoring tools, coaching, in concert with timely and purposeful feedback to enhance teachers' skills and awareness for discipline management and reform (Müller et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2019).

### **Interventions**

Since the passing of legislation restricting suspensions and expulsions, school districts were charged with discovering alternatives for exclusionary discipline. No Child Left Behind Regulations of 2001 required schools to limit the use of removing students from the classroom or school campus, and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act provides requirements for states and schools to reduce this practice (Nese et al., 2020). MSDE created a resource for its school districts to select best practices to support The Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR), particularly regulations such as “Disciplinary Actions: Suspensions and Expulsions.” The list of interventions was developed to focus on teaching and learning and not punishment and stimulate the discussion about discipline practices (MSDE, 2018). In this document, interventions are listed such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social-Emotional of Early Learning (SEFEL), Second Step Early Learning, Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI), Restorative Justice, and additional resources. This section will focus on three intervention programs (PBIS), Restorative Justice, and the Second Step Program by describing the intervention and the research used to evaluate its effectiveness.

### ***Positive Behavior Interventions and Support***

One of the most widely used practices that schools implement as a preventive approach to exclusionary discipline is Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (PBIS). According to the PBIS website, nearly 26,000 schools across 49 states implement PBIS, representing an 80% increase over the last decade. The term PBIS was introduced in the 1997 amendments of IDEA (1997) and provided a three-tiered framework to improve and integrate all data, systems, practices, student daily outcomes to create a school environment where all students succeed (George, 2018). The three-tiered approach creates a positive school environment and behavior support to reduce challenging behaviors and improve academic performance (Garbacz, 2018; George, 2018; Horner & Monzalve, 2018). PBIS provides multiple effective strategies for preventing problem behaviors from increasing and for developing systems for effective classroom behavior management through three tiers of support: universal, targeted, and intensive (Adamson et al., 2019; Clayton, et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Often the introduction of the PBIS program for schools is exciting and a welcomed intervention to manage behaviors.

The program's longevity is often determined by the availability of financial resources, the staff's devotion, students' participation, and evaluating the program's effectiveness (Clayton et al., 2020; George, 2018). PBIS's intended purpose focuses on preventive strategies through teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors to prevent behaviors from occurring or escalating (Nese et al., 2020). This intervention is intended to establish universal screening, data-based decision-making and develop

teachers' and staff's understanding of the program and implementation (Nese et al., 2020). For students who need more individualized supports, targeted interventions can include mentoring programs, such as Check-In Check-Out which is a program with students communicate in the morning and throughout the day with a mentor to monitor their behavior, or participation in a small group for social skills lessons (Gagnon et al., 2018; George, 2018; Nese et al., 2020). Research for the PBIS program's effectiveness utilized data collected from an Illinois school district that examined seven years of PBIS.

Researchers discovered that schools that were implementing the program with fidelity had considerably fewer office disciplinary referrals (ODR) ( $d = .32$ ) and suspensions ( $d = .31$ , where  $d$  represents the total number for the school year) compared to schools that were not implemented with fidelity (Gage, et. al, 2018). In Tier 1, PBIS supports the development of a behavioral support team and plans for staff professional development, establishes procedures for collecting, monitoring, evaluating, using, and reporting behavioral data, and methods to ensure all staff apply PBIS components with reliability (Gagnon et al., 2018; Nese et al., 2020).

In Tier 2, the framework identifies targeted students or behaviors needing more individualized support and are often identified through teacher referrals and screening by a mental health provider (George, 2018). During Tier 2, more intense interventions target positive behavioral changes and decrease behaviors from escalating. In Tier 3, students should make up the smallest number of behaviors, but require specific targeted behaviors, often leading to Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIP) or formal assessments such as Functional Behavioral Assessments. Implementing a PBIS program with fidelity can

reduce or eliminate suspensions and expulsion when used as a preventive measure to target behaviors and support administrators, teachers, students, and parents. A 2018 study using Minnesota schools, revealed that the use of exclusionary discipline disrupted student learning and supported feelings of unvalued and unwelcome (Gagnon, et al., 2018; Nese et al., 2020)

### ***Restorative Justice***

Restorative justice programs are another alternative strategy to implement and replace the use of exclusionary measures. The use of exclusionary forms of discipline are not only problematic for a student's academic achievement and success, but the effects of suspension or expulsion have a direct connection to a student's social and emotional well-being, economic status, chronic health concerns, and low life expectancy (Gonzalez et al., 2019). These emotions can lead to long-term health concerns, both emotionally and physically. These health concerns are prevalent in underrepresented populations (i.e., LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, and minorities), especially for students who have different adverse childhood experiences; According to the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Black preschoolers are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as their White peers, and 33% have experienced two to eight adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) compared to white peers (Gagnon et al., 2018; Nese et al., 2020).

As school districts make changes to discipline policies and practice, including interventions that offer support and bridge relationships between adults and students, this strengthens essential life skills and reduces the source of stress (Farr et al., 2020).

Restorative Justice Programs (RJP), implemented since the mid-2000s and were introduced as another intervention to reduce suspensions. RJP is defined as building positive school climates and developing productive school culture through prioritizing individual and community growth, responsive relationships, with a preventions and interventions focus (Gagnon, et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018; Nese et al., 2020; Sandwick et al., 2019). Often RJP is executed through restorative circles, conferences, restorative dialogues, and peer mediation between the offender and the victim.

In cities, such as New York City and Minneapolis, RJP is included in the school district's policies for behavior interventions. In Maryland's 23 school districts, the state's education board made changes to include RJP as a part of the framework to develop new discipline policies (Hashim et al., 2018). A study was conducted in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), to analyze suspension bans and restorative justice programs in LAUSD. The researchers chose restorative justice as an intervention instead of suspensions or expulsions for behaviors such as willful defiance, truancy to class, and talking back to the teacher (Hasim et al., 2018). The LAUSD Board of Education adopted the School Discipline Policy and School Climate Bill of Rights (School Climate Bill), which followed the suspension ban by implementing restorative justice as a new theoretical approach for managing student behavior along with the School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Program (SWPBIS), (Haskim et al., 2018). These restorative justice practices include Tier 1 strategies for increasing the culture of the schools (recognizing student accomplishments and building healthy student and teacher relationships); Tier 2 methods for fixing the relationship between students and teachers

when conflicts arise (e.g., discussion circles and peer mediation to transform conflict), and Tier 3 strategies for emerging students back into school after a suspension, expulsion, or who are truant (Haskim et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019).

Restorative justice programs (RJPs) also endeavor to lower suspension for willful defiance and other misconduct and take a broader approach by building positive and inclusive school climates. The research data included 1.44 million observations of individual students enrolled in 785 schools collected from 2003–2015. The researchers examined how suspension trends changed in LAUSD to after its suspension ban (2011–2012 to 2013–2014) and once the RJP was adopted (2014–2015) (Haskim et al.). The data revealed that results show that educators in LAUSD were suspending minority and students with special education services for willful defiance at higher rates than other students. There was a significantly higher suspension rate before the district’s suspension ban and a decrease once the district centralized student discipline procedures and prohibited student suspensions for willful defiance (Haskim et al., 2018). Suspension bans and RJPs have gained policymakers’ attention and have proven to reduce the amount of exclusionary discipline.

### ***Second Step Program***

The early years of a student’s entrance into school are critical to a student’s emotional, academic, social, behavioral development, and academic outcome. For some students, pre-existing behavioral and emotional conditions increase their risks for emotional and behavioral disorders (Low et al., 2018; Moy & Hazen, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2019). Barriers that schools face is discovering which evidence-based program to



implement to support students at different developmental stages. Elementary schools are electing to utilize the Second Step Program as a prevention program to develop young students' social and emotional learning to reduce suspensions for primary students.

The Second Step Program's goals are to promote interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies and to reduce the development of social, emotional, and behavioral problems through social learning theory (Low et al., 2018; Moy & Hazen, 2018). Second Step is a universal classroom-based curriculum designed to increase student success, decrease problem behaviors, and promote social-emotional competence and self-regulation. This Tier 1 program focuses on observation, self-reflection, implementation, the performance of expected behaviors, social information processing, self-regulation through verbal and mediation for appropriate development of social and emotional skills (Low et al., 2018).

The program materials include packaged grade-level kits for PK, K-5, and 6-8. The kits include a curriculum (a lesson script) that may be used to teach lessons, links to an audio-visual media presentation for small group discussions, worksheets, and behavioral skill training and modeling (Low et al., 2018; Moy & Hazen, 2018). Lessons can be taught by classroom teachers, school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and even trained youth groups. The 15 to 28 lessons consist of 20 to 45-minute presentations, once or twice a week (Low et al., 2018). A systematic synthesis of research was conducted to analyze the program's effectiveness by comparing students who did not participate in the program to those who did, and then by analyzing student outcomes before participation in the program and afterwards. The study of programs

implemented in a classroom setting as a Tier 1 intervention included over 15 studies and included journals from 1984 and 2014 (Low et al., 2018).

After a review of the meta-analyses, the study concluded that 4 out of 5 studies showed positive effects of student outcomes and students outperformed those who did not participate in the program. However, the study also indicated positive and significant effects on participants' knowledge of program content and no significant effects on reducing antisocial outcomes in participants (Low et al., 2018). The Step Program is a preventive intervention focused on social-emotional skills to provide students with the knowledge to develop strategies to regulate emotions, problem solves, and use prosocial behavior to reduce student suspensions. Interventions such as PBIS, Restorative Justice, and Second Step programs, when implemented with fidelity, can be utilized to prevent disruptive behaviors, teach appropriate behaviors, and provide another option for discipline.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Chapter 2 was structured to address the framework on which this reach was based and to provide background literature about state mandates and policies, such as zero tolerance and House Bill 651 the impact on exclusionary discipline. I also discussed how administrators' and teachers' beliefs and professional development influence how disciplinary responses to students reflect school data and trends. Information was then provided to demonstrate how prejudices such as race, culture, and economic status can also influence disciplinary decisions and impact the school's culture. Finally, alternatives such as PBIS, Restorative Justice, and the Second Step program were introduced as

prevention and alternatives to reduce severe behaviors from occurring that would result in removal from the classroom or school.

The research presented has shown that exclusionary discipline does not effectively reduce severe discipline from occurring, and additional research is warranted (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Steinberg & Lacoë, 2018; Babb, 2019). Sutherland et al. (2019) remarked that the field has struggled to implement evidence-based practices in classrooms for students at-risk for emotional behavior disorders. Welsh and Little (2018) stated that there is a need for further evaluation studies of alternative school discipline policies and practices on student and school outcomes such as school safety and instruction quality. The gap in practice focuses on how school-based administrators utilize preventive alternatives to prevent severe behaviors and comply with state mandates. Previous research analysis correlates to my study by identifying the current gaps in the literature related to the effectiveness of interventions to prevent severe behaviors and the overuse of exclusionary discipline. In my present study, interviews from administrators in Maryland will identify which interventions are most effective at preventing severe offenses from happening for students in prekindergarten through second grade to comply with SB 651. This literature review revealed how state mandates, school policies, administrators' beliefs, training, and interventions could impact students' being removed from the classroom or school building.

Studies have proven that previous policies such as zero-tolerance have caused states to evaluate the use of exclusionary discipline and why some states and school districts are making progress while some are not. The data supports that there remains a

gap in preventing escalating behaviors, especially in the primary grades. The classroom teacher's use of classroom management and relationship building can severely influence a student's behavior. Overall, finding a solution to preventing student behavior will support students' academic, attendance, and social well-being.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

In this basic qualitative study, I explored how administrators in a rural northeastern Maryland school district are preventing severe offenses from happening for students in prekindergarten through second grade to comply with SB 651. Participants were Maryland public school administrators, principals and assistant/vice principals who have direct contact with elementary students in a rural northeastern Maryland school district. The purpose of my research is to explore how this school district's administrators' viewpoints are critical to uncovering how their decisions, preventing behaviors, and identifying which interventions were effective at reducing the number of students being suspended or expelled from school.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, rationale of the study, and my roles as a researcher. The next section of Chapter 3 will include a comprehensive review of the methodology, including the processes for selecting participants, as well as the instrumentation procedures for recruitment, participation, and data compilation. Furthermore, data analysis, trustworthiness, and threats to validity will be discussed. To conclude the chapter, I will review the ethical procedures and a summary for Chapter 3.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question that guided my research for this study was: What are rural northeastern Maryland public elementary school principals' perspectives about discipline interventions as a strategy to prevent the use of exclusionary discipline for prekindergarten through second grade students?

My research study's methodology was based on a basic qualitative design that included data collection through interviews with 12 participants regarding their personal and professional experiences. This research was structured to build upon previous studies and makes an original contribution toward addressing a gap in practice. This study complies with the components of an epistemological perspective, specifically a standpoint theory. The standpoint theory can be used to analyze the principals' perceptions (interpretivism assumptions), data collection (interviews), and analysis to develop an understanding of the results. The study met the criteria for ontological research by recognizing that rural northeastern administrators' perceptions are based on their truths and reality. This study found common themes through the interpretation of the phenomena. The process for the semistructured interviews included predetermined questions, follow-up questions as needed, voice recording, transcribing, and coding. The data collected from the semistructured interviews with administrators regarding their understanding of disciplining students, how discipline consequences are determined, and their strategies to reduce suspensions and expulsions were reviewed.

Another qualitative approach considered for my research was gathering data and information by conducting case study research. This research style involves studying a specific principal, school, or school district to gather information using a collection of data such as direct observations, interviews, documents, artifacts, and other sources (Ravitch, 2016). I rejected this approach and elected to gather information about the perspectives of administrators in rural northeastern Maryland public schools rather than focusing on all school districts in Maryland. A case study method can be used for

qualitative methods and is processed in which findings are extended from one case to the next additional data are collected and analyzed over an extended period (Ravitch, 2016).

The purpose of grounded theory design was to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest. Grounded theory allows for data collection through multiple tools such as interviews, audio recordings, memos, and questionnaires and change throughout the study (Burkholder, 2016). My research problem was structured on studying principals' perspectives through interviews to discover common themes for coding and not to develop a theory from the data collected as in grounded theory.

The phenomenological research method is often related to a specific event and situation and is studied over years. Research methods include identifying a specific phenomenon through how the participants in a situation perceive them; data collection can include interviews and observations (Ravitch, 2016). The approach also focuses on the participants' lived experiences of the phenomena. My research only included interviews of previous experiences, such as the use of disciplinary actions and school-based interventions to prevent undesirable behaviors.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as a researcher was shaped through this process of planning and designing, and I ensured the study methods were conducive to data collection. I recognized that people are specialists in their own experiences. Because I am currently an administrator in a rural northeastern Maryland school district, I am aware that my own experiences and bias could potentially influence the research. During this research, I followed an interview protocol and was honest with my interviewees. I reviewed

transcripts by listening to the recordings more than once and updated the transcripts as needed. Also, during this process my role was to understand that I was a part of the process. I evaluated my personal influence on the data through my questions by exploring and understanding the complexity of each administrator's experiences. Reflexivity shaped my experience by ensuring that my thoughts of the data were included in my memos, research journals, and interviews. Ravitch (2016) describes a researcher's role as interacting with other individuals and the researcher as a primary instrument of the study, directly impacting and affecting the data collected.

My role as the interviewer was to develop questions aligned to my research problem, purpose, gap, and research questions. During the research, I provided participants with adequate information on how the interview would proceed by informing the participants the session would be recorded and I would not use any identifiable information. During the interviews, I ensured that participants were aware of the procedures and include the participants in the discussions gather enough information needed for the research. The relationships between fellow administrators were managed as I ensured that all participants understood the guidelines related to the study and did not reveal who the other administrators were.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The participant selection for my research consisted of administrators (principals and assistant principals) from a rural northeastern Maryland elementary school setting. I investigated their perspectives of behavioral prevention and exclusionary discipline. The



criteria for participating in this study included (a) being a current or previous elementary school principal or assistant principal in a rural northeastern Maryland school district, (b) being responsible for making decisions for exclusionary discipline and preemptive behavioral interventions, and (c) being available to participate in face-to-face video conferencing through Microsoft Teams or available for telephone interviews regarding their personal experiences and perspectives. All interviews and transcribing were conducted via Microsoft Teams, which allowed for the interview to be recorded.

The administrators' perspectives provided an understanding of this phenomenon. Teachers, students, parents, students, central office staff, school-based psychologists, or therapists were not invited to participate because they are not the decision makers for choosing school-based prevention programs or assigning disciplinary actions. The population for this research specifically focused on administrators from a rural northeastern Maryland public school whose student population included students from prekindergarten through second grade. The sample included 12 current or former rural northeastern Maryland school administrators including principals and assistant principals involved in choosing and evaluating intervention programs and involved in the exclusionary discipline process.

Current or former administrators were chosen from a rural northeastern school district in the state of Maryland. The participants were chosen to meet the sampling criteria because they were involved in implementing interventions for the primary student, where exclusionary discipline was assigned. Purposeful sampling was applied by choosing participants who have a shared experience, have knowledge related to a

phenomenon, and reside in the same region (Ravitch, 2016). Purposeful sampling included nine principals, one assistant principal, and two former assistant principals from rural northeastern Maryland elementary schools with diverse student populations and specialized programming. Purposeful sampling aligned to the case selection and research design, including the purpose, research questions, and data. Based on the data collected from the individual experiences shared, the results were gathered into a shared experience description.

### **Instrumentation**

Semistructured interviews were used to identify administrators' perspectives. I investigated rural northeastern Maryland school administrators' perspectives about policies related to exclusionary discipline, training for administrators, implementing schoolwide interventions, and what guides their decision-making process when they assign exclusionary discipline. The participants who volunteered for this research were contacted through email, telephone, and in-person meetings to arrange a suitable time to be interviewed through Microsoft Teams. Through the qualitative research design, I engaged with participants through a descriptive and analytic approach by understanding, describing, and analyzing meanings from the participants' experiences (Ravitch, 2016).

My qualitative interviews followed the process of responsive interviewing. Responsive interviews include talking to knowledgeable people, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on their responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For my interviews, I identified the initial questions, problems, and follow-up questions. I included 11 questions (see Appendix A). Every interview began when I read the

introduction by stating the purpose of my research, my name, where I was a student, specific guidelines, and approximate time for the interview. After the interview, the participant was provided the opportunity to review the transcript. During this process, the conceptual framework reinforced the interview questions connected to the research questions.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After I gained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number 08-18-21-1011516), I solicited participants using various communication platforms. According to Walden's IRB approval process, before a student can begin recruitment of participants, data collection, a consent form, and the proposal must be accepted, and form for description of data sources and partner sites must also be completed. The communication platforms included contacting participants in the rural northeastern Maryland school district through phone calls, email, and face-to-face communications. Once I received interest from potential participants, I clarified the process for meeting the participation criteria. I followed up with potential candidates through constant communication to schedule interviews. At times, I had to reschedule interviews due to time conflicts or emergencies.

Data collection for this study included information gathered from interviews. The participants' recruitment occurred through direct contact with administrators from a rural northeastern Maryland school district by phone, email, and in person. Before the interview, the participants were emailed a description of my study, and I provided my contact information such as my cell phone, email, address; I identified additional forms to

reach me, such as through text messaging. The first contact was through a phone conversation to review questions that helped me to decide if participants met the participation criteria. After determining a participant met the criteria, interviews were scheduled. The interviews were conducted one-on-one using a virtual conference call through Microsoft Teams. As the interview was taking place, I used Microsoft Teams to record and transcribe participants' responses. After the interview, I sent the participants the transcripts to review for accuracy, along with a thank-you note for their participation.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

After completing the interview process and transcribing, data analysis began. This analysis involved an extensive review of preparing and organizing data by coding and forming themes and categories. Qualitative research coding is performed to organize and chunk data into manageable sections and identify or name those sections (Ravitch, 2016). All the data were secured by saving the recordings and transcripts to a password-protected external hard drive. In qualitative research, codes represent the first step in conveying meaning to data from an interview transcript, including words or phrases that identify what is occurring. Coding is one of many aspects of qualitative data analysis and requires multiple steps to disseminate data effectively. The purpose of coding for this study was to organize the data, to continue with immersive engagement with the data, and finally to analyze the data through writing, reflection, and representation (Ravitch, 2016). After the interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams, I exported the information into Microsoft Word to clean up any mistakes made during transcription. For data collection and analysis, I used Dedoose a web-based software to import and export the

data, organize into categories, and apply filters. After the data were organized into themes, Microsoft Excel was used to export the data from Dedoose and I applied color coding to further identify the four major themes. Excel was also used for visualization such as tables, charts, and graphs.

Coding was the connection between data collection and the explanation of meaning. My coding involved at least two cycles using short phrases or metaphorically assigning an attribute for a portion of languages or visual data (Saldaña, 2016). During the first coding, the data was broken down from single words, short phrases, or a full paragraph, compared to the second cycle of coding, which was by similar group phrases, longer passages, analytic memos about the data, and some of the codes required to be reconfigured (Saldaña, 2016). During this process, the information was disseminated further by using Values Coding. This method explored the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs and perspectives (Saldaña, 2016). By applying the Values Codes to the data from the interviews, the coding reviewed collective meaning about interventions related to discipline such as root causes, principal's understanding of SB 651, reasons for use of exclusionary discipline, and a variety of types of interventions. Second, coding consisted of recognizing and reanalyzing the data to develop a categorical, thematic, conceptual, and theoretical organization for the information of the first codes (Saldaña, 2016). The second coding method that was utilized was Axial Coding which allowed me to further reorganize and condense my results into smaller categories. Saldaña (2016) defines Axial Coding as describing a category's assets and the relationship between subcategories by extending the previous first coding by identifying the dominant and less essential codes.

Through the second coding, I focused on the critical themes in the data collected by my interviews. Using multiple data readings, unstructured reading occurred to identify themes in my data which centered around my research question.

After coding, my data analysis included examining my data set to identify and construct analytical themes, and afterward, the themes and findings answered my research question. The themes were developed from common phrases or words from the narratives from participants' experiences and any charts or graphs. The thematic analysis included identifying relationships, similarities, and differences in the data that will reflect the data and often rechecking the themes that may happen (Ravitch, 2016). Using data graphs and consolidating the data from multiple sources or types assisted me by identifying relationships and by drawing conclusions. (Ravitch, 2016). After the themes were established, data saturation where no new important is gathered from the data. Through this process, I grouped similar ideas into categories using appropriate labels from terminology provided by the participants. In turn, this data has helped to develop an understanding of the participant's perspectives and experiences to form my conclusions.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

When designing my research, I71 developed validity methodologies and ensured alignment with my research question, goals, and contexts of my research. Qualitative researchers attempt to establish credibility by implementing the validity strategies of triangulation, member checking, and using peer review, and putting all the pieces together (Ravitch, 2016). Credibility was established by drawing meaningful inferences

from collected data and ensuring that my interpretation of the data through coding of themes aligns with the participants' responses by allowing the participants to review my analysis. As a researcher, considering my reflexivity and how my own experiences, self-reflection of biases, relationships with participants, and the understanding of analytical explanations were constantly considered to assess my positionality and subjectivities.

### **Transferability**

For qualitative research, transferability is how the study can be applicable to a larger context while keeping the original context. I implemented transferability for my research by including detailed descriptions of my data, including thick descriptions, for readers and other researchers to compare my research to other studies based on the provided information (Ravitch, 2016). This will allow readers to make connections to my study design and data instead of reproducing the design and findings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is produced when data in research can state how data collection would occur and that the data is consistent with the researcher's argument (Ravitch, 2016). Using my research questions, my data reflected the answers justifying the use of my method (coding) as my method for achieving dependability. In addition to justifying my use of interviews, I also explained why I chose the data collection method and how it aligned with my research questions. While collecting the data, I recorded the participant's responses to confirm the data's accuracy being contained.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability occurs when researchers acknowledge that inevitable biases exist and that researchers do not seek objectivity; however, their findings can be substantiated (Ravitch, 2016). Researchers must often recognize and examine their biases and preconceptions while analyzing data through reflexivity to establish confirmability. To ensure the validity of the findings, I utilized an additional method to triangulate the data, such as different coding methods to analyze the data. Additionally, I ensured that confirmability transpired by including questions that caused me to reflect on my data analysis process and interpretation. These questions included, “What is my agenda for conducting this research?” Another question I asked myself was about potential challenges that I could face, such as how the information gathered throughout my research changed my thinking about the topic? Constant monitoring and questioning of my own biases and prejudices allowed me to ensure that I was making sure that confirmability was taking place to ensure my research had rigor and validity.

**Ethical Procedures**

When conducting qualitative research, ethical there are many factors to consider for the researcher and the participants. First, a relational approach to research allows the researcher to become reflexively engaged in interactions with others, such as being able to honestly admit that they do not have a response to a question, admit bias, listen intently, participate in a dialogue, be reflective of their research approach, and to make changes as needed (Ravitch, 2016). Identifying other factors that influenced how I conducted my research; a relational approach will allow me to develop an understanding



of the participants' viewpoint through collaboration and the willingness to change constructively. Since qualitative research is founded on relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee, understanding the roles, power structures, language used to build the relationship, and framing relation factors are ethical concerns (Ravitch, 2016).

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the ethics committee support's purpose were to provide consent and assent, research relationships and boundaries, reciprocity, transparency, and confidentiality (Ravitch, 2016). In accordance with Walden University's policies about conducting research, I first submitted my proposal through beneficence practice. Beneficence is defined as the researcher considering the participants' welfare and not causing harm to research participants (Ravitch, 2016). Next, I obtained all necessary approvals from Walden University and the participants by submitting the proper Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for permission to collect data once I identified my research participants. The consent form was reviewed with participants, and ethical concerns such as confidentiality, participation as a volunteer, the process for early withdrawal, and disposing of data once the study is concluded will be discussed.

To ensure that the recruitment process is fair and ethical, I communicated with potential participants that their participation was voluntary and would not harm them or their careers as educators. I also expressed the importance of the study and ensured participants, if they chose not to continue to participate during any time of the research, they may request an early withdrawal. Participants were informed that they would not

receive a monetary donation, but I encouraged participation by reminding them of how their contribution in this study influences social change, such as the development of new policies, professional development for administrators, and school staff.

Ethical concerns related to collecting, storing, and ensuring data security were included following protocols for storing and maintaining the participants' confidentiality. The use of the internet to collect data can simplify the collection, but there were many aspects to consider, such as privacy rights, which could make confidentiality challenges. I utilized data storage through my personal Google Account that was password protected and an external hard drive. I identified ways that data security can be breached, and I weighed the pros and cons of using social media, the internet, and my research's design, context, concerns, and needs (Ravitch, 2016). To protect my participants' privacy, I used pseudonyms or alphanumeric codes for my data and developed an action plan if my data was compromised, such as someone accessing my data. After the research was finished, I will retain documents for five years until Walden has accepted my dissertation and then destroy all electronic data by removing the information from my Google Account, external hard drives, and laptop.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 was a comprehensive review of the qualitative method for this study, the design, and the rationale. Throughout the chapter, the role of the researcher, methodology, and instrumentation was also described. The chapter then discussed participant selection requirements, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. An evaluation of how the data would be analyzed, ensuring trustworthiness,

minimizing threats to validity, and reviewing the ethical procedures that would be executed during the study was also described.

For Chapter 4, a review of the purpose and the nature of conducting the research will be reiterated. Next, the study will introduce participant characteristics that are vital to the research. Additionally, the data collection, data analysis practices, and substantiate trustworthiness will explain the procedures taken to guarantee credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter Five 5 will summarize my study's findings, in addition to limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, the impact of social change, and practical implications.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of my research was to explore perspectives of administrators in a rural northeastern Maryland elementary school district about preventing behaviors from occurring and identifying which interventions were effective at reducing suspension or expulsions from school. I applied a qualitative approach to answer the following research question: What are rural northeastern Maryland public elementary school principals' perspectives about discipline interventions as a strategy to prevent the use of exclusionary discipline for prekindergarten through second grade students? In this chapter, I describe the setting where data collection took place, the demographics of participants, participant characteristics connected to the study, and evidence of trustworthiness.

### **Setting**

The location for this study was in a rural county in northeastern Maryland. Information gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) identifies the total population for the county as 172,891, and the number of students enrolled in prekindergarten through second grade in the district was 4,095. The county where this study was conducted includes the 10th largest school district in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Discipline data revealed that principals were complying with SB 651 by not using suspensions or expulsions as a form of disciplinary actions, but the number of students receiving official referrals for several behaviors in prekindergarten through second grade was consistently increasing. The data also revealed the highest number of referrals for primary students was in physical contact and physical assault on students and adults.

### Demographics

For this study, 12 administrators participated, which included one assistant principal, two former assistant principals, and nine principals. The population consisted of four male principals and eight female principals; the participants' experience as an administrator ranged from 5 years to 24 years. As shown in Table 1, administrators' position, gender, and years of experience varied among the participants.

**Table 1**

*Research Participants Demographics*

Participant	Title	Gender	Administrative experience (years)
P1	Principal	Male	9
P2	Principal	Female	17
P3	Former assistant principal	Female	15
P4	Principal	Female	15
P5	Principal	Female	7
P6	Principal	Male	24
P7	Principal	Female	10
P8	Principal	Male	8
P9	Principal	Male	10
P10	Assistant principal	Female	5
P11	Principal	Female	10
P12	Principal	Female	15

### Data Collection

After meeting the requirements and receiving approval from Walden University's IRB (approval number 08-18-21-1011516), I began recruiting and selecting participants for the study. Recruitment was through personal phone calls and emails to current and former administrators. After the personal phone calls to screen candidates, an email was sent to potential participants, which included an introduction of me as a doctoral student

at Walden University, the research purpose, and the informed consent form. Following the phone calls and emails, participants who met the criteria were emailed the consent form for review and answered questions for clarification. The participants responded to my email with “I consent” agreeing to participate in the study.

A total of 12 administrators participated in the interviews during a 16-day period between September 9, 2021, and September 24, 2021. The participants included nine principals, two former assistant principals (currently supervised), and one assistant principal. All participants have been involved in the exclusionary discipline process for prekindergarten through second grade through either through reviewing behavior referrals, behavioral conferences, intervening with behaviors or through the decision-making process. Semistructured interviews consisted of one time only one-on-one interviews with participants to gather data. Participants were voluntary and all interviews were confidential.

Through virtual conferencing, data were collected, and the interview setting was quiet and free from interruptions. All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, and the interview sessions lasted between 20 and 32 minutes depending on the length of participant responses to the questions. Prior to the interviews, I developed a series of 11 interview questions and asked additional clarifying questions to further probe for more information or to have the participant expand their responses. During the interview, I also took handwritten notes and preprinted copies of the questions in addition to the video-recorded interviews and transcript of the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

The research question was answered after reading and examining interview transcripts numerous times and using open coding with thematic analysis. Data including all related materials are being kept confidential and secured on an external hard drive that is password protected. Saldaña (2019) stated that qualitative inquiry requires thorough attention to language, images, and deep reflection on the developing patterns and connection to personal experiences. My process for coding consisted of first organizing the interviews and transferring the transcriptions from Microsoft Teams into a Word document. Once the transcripts were uploaded to Microsoft Word, I reviewed the transcripts to identify any words or phrases that were misinterpreted by reviewing the audio recordings and taking field notes.

Transcripts were loaded into Dedoose software for coding, and I was able to go line by line to first identify codes, subcategories, categories, and then themes and concepts. First coding included using values coding by identifying key words or phrases that represented participants' values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives (Saldaña, 2019). At times during the interviews, participants became emotional when describing past situations and often expressed their frustrations and personal beliefs toward how a disciplinary action was managed. Similar words and phrases were then categorized to reflect the collective meaning of the participants' perspectives, and eventually themes emerged.

During this first coding method, I referred to my analytic memos to examine further identify how participants unique experiences influenced their perspectives. Using

the values coding method, commonalities among the participants emerged to explore their perspectives about exclusionary discipline, interventions, and if their views were identified as innovative or traditional. For my second coding method, axial coding was applied to the data to condense my results into smaller categories. I downloaded the results from the transcript uploaded from Dedoose into Microsoft Excel where I color coded similar words into categories because of their similar characteristics to identify patterns in the data. From the categories, subcategories emerged based on their relationship to the main category, and three themes emerged.

During the second coding, my themes became more defined and began to shape how administrators' perspectives aligned to the conceptual framework. My second coding of the data provided a better connection because I was able to restructure and reclassify the codes into new categories. The discrepant responses occurred only three times during this process. Saldaña (2019) also stated that recoding can occur with a more attuned perspective using the first cycle methods while second cycle can refer to the procedures that may be employed during the second analysis of the data.

Interpretation of the data consisted of developing the meaning of the participants' perspectives, personal experiences, descriptions, and their own conclusions. There were phrases or words from some participants that did not relate to others and were not included in the coding throughout the coding process. Table 2 provides an example of codes used and examples from the data.



**Table 2***Codes Related to Research Question*

Codes	Data examples
Beliefs about the use of exclusionary discipline	<p>“I never use it as a punitive thing or to get back at a student.”</p> <p>“It depends on the student’s understanding of what suspensions is and if they understand what the ramifications are.”</p> <p>“Then some students need to like, truly, I mean, families need to reach out to medical professionals at times too. And sometimes it apparent if a student suspended, that’s an opportunity to take the day to actually do that versus them in school like and the next day and the pattern or the cycle just continues.”</p>
Actions that led to the use of exclusionary discipline	<p>“Pulling a fire alarm”</p> <p>“A look-alike gun”</p> <p>“And it was repeated. It wasn’t just an isolated like, just got angry and had a meltdown. It was a repeated starting to become almost daily occurrence of hitting, you know, biting, things like that. So that’s really what led to the suspensions.”</p>
Administrator’s understanding of SB651	<p>“I know it’s about discipline for kids that are I believe in the second grade and under and they are pushing to keep those kids in school instead of discipline outside of the school setting. Again, back to those proactive and learning opportunities in lieu of suspensions that you know are going on their records or being labeled.”</p> <p>“The bigger the learning gap, and so yes, I want everyone safe but also was concerned about that learning gap, so I didn’t believe in a lot of suspensions. I wanted to find ways that we can correct the behavior but still maintain safety.”</p> <p>“It was very selective in the students that we would have multiple suspensions for in a year.”</p>
Interventions and strategies	<p>“And then there’s a checklist of whatever their two goals are, so we track the data on that. They put it into an Excel document.”</p> <p>“Conversations using things like the calm down corner, you know, not jumping to punitive, changing the idea that a consequence needs to be punitive as opposed of natural and restorative.”</p> <p>“It’s so important, and I feel like that connects directly to the social–emotional. In my mind, they are like one in the same in a lot of ways because you do all that SEL stuff in your community meeting, like that’s the whole point is to build that social–emotional learning.”</p>
Finding solutions	<p>“It’s hard because a lot of it takes so much time you can’t write a functional behavior assessment or a behavior intervention plan at the snap of your fingers.”</p> <p>“I think our teachers need a lot of exposure to professional development. Indirect way to kind of get to know the child on a different level, one on one in your office, quietly while they’re comfortable eating lunch.”</p> <p>“I think it would be definitely gathering information, right? So, from the student tracking, collecting that data on what’s actually happening, having the conversation with them about their understanding of the behavior, why it’s happening.”</p>

Table 3 reflects the codes, subcategories, and categories that informed the overall themes based on the data collected.

**Table 3**

*Themes Related to the Research Question*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Physical attacks Weapons or illegal drugs Destruction of school property	Root causes of the use of suspensions	Consistency regarding behaviors that warrant exclusionary discipline
Provided break from the student Changing behavior	Innovative Traditional	Exclusionary discipline as an effective disciplinary tool
PBIS Class dojo Second Step Social-emotional learning (SEL) In-school-intervention Calm down strategies Restorative Mentors Justice/practice Behavior plans	Interventions Professional development Individualized education program (IEP)	Alternatives and interventions to exclusionary discipline
Crisis prevention intervention (CPI) Behavior support School psychologist Relationships Instruction	Professional development Parent support Additional resources Prevention Progressive discipline	Solutions to preventing severe behaviors

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

When designing my research, my methodologies ensured alignment with my research questions, goals, and contexts of my research. Qualitative researchers attempt to establish credibility by implementing the validity strategies of triangulation, member checking, and using peer review, and putting all the pieces together (Ravitch, 2016).

Credibility was established by drawing meaningful inferences from collected data. I ensured that my interpretation of the data through coding themes aligned with the participants' responses by allowing the participants to review the transcript. As a researcher, I considered my personal reflexivity and how my own experiences, self-reflection of biases, relationships with participants, and the understanding of analytical explanations were constantly considered as I assessed my positionality and subjectivities.

### **Transferability**

For qualitative research, transferability is how the study can apply to a larger context while keeping the original context. I implemented transferability for my research by including detailed descriptions of my data, including thick descriptions, for readers and other researchers to compare my research to other studies based on the provided information (Ravitch, 2016). This would allow readers to connect my study design and data instead of reproducing the design and findings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is produced when data in research can state how data collection would occur and that the data is consistent with the researcher's argument (Ravitch, 2016). The data gathered was able to answer my research question and justified my method (coding) as my process for achieving dependability. I explained the steps that I completed during the research process. In addition to justifying my use of interviews, I explained why I chose the data collection method and how it aligned with my research questions. When collecting the data, I recorded the participant's responses and the recordings to confirm the data's accuracy that was collected.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability occurs when researchers acknowledge that inevitable biases exist and do not seek objectivity; however, their findings can be substantiated (Ravitch, 2016). Researchers must often recognize and examine their biases and preconceptions while analyzing data through reflexivity to establish confirmability. To ensure the validity of the findings, utilizing an additional method to triangulate the data, such as different coding methods to analyze the data. Additionally, I ensured that confirmability transpired by including questions that caused me to reflect on my data analysis process and interpretation. These included, “What is my agenda for conducting this research?” Another question I asked myself was about potential challenges that I could have faced, such as how the information gathered throughout my research changed my thinking about the topic? Constant monitoring and questioning of my own biases and prejudices allowed me to ensure that I was making sure that confirmability was taking place to ensure my research had rigor and validity.

## **Results**

### **Theme 1: Consistency Regarding Behaviors That Warrant Exclusionary Discipline**

A common theme throughout the data from the interviews was administrators’ perspectives of when exclusionary discipline should be used. According to the data, behaviors that often resulted in exclusionary actions were physical attacks, destruction of school property, weapons, or illegal drugs.

### *Physical Attacks*

All the participants stated that previous suspensions before the implementation of SB 651 involved physical attacks such as physical harm to other students or to staff members. For example, participants shared the following perspectives about physical harm: P2 said, “The student’s intent is to truly hit somebody like to hurt somebody.” P10 shared, “It can be pretty violent. It’s usually attacks, but it’s likely intense attacks on adults and other students.” The identified physical attacks reported by the administrators often included biting, kicking, and throwing desks and other classroom furniture.

When it comes to level of intensity of physical attacks, P5 stated, “Attack resulting in injury or certainly had the potential to result in injury, and it wouldn’t have just been like one incident.” P7 stated, “The threat level has to be really high and substantiated in some way to warrant a suspension,” and “I just know that as a principal, I was told, you know, unless it’s imminent harm, and I consider assaults as imminent.” P3 suggested, “A fifth grader biting somebody is very different than a kindergarten biting somebody.” P8 provided an additional perspective: “It wasn’t just an isolated event—the student just got angry and had a meltdown. It was repeated, starting to become almost daily occurrence of hitting and biting. So that’s really what led to the suspension.” Attacks on other students was mentioned several times by administrators. P1 stated “Attacks on students often occur during recess when all of the sudden they kick a kid or hit a kid and sometimes continue to go back to the same student over and over again.”

### ***Weapons or Illegal Drugs***

The participants noted other behaviors that should result in suspension included finding of weapons or smoking devices such as vaping devices. P6 stated, "Suspension is used for major events happened like a weapon or a major physical harm." Suspension can also result in a threat and evidence of a weapon. For example, P3's responded, "We have evidence that it's going to happen like we have found a weapon." Another administrator said (P9), "When major events happened... like a weapon or a major physical harm event" Students often use everyday school materials such as pencils and pens as weapons. P5 stated, "intentionally coming at you with scissors." P4 referred to "using pencils to stab."

### ***Aggressive Behaviors***

Suspension of a student is often utilized after a series of events have occurred. For example, P10 stated that "Seclusion and restraints have been used leading up to the suspension." Relative to younger students, P7 noted that "...For kindergarten, .... is it because they have not been taught?" Another administrator commented, P1 "you know we have done multiple interventions before," P1 also stated,

Depending on the kid's outburst, when staff was injured or when there are frequent elopements ...we would sometimes suspend students because they became unsafe, and we tried so many other strategies trying to understand what was setting him off so we would have motivational things such as behavior charts and plans.

When asked about patterns of aggressive behaviors, P5 response included, “Basically, the main thing that we’re looking at is when we have that pattern of aggressive behaviors towards peers or staff. We’ve had students in the past that ... will engage in aggressive behaviors”.

### ***Destruction of School Property***

The participants noted other behaviors that should result in suspension included students who showed aggression such as destroying classroom materials, furniture, and instructional materials, which can lead to the use of suspension. For example, P10 stated, “destruction of school property despite efforts to redirect the child.” Another administrator commented on students throwing furniture as the destruction of property. P7 said, “destruction of school property also involves throwing desks and destroying classrooms.” P3’s reflection was, “We’ve had some aggressive students throwing chairs or throwing things inappropriately, which again could be a harm to students.” These subcategories led to the development of root causes as categories and the overall theme of behaviors, which warrant exclusionary discipline.

### **Theme 2: Exclusionary Discipline as an Effective Disciplinary Tool**

Many of the administrators were asked how effective the use of exclusionary discipline on student behavior. The subcategories resulting from the data gathered were from codes related to administrators’ beliefs about exclusionary discipline and their understanding of Senate Bill 651.

### ***Using Exclusionary as a Break from the Student***

According to 9 out of the 12 administrators interviewed, suspending a student can provide break from managing aggressive behaviors of students. Often when a student is suspended, it provides a break for the classroom teacher spending additional individual time re-directing the student's behavior, and for administrators to identify other strategies to change the behavior. For example, P11 stated, "sometimes suspension is necessary to break the situation and regroup." P9 also said that "Students in the class need a break or the staff, which is never really a valid reason for suspension." P9 perspective about suspensions as breaks was that "I do agree that there are times people need a break from each other, but that's to me not the role of suspension, but that we need to teach kids what they can and cannot do." P5 stated,

Families need to reach out to medical professionals at times too, and sometimes it's apparent if a student is suspended, that's an opportunity to take the day to do the that versus them in school and continuing the pattern of the cycle of behavior. Similarly, administrators also reviewed suspensions for documentation of interventions, for example, P6 stated, "it helps to get them the help we need, I have to have that on the record."

### ***Exclusionary Discipline Did Not Change Behavior***

In contrast to providing the break between the student and school, administrators also stated that exclusionary discipline did not change the behavior. For instance, P8 noted,



For students of those ages and grade levels, discipline should be a learning experience. Just like we teach lots of other things in school, reading, math, writing, and physical education, we also know students might not come to school prepared in the discipline.

P3 agreed, stating,

All you do is put a Band-Aid on a place where you need stitches because if you do something in one situation and it gets connected in another situation, that connection is not there, and the younger the kid is, the harder it is.

P8 suggested that “I believe that that this is our responsibility to help lead the child toward the desired behaviors in the process of trying to learn.” P3’s thoughts about the effectiveness of suspensions stated,

I’m just one of those people I really feel when we send the child home at any age. And we’ve told them that you know, we’ve given up that that control. And then we’ve said to them that we couldn’t control their behavior, and they’ve gone home. And even though even in the cases where I feel like they. They didn’t want to disappoint their parents or get in trouble with their parents or must be home, and it was an inconvenience to parents.

Most of the principals believed that the use of exclusionary discipline does not effectively decrease behaviors from reoccurring and that it is not a permanent solution. The over-beliefs of administrators were then categorized to either Innovative or Traditional methodologies of the discipline.

### **Theme 3: Alternatives and Interventions to Exclusionary Disciplines**

Administrators' perspectives also indicated that since the implementation of House Bill 651, which restricts suspension for primary students, other forms of disciplinary measures had been applied instead of suspensions. Through progressive discipline such as using behavior support rooms, In-School-Intervention, Class DoJo, mentors, lunch, recess, and after school detentions, assist with reducing the number of students being excluded from school.

#### ***In-School Interventions***

In-School Interventions were tools frequently mentioned by 9 out of the 12 administrators as a form of discipline. In-School- Intervention is used instead of sending a student home from school. Administrators reported the use of In-School- Interventions like P6, who stated, "In-School-Intervention typically will consist of a learning opportunity, exclusive of the classroom and we might engage the behavioral support specialist, school psychologist, or counselor." P1 concurred, stating,

If we can get them into some specials and different things throughout the day, we really do not want to exclude them through a suspension or expulsion, and it typically involves behavior support from my AP and me throughout the day.

P5 reflected, "In-School-Intervention can be time-consuming, so you have to be really intentional about it."

#### ***Calm Down Strategies***

Principals also shared their perspectives about the use of calm down strategies. For instance, P3 stated that "All teachers have quiet spaces or calm down spaces where

there may be books for students to relax and comfortable chairs such as a bean bag chair. There are also signs with strategies to let students know different things that they can do to calm down.” P2 mentioned “trying breaks and calming strategies,” and P10 said, “We are following the use of Zones of Regulation as a calming down strategy.”

### ***Behavior Charts and Plans***

Behavior charts and behavior plans are additional tools administrators reported using to monitor behaviors as an intervention for discipline. For instance, P1 explained the importance of feedback:

There’s a checklist of their two goals, so we track the data and export it to an Excel document. We... develop a plan to check in with the student. We’re so focused on the ones that need behavior charts and sticker charts and more frequent breaks.

In developing behavior plans, P7 mentioned, “We might engage the behavioral support specialist, the school psychologist, this school counselor.” Some administrators responded that the use of charts may not always be a method to improve behavior. P11 stated, “We’re so focused on the ones that need behavior charts and sticker charts and more frequent breaks and all that kind of stuff. They’re the ones that are doing great. We don’t really recognize, so we’re trying to do that more the last couple of years.”

### ***Alternative Placements***

Alternative discipline practices that were not as common between administrators were the use of alternative placement for students displaying severe behaviors after a

history of documented referrals and the use of progression documents for discipline. P11 alluded to:

We look at a couple of things for short term intervention such as an alternative placement for six weeks stay...., which is not enough time to get a kid adjusted into a new school, .... under this new measure, my principal, keep him as long as we need to in our self-contained program.

Subcategories from participants include various alternatives, such as removing the student from the actual school and providing continuous support to prevent behaviors.

A mixture of school-based interventions was also mentioned, such as Positive Behavior, Intervention, and Supports (PBIS), Social-Emotional Learning, and Restorative Justice.

### ***Positive Behavior Intervention Supports***

Administrators had mixed perspectives on implementing PBIS. P2 stated in the interview, “The PBIS committee that meets monthly looks at discipline referrals and data, and school-wide pep rallies are held.” P6 responded, “We were a PBIS school, but we did not care for the PBIS bureaucracy. So, we now refer to our school as an on-track behavior system. We use all of the goodness of PBIS without the PBIS name and paperwork.” P1 had a similar response, “We switched from tickets to Dojo points where we have a class or a school store once a week that different grade levels can come and go shopping.” P5 shared that,

What we have is so similar, I think they were a PBIS at one point, so they know the structure of it, but then I think they just lost touch with having it and a formal

team coach, staying registered as a PBIS school that now they just kind of do their in-house version of PBIS.

Administrators seem to be moving away from completely using all the components of PBIS, but they are adapting their positive reinforcement program to meet the needs of their students best. For example, P7 offered:

Transitioning from the use of a PBIS system was not a big hit. So, we came up with a compromise. ...I want kids regularly cashing in, so the Instructional Assistant (IA) assigned to them at the end of the day has one in every grade level. They're to set up a time with each teacher to cash in weekly, and then the IA can share with me the progress.

The participant's responses are captured in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*PBIS Programs*

Participants	Responses to PBIS
P4	Like what they have is so similar, I think they were a PBIS at one point, so they know like its structure. I think they lost touch with like having the formal team and coach, staying registered as a PBIS school, and they just kind of do their own in-house version of PBIS.
P8	Something as simple as a chart or some kind of visual for the student to track their day. That might sometimes be tied to a reward. If you get so many smiley faces, you get a reward.
P8	Sometimes that works well when the parent buys in and can follow through at home, or they can have a similar system at home so that we're consistent for the child.
P3	So, all our schools have a positive behavior reward type.
P1	We also recognize them on R3R's quarterly, so respectful, responsible, ready to learn
P6	We were a PBIS, and we did not care for the PBIS bureaucracy. So, we now refer to our school as an on-track behavior system. We use all the goodness of PBIS without the PBIS name and paperwork.

### ***Social-Emotional Learning***

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) was often mentioned as a newly introduced intervention that was recently implemented beginning in 2020 with pre-kindergarten students and expanding to students in kindergarten and first grade. P7 shared, “There has something to build that relationship back with the classroom and teachers as well. It’s so important, and I feel like that connects directly to the social-emotional, and the whole point is to build that social-emotional learning.” Other responses included P3

It’s so important, and I feel like that connects directly to the social-emotional, like I haven’t like sad it directly. Because in my mind, there are like the same in a lot of ways because you do all that SEL stuff in your community meeting like that’s the whole point is to build that social-emotional learning.

### ***Restorative Justice***

Restorative Justice as an intervention was only utilized by one administrator, but components were shared by other administrators. P7 shared,

I am a very strong proponent of restorative approaches and restorative justice.

Every staff member has three restorative questions to ask, what happened?, who was harmed, and how can I fix it? I mean, my solution, I think, is what I’m pursuing and really working on the restorative.

Overall, participants’ perspectives agreed that there isn’t always one approach or intervention in preventing behaviors. Participants also shared how parents play a significant role in supporting the school’s behavior strategies or program to prevent behaviors. P9 mentioned, “The parents are in support, and whatever we teach them in

school so parents can carry on in their own house with their family, if it's not happening at home, so we're it's a back and forth."

P3 replied, "Some parents are not good problem-solvers for their emotional issues themselves, and so that carries over to their children." P5 perspective was, "I think that our younger generations and I don't just mean school-age students, but even their parents' generation for use at the elementary level because they tend to be younger parents." The use of interventions was evident by the comments made by all the administrators, and the data reflected that often it takes a combination of interventions to prevent behaviors.

#### **Theme 4: Finding Solutions**

Participants were asked to provide their perspective of what the solution should be to preventing behaviors. The data gathered alluded to categories such as professional development, parental support, additional resources, and the use of progressive discipline.

##### ***Professional Development***

Professional development was a recurring subcategory that was consistent with identifying solutions to prevent severe behaviors. Training staff, including teachers and administrators, on how to use interventions, follow behavior plans, and build relationships was mentioned several times in the interviews. P3 comments about professional development included,

Professional Development and I think you know; I think our teachers need a lot of exposure to professional development to find an indirect way to kind of get to see the child on a different level. An indirect way to get to know the child on a

different level, one on one in your office, quietly while they're comfortable eating lunch.

P7 also suggested that professional development include, "Best practices I guess the most current best practices that are research-based." Another administrator presented literature as a part of professional development. For example, P8 suggested, "Read a book on educating oppositional and defiant children. And it was a quick read. But it totally changed the way that I worked with kids in my class that had oppositional defiance disorder". P6 suggested that teachers need training on the social-emotional aspect of behaviors by stating, "And you have to help have a lot of understanding and empathy and sympathy. Additional training referenced how to write student behavioral referrals". P12 mentioned, "don't just send the referral that looks like they're getting suspended because it's our format." Training for teachers should be relevant and ongoing to help to reduce and prevent severe behaviors.

### ***Parental Support***

Communication between parents and the school is essential to supporting students who have exhibited behaviors where exclusionary discipline may be warranted.

Throughout the interviews, participants stated that lack of communication between school and parents are sometimes parents disagreeing or not supporting the schools' suggestions to change a student's behavior. P2 said, "The other thing is the communication with parents, and sometimes I make phone calls as well to the parents to ask if they are seeing the same behaviors at home." Administrators also mentioned how parents could support the child at home. P3's comment was, "I think that our younger



generations and I don't just mean school-age students, but even their parents' generation for schools at the elementary level because they're they tend to be younger parents".

Many of the administrators commented that parent training is essential to helping prevent behaviors or to change behaviors.

### ***Additional Resources***

When participants were questioned about solutions to preventing behaviors and using exclusionary discipline, additional resources were mentioned by 8 of the 12 principals. P1 suggested, "Full time, either school psychologist or behavior support specialist." P5 stated, "It's hard because a lot of it takes so much time you can't write a functional behavior assessment or a behavior intervention plan at the snap of your fingers." P9's response was, "If we all had our own behavior support person, school psychologist, and we had two counselors for bigger schools, ...instead of just one for 540 kids." Another administrator spoke about helping to reduce the workload of administrators. P6 stated,

But it is so much work, and it does pull so many resources from the building at large; ..... it's a balanced day in and day out. As an administrator, you know the benefit of this and investing this much into one kid.

P9 responded differently and shared, "And like as a leader, you feel responsible for hundreds of kids, not just one, but when one consumes so much of your time, you start to wonder. It's this really the best." The data collected from the interviews revealed that administrators' perspectives about exclusionary disciplinary actions were to increase

the number of support staff such as school psychologists, guidance counselors, and behavior specialists based on the enrollment or programs in a school.

### ***Progressive Discipline***

Since House Bill 651 in Maryland, northeastern, rural administrators had to become innovators for assigning and managing student behaviors. Progressive Discipline was a tool that most participants mentioned instead of using suspensions and expulsions. In addition to In-School-Intervention, administrators suggested other types of progressive discipline such as goal setting, tracking, monitoring, detentions, assigning mentors, and support rooms to provide a break to students. P7 mentioned, "Setting up strategies ahead of time that they don't even engage in the behavior as much more effective." P4's stated, "To really problem solve and learn, hopefully, better ways, better choices." The use of lunch, afterschool, or recess detention was used by 10 of the 12 administrators. P2 stated, "I use after-school detention and have the student complete missed work." P9 indicated, "Goal setting for what we expect to be different from a student." P7's response was, "Conversations using things like the calm down corner, you know, not jumping too punitive, changing the idea that a consequence needs to be punitive as opposed of natural and restorative." P8 suggestion included, "Start with the smallest thing that might make a change, whether that you know you start with a warning reminder or a discussion, or you know the conversation with parents." Progressive discipline as a solution by administrators was one solution that has assisted in reducing behaviors and exclusionary discipline.

### **Perspectives Regarding Exclusionary Discipline**

The purpose of interviewing the participants was to gain their perspectives and experiences regarding which discipline interventions or strategies effectively prevented the use of exclusionary discipline for pre-kindergarten through second grade. Participants were identified using alphanumeric codes in both the interview transcripts and the research study. This section will introduce results focused on the participants' responses to the interview questions and how they connect to the research question. Discrepancies in the data included how effective school-wide interventions were, such as the use of PBIS programs and if they were indeed using the program as described to be most effective or developing a program with some of the components such as rewarding students with positive behaviors. By not implementing the program with fidelity, the administrator's perspective on the program's effectiveness at preventing the use of exclusionary discipline may not be accurate.

Nine out of the 12 administrators interviewed implemented In-School-Intervention as the most effective intervention to use instead of suspension or expulsion from school. In-School-Intervention allowed students to remain in the school building where they had access to teachers, support staff, and instruction was obtainable. For example, P6 commented that, "I think the most effective intervention that we provided was something of an in-school nature, where we would involve the immediate school staff. For example, we might engage the behavioral support specialist, the school psychologist, and the school counselor." P9 stated, "We do use In-School-Intervention liberally if needed with some friends if they are not safe to be in the classroom." P4's

response included, “Teaching and learning of behaviors that may be relevant to the incident that prompted the In-School-Intervention. The use of In-School-Intervention eliminates students being excluded from school. However, students are still excluded from the classroom and are not receiving direct instruction from their teachers depending on the school. P3 reflected:

The last thing that we would use was a suspension, out of school, in-school intervention, or in-school suspension, where again the student would be excluded because they would be in the support room with just with staff. They wouldn’t be back in the classroom for instruction.

In addition to using In-School-Interventions, administrators used additional intervention or strategies such as PBIS, mentorship programs, sensory paths, social stories, calm down corners, behavior plans, detentions, Second Step, and parent conferences instead of suspensions. School-wide interventions are structured around using a tiered-leveled program such as PBIS with modifications to the reward systems and tracking datasheets. P3 commented,

We do use our PBIS system with using the positives as well as consequences. We are trying to make sure that they are tailored to the age and developmental levels of the kids that are motivating to them, teaching the expected behaviors through guidance lessons and schoolwide pep rallies.

P1 stated, “We also recognize the three R’s (Respectful, Responsible, and Ready to Learn) at our quarterly PBIS assemblies.” P1 shared, “Most of our students complete a think sheet of the behavior for reflection when they are moved down a level.” The data

also reported that administrators use various strategies to help with sensory by providing movement breaks to students. P2's perspective was, "We created sensory paths throughout the hallways for students when they may need a movement break that structured and has various activities for sensory input." The data also revealed that when interventions and strategies have been exhausted, the use of progressive documents of help to document what has been tried to assist in changing the student's behavior and often refer to the Student Support Team to determine if formalized assessments are needed. P7 mentioned, "When interventions are not effective, we complete a Functional Behavior Assessment to determine if a Behavior Intervention Plan is needed." P1 stated that "I think we need to continue to go back to the intervention summary to determine if the behavior plan is working."

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 explained the setting of where the research was conducted and the characteristics of the participants as it pertains to this study. A summary of the data collection and data analysis supported the study's findings and provided evidence of the research's trustworthiness. Methods included reviewing how trustworthiness was achieved by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The qualitative study was performed to investigate educators' perspectives about discipline interventions for pre-kindergarten through second-grade students. The purpose was to explore northeastern Maryland elementary school administrators' perspectives about preventing behaviors from occurring and identifying which interventions were effective at reducing suspension or expulsions from school. The participants included

twelve administrators, nine principals, one current and two former assistant principals, and were interviewed for the study. Thematic analysis was used for opening coding, and four themes were discovered. The four themes included: Behaviors Which Warrant Exclusionary Discipline, Effectiveness of Exclusionary Discipline, and Alternatives and Interventions to Exclusionary Discipline, and Finding Solutions. The discrepancies in the data included the validity of how administrators were using PBIS as an effective intervention.

The participants understand how exclusionary discipline in primary grades is not effective in preventing or changing behaviors. They all agreed that to change behaviors, prevention such as using interventions and strategies can help reduce the use of the exclusionary discipline (RQ1). The participants shared a common message that building relationships with students and parents, providing professional development, and data collections are additional tools to monitor behavior before it becomes repetitive and gets to the level of suspension.

Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the research and explain the study's findings limitations to trustworthiness, recommendations for future research, the possibility of positive social change, and the empirical implications. Finally, the chapter will provide a conclusion to the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of administrators who have been directly involved in the disciplinary referral, interventions, strategies, and decision-making process for prekindergarten through second-grade students after implementation of SB 651, which prohibits suspension in the primary grades. The participants were defined as current or former assistant principals and principals working directly with students in prekindergarten through second grade. In the study, I sought to identify interventions that were helping to prevent severe behaviors and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. The administrators provided their perspectives about the root causes of behaviors, interventions currently being used, and how they reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. Interviews were the source of data collection for this qualitative study.

The methodology was a qualitative design that was applicable to this study because through the research, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and meanings about a particular problem or phenomenon (Ravitch, 2017). Using semistructured interviews, I was able to understand the individual perspectives of administrators who make decisions concerning the use of interpreting policies, interventions, and disciplinary actions for exclusionary discipline. The participants could share their emotions, experiences, best practices, and opinions on a specific phenomenon that aligns with best practices used for a qualitative study where interviews were the source of data collection (Ravitch, 2017). The interviews allowed

each participant to provide responses to the questions about their personal experiences with finding strategies and interventions to reduce behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline. The participants were all from elementary schools where the focus was on students in prekindergarten through second grade.

The responses from the interviews correlated to the research question, and the participants were able to provide their perspectives and experiences related to the prevention of exclusionary discipline. The four major themes from this study were (a) behaviors that warrant exclusionary discipline, (b) effectiveness of exclusionary discipline, (c) intervention alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and (d) solutions to preventing severe behaviors.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The data collected were carefully evaluated through two cycles of coding, and four themes emerged: (a) consistency regarding behaviors that warrant exclusionary discipline, (b) exclusionary discipline as an effective disciplinary tool, (c) intervention alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and (d) solutions to preventing severe behaviors. Before SB 651, suspensions for behaviors were a common practice for prekindergarten through second-grade students. After a guidance letter from the Department of Justice and Department of Education, guidelines for suspensions included reform and a shift from zero tolerance (Camacho, 2019). Since the implementation of Maryland SB 651, suspensions, including in-school suspensions and expulsions, have decreased (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).



Data analysis suggests participants were unanimous in the perspective that exclusionary discipline does not benefit prekindergarten through second-grade students. According to Jacobsen et al. (2018), harsh or excessive punishment such as suspension or expulsion can promote negative emotions. These emotions can be amplified if they cause a student to fall behind academically. Participants also stated that suspensions did not change behaviors. Researchers have found that school suspensions predicted higher rates of misbehavior, antisocial behavior, and additional suspensions (Ritter, 2018). The results from this research will validate and enhance the findings from the professional literature as reviewed in Chapter 2.

### **Exclusionary Discipline**

One of the themes revealed after examining the data for the interview questions for the research was identifying behaviors that warrant exclusionary discipline. The participants identified a variety of disciplinary infractions that result in exclusionary discipline measures such as suspensions. Jacobsen et al. (2019) stated that acts of physical aggression, such as fighting or vandalism, and exclusionary discipline are very stressful events that may be associated with aggressive behaviors in elementary school. In this study, participants commented that suspensions were often for students who exhibited aggressive behaviors in which other students were attacked. P6 stated, “Behaviors that would have threatened the safety of classmates of result in suspensions.” P3 mentioned, “And I mean attack resulting in injury or certainly had the potential to result in injury, and it would have been repeated, too, it wouldn’t have just been like one incident.” These participants’ statements verify Jacobsen et al.’s (2019) finding that

exclusionary discipline in elementary school is associated with increased aggressive behaviors. The comments and data analyzed from the participants confirmed findings from previous researchers that the use of exclusionary discipline for violent offenses such as a physical attack did not improve student behavior but often increased behavior, and therefore, the cycle of suspension of a student continued.

### **Alternatives and Interventions to Exclusionary Discipline**

The use of interventions and other strategies emerged as a theme to prevent severe behaviors that could result in exclusionary discipline. The state of Maryland passed legislation to use schoolwide prevention strategies such as PBIS and restorative justice practices (Camacho & Krezmein, 2019). Participants implemented interventions such as PBIS, Class Dojo, and programs such as the Second Step and restorative justice. Their implementation is directly related to discipline reform, which includes the use of positive school-based programs. No Child Left Behind regulations in 2001 and Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 contain requirements for states and school districts to reduce the overuse of exclusionary discipline. PBIS was designed to prevent school-based problems by reinforcing positive behavioral expectations (Gage et al., 2018). Participants commented that they use the tiered system but often modify the program to reduce paperwork or resemble their school's specific needs.

In addition to PBIS programs, only one participant indicated the use of restorative justice. The participants' responses were structured on restoring relationships between the student displaying behaviors and their school community and family by having conversations. According to Hasim et al. (2018), rather than punishing students for

negative behavior, restorative justice practitioners attempt to engage students in conflict resolution instead of removing students from the school or class. Second Step was only mentioned by two participants even though it is now a district-wide initiative for students in prekindergarten through first grade. Moy and Hazen's (2018) review of the Second Step program describe it as a tiered framework for preventing disruptive or antisocial behaviors in schools with the support of teachers and school mental health professionals to build self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management and to develop a relationship and responsible decision making. P7 remarked about the use of Second Step:

It's so important, and I feel like that connects directly to the social–emotional.

Because in my mind, they are like one and the same in many ways because all the social–emotional stuff in the community, and that's the whole point is to build the social–emotional learning.

As behaviors can often be linked to a student's social–emotional behavior, with the expansion of the Second Step program to additional grade levels, the desired outcome is for more administrators to implement this program in their building. The information provided in the literature confirms the use of interventions as a strategy to prevent behaviors as more administrators are using exclusionary discipline less frequently.

### **Solutions to Preventing Severe Behaviors**

Finding solutions to prevent severe behaviors was a common theme among participants. Administrators are analyzing data to identify root causes but finding solutions to avoid or decrease behaviors often involve several components, such as

classroom management, instruction, and building school culture through trusting relationships and parent involvement.

### **Classroom Management and Instruction**

Previous research and literature have identified teachers as one of the most crucial influencers of success for students academically and behaviorally. The classrooms that have established clear stated expectations, consistent routines, efficient time management, and teacher enthusiasm are often connected to student academic and behavioral success (Gage et al., 2018). The analysis of the data validated that instruction and classroom management were critical components of preventing behaviors. Participant P1 commented,

You know you have one teacher that no matter what kind of kid you put in their room, they're never going to really act up as much as they would every other year. So, what is it? It's just that the teacher can pick up on those triggers and make the student become successful in their class and not in previous classes.

Green et al. (2017) stated that when schools develop positive climates, faculty and administration have paradigm changes in their knowledge and perspectives regarding how to reach their goals without the use of exclusionary discipline procedures.

When teachers have not supported classroom environments for students who struggle with behaviors, they often promote a classroom of inappropriate behaviors. Seven out of 12 participants identified classroom management as a trigger to behaviors in the classroom when rules and routines are not established. According to P3, "When teachers start the beginning of the year off letting the students be a part of the policy,

procedures, and along with the consequences, students will have ownership.” Often teachers and administrators use exclusionary discipline to send a message to other students about the consequences of misbehavior (Green et al., 2017; Nese et al., 2020).

A common misconception about exclusionary discipline is that removing a student from the classroom will improve other students’ classroom environment. According to Nese et al. (2020), schools with high rates of exclusionary discipline have lower academic quality compared to other schools with lower rates. The teaching of social skills is critical to interventions and to reduce behavior problems. Previous research has focused on including behavioral skill-building programs and mentoring where an adult provides direct instruction into modeling appropriate behavior. Training staff on classroom behavior management strategies and a process of graduated disciplines such as reteaching and redirection, restitution, counseling, parent contract, and behavioral contracts will assist classroom management (Nese et al., 2020). Providing students with feedback improves student outcomes, increases student engagement, and decreases disruptive behaviors (Gage et al., 2015). The data derived from the research reinforces solutions to preventing behaviors must include positive classroom environments that have established routines and procedures.

### **Parent Involvement**

Participants of the study also suggested that parental support is essential to changing behaviors. Jacobsen et al. (2019) indicated that teacher perceptions of students’ families often influence decisions about students. In earlier studies, researchers have reported that parents who are less involved in their child’s education are usually younger,

single parents, have fewer economic resources, and may have been involved in deviant behaviors. Participants' perspectives included how the use of exclusionary discipline was often to get the attention of the parent. For example, P9 stated, "It's the parents that are receiving the consequences and having to take off work."

Participants' comments also include that sending a student home does not change the behavior. P3 stated, "So if I am misbehaving, I get to go home and play my video game. The student is making the connection that if they misbehave, they are going to send me home, and then I get to play my video game." P3 mentioned, "We are rewarding the behavior because now we're sending you home where you don't have restrictions, and no restrictions are taking place." Eight of the twelve participants mentioned the training of parents as a solution to preventing behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline. P6 mentioned,

I think educating families to understand school expectations and expectations their child would need to follow for at least 13 years. Parents should also know that a child learns a set of behaviors at home and is different from the behaviors at school. Parents can help support those behaviors to enable their children to stay actively engaged in learning.

Developing more home-school communication to increase the development of a shared partnership between families and schools can support students' academic progress in addition to their social-emotional and behavioral growth (Sutherland et al., 2019). The findings from previous studies and this current study authenticate that finding preventive

solutions to behavior must include buy-in from teachers, administrators, and parents working in collaboration.

### **Traditional Versus Innovative Discipline Practices**

The instrumentation of discipline practices, interventions, and strategies is often dependent on the administrator's discipline practices. Hannigan and Hannigan (2019) classify discipline practices into two categories: Traditional or Innovative. The findings extend the professional literature base because participants' responses to the interview questions coincided with supporting exclusionary discipline practices, aligning with traditional approaches. Data collected from participants showed that other methods such as school-wide positive behavior interventions, calming down strategies, behavior charts, or mentors were more innovative. Table 6 provides statements from participants which were aligned with either traditional beliefs or innovative beliefs.

**Table 5***Traditional Versus Innovative Beliefs*

Traditional beliefs	Innovative beliefs
P1 The parents of the victim are going to want to know what we are doing. We're trying to keep them away from each other, yet the kids continue to keep being very aggressive by hitting, kicking, biting other students many times.	P3 All you do is put a band-aid on a place where you need stitches because the connection is not there for younger kids.
P6 For a bona fide weapon and illegal substance, the suspension is warranted.	P1 Because I always find it hard to suspend a little kid because I know they're really struggling.
P6 Destruction of school property despite efforts to redirect the child.	P8 Just like we teach lots of things in school, reading, math, writing, physical education, we also know students might not come to school prepared.
P8 Especially the ones who we try many things for, and we still not having an impact. It seems to need the more severe consequences when it comes to discipline.	P9 And I think there are some principals that were quick to run to suspensions as an option versus my personal belief is that it is a last resort.
P5 Then some students need to truly be suspended, I mean, families need to reach out to medical professionals at times. Sometimes it is apparent if a student is suspended, that is the opportunity to take the day versus them being in school the next day and the pattern or cycle continues.	P9 I do agree that there are times people need a break from each other, but that's to me the role of suspension. We need to teach kids ahead of time what they can and cannot do.

The perspectives shared by participants about exclusionary disciplines demonstrates that even after the implementation of Senate Bill 651, administrators still believe there are reasons for the use of suspensions. The data also shows that there are administrators who have used progressive discipline measures such as interventions or additional strategies tend to work towards a solution for the behaviors. Previous research has found that schools who use more traditional types of discipline will repeat the cycle



of violence and destructive behaviors and for students to be excluded for instruction (Hannigan and Hannigan, 2018). Administrators shared the use of In-School-Intervention as an alternative to suspension; however, students are still being excluded from the classroom and missing valuable instruction even when work is being provided. The continued use of In-School-Intervention complies with Senate Bill 651/House Bill 425. The current bills ban the use of suspension and expulsion of pre-kindergarten through second grade students, except where the student would create an imminent risk of serious harm as determined by an administrator in consultation with a mental health professional consultation with a mental health professional, consultation with a mental health professional. consultation with a mental health professional, or consultation with a mental health professional. (MSDE, 2017). Participants commented that instead of using exclusionary discipline, they are using positive behavior interventions, behavioral plans, and referrals to student support or the individualized education program, but often behaviors are repeated after these measures and an alternative program or school is warranted. The results from this study validated previous research and literature of how administrators' perspective about discipline determines their approach to how they allocate disciplinary consequences and if they consequences will be effective at changing the behavior.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study included a limited to a small sample size of 12 administrators (principals, assistant principals, and former assistant principals) who currently or were previously employed at one of the rural, northeastern school district in

Maryland. Due to the limited sample size, the perspectives from the participants may not be reflective of the greater size of the administration for this school districts or for other districts in Maryland and other states. Furthermore, this study was limited to only administrators and did not consider teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologist, students, or parents' perspectives or experiences. Thus, the relative factors that contribute to the perspectives of interventions and strategies targeted to prevent severe behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline practices in grades pre-kindergarten through second grade were limited to principals' perspectives and assistant principals. The limitations presented are potential perspectives for future study, development, and generalizability.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The limitation of this study warrants the need for further research, such as involving other educators or staff involved in the prevention of behaviors and the practice of exclusionary discipline. Support staff such as school counselors, school-based psychologists, and behavior specialists often assist in identifying the root causes of behaviors based on their area of expertise. They are essential to identifying interventions or strategies. Support staff can also provide resources to administration, students, and families to help with mental health concerns or behaviors, develop behavior incentives, identify mentors, or create referrals to outside agencies. Educators, such as classroom teachers, were not included in this study, and their perspectives could aid in how interventions and strategies are being managed in the classroom. Teachers could also

provide insight into if they are seeing results or changes in a student who have previously exhibited behaviors that may have warranted the use of removal from the classroom or suspensions. Researching the parents' perspective about school discipline and how interventions impact their child. Additionally, investigating how student gender plays in the use of exclusionary discipline with further investigate administrators' perspectives when assigning disciplinary consequences.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study centered around elementary schools and school districts identifying strategies and interventions that were researched based on decreasing behaviors and exclusionary discipline. Analyzing behavior referrals for student patterns can identify interventions, methods, and professional development for staff and administrators. Including school psychologists and mental health partners can provide students with strategies to manage aggressive behaviors and physical attacks on others. At the district level, they invested funding for full-time school psychologists to all elementary schools to assist with implementing programs such as Second Step, Zones of Regulation, and complete Functional Behavior Assessments and Behavior Intervention Plans. The school-based psychologist will work with administrators to identify the effective use of positive reinforcement interventions.

In addition to full-time school-psychologist, funding should support the use of training for administrators, teachers, staff, and parents to prevent behaviors. Administrators who are inclined to use alternative disciplines should provide adequate and ongoing training, time, and space for courageous conversations about school

discipline (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2018; Gagnon et al., 2018). Training for teachers should include responding to inappropriate behaviors by focusing on expected behaviors to support a classroom where the climate remains positive (Green et al., 2017). In addition to changing the learning environment, training on teaching behavioral expectations should also be provided, such as during the implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) programs, throughout the school year, and data should be reviewed quarterly (Horner et al., 2018; Nese et al., 2020). Training should also include effectively using differential reinforcement as a response to behavior that results in repetitive behaviors. For some students, withholding reinforcements for inappropriate or problem behavior and providing the reinforcement for the expected behavior (Green et al., 2017). Reinforcements can include stickers, small treats, class privileges, or positive nonverbal acknowledgment. In addition to school-based training, parental support should be required beginning in pre-kindergarten. Parent engagement is essential to the prevention of behaviors and to build relationships with families and students. Parent training can consist of learning at home, participating in communications with the school, volunteering for school events, and various training connected to child development.

My final suggestion would be to develop community-based programs such as therapists, health care practitioners, and psychiatrists to collaborate with administrators, teachers, staff, and parents to provide and develop support plans for students exhibiting intense behaviors. The partnerships could be housed within the school or providers could come to the school to deliver therapy, medicating management, health and wellness, and

recommendations to outside agencies if needed. Establishing these partnerships would be beneficial to providing immediate treatment for students, building relationships with parents and the community. As an administrator, I often hear from parents that it is hard to find providers who accept their insurance, are local and are relatable to students. My goal is to educate students and ensure that all their needs are being met, including mental and social well-being.

### **Implications**

The data gained from this study may help inform and provide guidance to administrators and school district officials on strategies to prevent behaviors and identify interventions and strategies to eliminate exclusionary discipline. The results from the administrators' perspectives about behaviors can contribute to the underuse of interventions structured to reduce behaviors by focusing on positive behaviors instead of removing students from the classroom or school. Understanding factors that cause primary students to demonstrate physical attacks, aggressive behaviors, and classroom disruption will help develop strategies to prevent these types of behaviors and address root causes associated with mental health, social-emotional or lack of parental involvement. Future research could also include long-term studies about if policies are working to change administrators' perspectives or if they are reducing behaviors in primary grades. The results from this study supported how changes in discipline policies, interventions, and progressive discipline can reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.

## Conclusion

Twelve administrators in a rural, northeastern school district in Maryland were interviewed to explore their perspectives about prevention of behaviors and the effectiveness of interventions and strategies to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline. The data indicated that behaviors that warrant exclusionary discipline, the effectiveness of exclusionary discipline, alternatives, and interventions, and finding solutions to preventing severe behaviors were contributing to administrators' perspectives and how they prevented behaviors and the use of exclusionary discipline. Of the 12 administrators interviewed, five of the participants' perspectives aligned to innovative discipline beliefs and used other methods than suspension. Most administrators have interventions in place, such as PBIS but are not following the program with fidelity. Training for administrators should include updating current practices for interventions and strategies such as Restorative Justice and the Second Step Program.

This research shows that even though the data reflects a decline in pre-kindergarten through second-grade students being suspended, administrators are still using exclusionary discipline such as In-School-Intervention to remove students from the classroom. When students are released from school, students are more prone to lower academic achievement, increased behaviors, social-emotional needs, dropping out from high school, or involvement with the criminal justice system.

Based on the results of this study and previous research, social change can be implemented by first ensuring that policies are equitable to all students regardless of age, race, ethnicity, social-economic background, and ability level. Second, to establish

interventions that are effective at reducing behaviors monitored at the school and county level to ensure accountability. Finally, by providing funding and human resources to support the school with providing services to school and parents.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your current position?
2. How many years have you been in this position?
3. In what way or ways have you been involved in the exclusionary discipline referral or decision-making process for students' prekindergarten through second grade?
4. What are your beliefs about discipline and preventive strategies?
5. What were the behavioral incidents that resulted in the suspensions or expulsions for the students you were involved in investigating?
6. What is your understanding of Maryland's Senate Bill 651?
7. Before Senate Bill 651, what kind of discipline did you use with PK-2 students? Why? How effective was that do you believe?
8. What are your perspectives concerning factors contributing to the exclusionary discipline practices in grades prekindergarten to second grade?
9. What does your school utilize for interventions or strategies to prevent severe behaviors?
10. Do you think these interventions are preventing severe behaviors?
11. What do you think is the solution to preventing severe behaviors?