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School Discipline and Its Negative Impact on Student Achievement Outcomes: An Evaluation of Discipline Policy

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Samantha L. Hudson

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
2025

Abstract

School Discipline and Its Negative Impact on Student Achievement Outcomes:

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by

Samantha L. Hudson

MSW, Clark Atlanta University, 2007

BSW, Northeastern, Illinois University, 2006

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

Community stakeholders raised issue with the lack of evaluative tools to measure the effectiveness of the implemented school discipline policy in the Metro Atlanta School district. These tools are important to implementing the appropriate interventions to referred students in the district. This professional administrative study evaluated how exclusionary discipline practices influence equity and student outcomes within a Metro Atlanta school district. The guiding research question asked: Is the currently implemented discipline policy effective in promoting equitable student outcomes and reducing exclusionary practices? The concept used for this study is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the study applied the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's six-step program evaluation model. Thematic and deductive content analyses was used to analyze the data. Seventeen participants—including educators, school staff, and community stakeholders—engaged through virtual focus groups and open-ended surveys. Findings showed that exclusionary practices disproportionately affected African American students and those with disabilities, perpetuating inequities in access, engagement, and academic success. Participants cited inconsistent documentation, limited use of evidence-based interventions, and opposition to zero-tolerance policies. Four themes emerged: policy ineffectiveness, racial disparities, stakeholder mistrust, and overreliance on punitive measures. Recommendations include adopting restorative practices, enhancing staff training in cultural competency and bias awareness, and implementing data-driven evaluation protocols. The implications for positive social change of this study are to promote fairness, reduce disparities and improve outcomes for all students.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my beloved son, Curtis Lemarr Kelly Sr., whose life became an unfortunate statistic in the school-to-prison pipeline. I reflect deeply on your educational experiences and the painful toll of school discipline practices, particularly for an African American male. The challenges you faced shaped my understanding of the systemic forces that too often lead to incarceration, and in doing so, contributed to your overall struggles in both school and life.

While this research may not offer direct benefits to your life today, it stands as a tribute to your strength and resilience. It also represents the unwavering love and commitment of our family, who continuously strive to challenge and change the systems that affect young people like you. This work is an embodiment of our journey toward finding solutions—solutions that I hope will lessen the burden for others who face similar injustices. Through this dedication, I honor you and the many young lives like yours, with the hope that future generations may experience a better, more equitable path in education and life.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to God, whose grace and guidance have sustained me throughout this academic journey.

To my children—Curtis, Mykeal, Dantrell, and Danielle—and my grandchildren, thank you for your enduring love, support, and sacrifices. Your encouragement has been a cornerstone of my strength.

A special acknowledgment goes to my daughter Danielle, whose leadership and care at home provided me with the time and space to focus and recover. Your selflessness has been deeply appreciated.

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I appreciate Walden University for awarding the Social Determinants of Health in Distance Education Research Grant. The resources provided through this grant were instrumental in strengthening the study's design, expanding data access, and enhancing its overall impact.

Above all, I remain thankful for the unwavering support of my family. This accomplishment reflects the collective strength and support of those who stood beside me.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education is currently unable to determine the effectiveness of its implemented discipline policy due to a lack of sufficient data. This issue has prompted widespread concern among community leaders, teacher unions, impacted students, and parental stakeholders. These groups have raised serious questions about the fairness and equity of disciplinary practices, particularly regarding their impact on student achievement.

The Board of Education develops and approves district policies that govern the Metro Atlanta Public School system. In addition to supporting the fiscal budget, hiring, and firing the district Superintendent. The Board comprises nine members, representing six geographical districts and three "at-large" districts. Each Board Member is elected per district to represent the schools in each district for a four-year term. The Superintendent is responsible for reporting any legal or financial matter that requires Board action or attention to the Board and the day-to-day administration of the school district.

Background of the Client

A Metropolitan Public School system is a Chartered System. This new contract, or "charter," with the state allows more decisions to be made at the school level by principals, educators, parents, and community members, all of whom are closer to students and their school needs. This freedom and flexibility from many state education laws and regulations increase student achievement accountability.

Public Schools' Mission Statement

Through a caring culture of equity, trust, and collaboration, every student will graduate ready for college, career, and life

(https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/60132?utm_s). The school district has had its share of controversy about how the current discipline policy is implemented. Parents and community stakeholders challenge the current practiced discipline as ineffective, believe that it is counterproductive to academic outcomes, and contend it needs revision.

Background of the Problem

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education is without the proper data to determine if the current implemented discipline policy is effective. The Board has received a numerous complaint from stakeholders alleging the current practice of discipline is not executed with fairness and equity. There are many possible factors to this problem, which include poorly trained staff on how to implement discipline, a lack of data that inform how successful the current practice is, and allegations of inequities in how discipline is administered. Authors Chu et al. (2018); Anderson et al. (2019), Gopalan (2019), Bacher-Hicks et al. (2019), and Weisburst (2019) suggested that these issues have been linked to varying negative outcomes for youth, especially concerns directly related to conflicts with resources officers, teachers, and staff responsible for administering discipline. Parents of students who have experienced discipline are concerned that the zero-tolerance rule is one shoe fits all and creates a negative learning environment and unfairly targets students. Teacher unions and community leaders complain that African Americans

students with learning disabilities are more likely to experience similar discipline concerns at increased rates.

Moreover, students with disabilities account for the highest out-of-school suspension rates district-wide compared to general education students. According to Smith et al. (2023), disparities in exclusionary discipline practices are well-documented; however, variation in Black students' disciplinary experiences across different racial and ethnic school compositions remains understudied. While race is noted as a significant concern, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that racial disparities alone are the sole cause for the issues stakeholders believe are contributing to the poorly implemented discipline practice and student achievement outcomes. It is not uncommon for children to exhibit poor behavior patterns; however, this may be problematic for schools in the United States. Teachers may opt to record the infraction more frequently when minor infractions occur to deter more serious behavior from occurring (Amemyia et al., 2020; Steinberg et al., 2018). Stakeholders assert administrators are invested in lowering suspension rates and insist trivial incidents are causing students who do not typically break rules to be caught in the crossfire of the zero-tolerance rule. For example, being in the right place at the wrong time means all in proximity are considered equal contributors, therefore will receive disciplinary infractions the same as those who violated the discipline code. Restorative practices are needed to reduce the rate exclusionary discipline occurs. As a result of the conflicts associated with the current discipline code, stakeholders are concerned about the impact on student morale. Higher suspension rates have a negative influence on student achievement outcomes.

Zero Tolerance Policies in School Discipline: History, Impact, and Alternatives

Zero-tolerance policies in school discipline refer to rules that mandate predetermined, typically severe punitive consequences (such as suspension or expulsion) for specific misbehaviors, regardless of the context or circumstances (Skiba, 2000). These policies gained popularity in the late 20th century as a "get-tough" approach to school safety. However, zero tolerance has become highly controversial due to questions about its effectiveness and fairness. This report provides a historical overview of zero-tolerance discipline in schools and examines current research on its outcomes. It discusses the disproportionate impact of zero tolerance on Black and other minority students, citing scholarly studies and data. Finally, it outlines policy recommendations informed by research, including alternative approaches like restorative justice and positive behavioral interventions, which aim to maintain safe, orderly schools while reducing the negative side effects of exclusionary discipline.

Historical Overview of Zero Tolerance in Schools

The concept of "zero tolerance" emerged during the 1980s and 1990s in response to public fears about drugs and violence. The term originated in the Reagan-era War on Drugs with the federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which introduced mandatory minimum penalties and shifted a rehabilitative criminal justice system toward a punitive one (Fabelo et al., 2011). In the school context, the turning point was the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, a federal law signed by President Bill Clinton amid concerns about youth violence (Skelton, 2024). This Act required each state to enact a law mandating at least a one-year expulsion for any student who brought a firearm to school, with referral

of these incidents to the criminal or juvenile justice system (Skelton, 2024). While initially focused on serious offenses (like weapons or drugs on campus) to ensure safety, many states and districts soon expanded zero-tolerance policies to cover minor infractions. For example, under the zero-tolerance philosophy, students have been expelled for relatively minor misbehavior—such as talking back to a teacher or violating dress codes—offenses far less serious than the violent acts the policies were originally intended to prevent (Fabelo et al., 2011). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, zero tolerance had become widespread, assigning automatic punishments for a broad range of misbehaviors without regard to context or student intent (Skiba, 2000). This evolution reflected a prevailing belief at the time that strict, uncompromising discipline would deter misbehavior and improve school safety.

Zero-tolerance laws and policies are characterized by their rigidity. School administrators often have little discretion once a rule is broken— a predetermined consequence must be applied. Over the years, media reports began highlighting extreme applications of these rules, such as young children suspended for bringing a toy knife to school or making a finger gun gesture (Skiba, 2000). These incidents, while sometimes anecdotal, underscored how zero tolerance can “remove common sense from the equation” by treating all infractions the same, regardless of the student’s age or the circumstances (Skiba, 2000). The inflexibility of such policies drew increasing criticism from educators and parents, setting the stage for research into whether zero tolerance was truly benefiting schools.

A growing body of research over the past two decades has found that zero-tolerance policies have not delivered the safer, more orderly school environments they promised. A comprehensive review by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) concluded that zero-tolerance policies “are not associated with improved school safety or academics” and can even lead to harmful effects on students. In other words, removing disruptive students under a zero-tolerance regime has not definitively been shown to deter misbehavior or improve the learning climate. Subsequent studies have echoed these findings. For example, an analysis by the Indiana Education Policy Center found few studies reporting that zero tolerance improves student behavior or school safety and instead raised serious concerns about the consistency and fairness of such discipline practices (Skiba, 2000).

Far from deterring bad behavior, strict exclusionary discipline may worsen student outcomes. Research indicates that frequent suspensions and expulsions contribute to a range of negative consequences for students. Removed students lose instructional time and are more likely to fall behind academically and eventually drop out (Fabelo et al., 2011). Multiple studies have linked suspension to increased risk of grade retention, dropout, and future involvement in the juvenile justice system (Skiba, 2000; Skelton, 2024). This pattern has been described as part of the “school-to-prison pipeline,” wherein harsh school discipline pushes students—often the most vulnerable—out of the education system and onto a path toward incarceration (Skelton, 2024). Notably, a large-scale Texas study tracking secondary students found that a single suspension or expulsion greatly increased the likelihood of a student repeating a grade or dropping out and nearly

doubled the risk of juvenile justice involvement the following year (Skelton, 2024). Such findings cast doubt on zero tolerance as an effective deterrent; instead, they suggest it may accelerate a cycle of disengagement and misbehavior.

Critics also argue that zero tolerance may degrade overall school climate. By emphasizing punishment over guidance, these policies can erode trust between students and educators. One report from Chicago – drawing on student narratives – demonstrated that zero tolerance “does not lead to safer schools or improved academic outcomes and damages student-teacher relations” (Skiba, 2000). The removal of students for minor offenses can create an atmosphere of fear or resentment, and remaining students may feel less connected to school when they see peers being harshly disciplined for trivial reasons. Furthermore, evidence suggests that exclusionary discipline can increase future misbehavior. Students who are suspended often feel alienated and unsupervised, which may contribute to further behavior problems. As one research summary put it, while often implemented with good intentions, suspensions tend to increase (rather than deter) misbehavior and dropout risks, and they negatively impact the school environment for peers as well (Fabelo et al., 2011). In short, current research largely debunks the effectiveness of zero tolerance, finding little evidence that it produces safer climates but considerable evidence of unintended harms.

Racial Disparities in Discipline

A major criticism of zero-tolerance discipline is its uneven application across student populations, with Black students and other minorities being disciplined at markedly higher rates than their White peers. After the wave of zero-tolerance policies

took effect in the 1990s, studies noted a significant increase in suspensions and expulsions, especially among students of color and students with disabilities (Skelton, 2024). This trend has persisted and is well-documented by national education data.

National Discipline Gaps

Federal civil rights statistics show that Black students are suspended and expelled far out of proportion to their enrollment. One recent analysis reported that Black students are nearly four times more likely than White students to receive an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These racial disparities appear across all grade levels – from elementary school through high school – and are not explained by higher rates of misbehavior by Black children. In fact, research indicates that students of different races commit misbehaviors at similar rates; the disparity in discipline largely reflects differences in how schools respond to and interpret student behavior (Skelton, 2024). In other words, bias (conscious or not) and school policy choices drive much of the discipline gap, resulting in students of color facing harsher consequences for the same infractions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Data on Minority and At-Risk Groups

Numerous studies and reports have quantified this disproportionate impact. For example, a U.S. Department of Education survey for the 2011–12 school year found that Black students were expelled at a rate three times greater than White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). It also showed that Black girls (who often are overlooked in discussions of discipline) were suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race and even higher than most boys (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Similarly, Latino and Native American students, as well as LGBTQ youth, have higher-than-average discipline rates in many districts, though the Black–White gap is usually the largest. Students with disabilities are another group that is over-punished: they are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension compared to non-disabled students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These patterns hold true even when controlling for poverty and other factors, suggesting that systemic biases and differing administrative policies contribute to who gets removed from class.

State and Local Examples

Disparities can be seen at state and local levels as well. In Texas, during the 2022–23 school year, Black students made up less than 13% of the student population but accounted for 26% of all disciplinary actions statewide (Skelton, 2024). This means Black children in Texas were about twice as likely to be subjected to suspension, expulsion, or other punishment as one would expect based on their enrollment share. The same Texas data showed that nearly 81% of disciplinary actions were applied to economically disadvantaged students, even though these students were 63% of the population (Skelton, 2024). Students from low-income families often attend under-resourced schools where zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline are more heavily used, compounding the disadvantage. Moreover, Texas found that Black, low-income, and special education students all were disproportionately represented among those disciplined (Skelton, 2024). These statistics mirror nationwide trends: marginalized student groups are punished more harshly for similar conduct (Skelton, 2024). The cumulative effect is profound – scholars argue that zero tolerance has contributed to an

institutional “criminalization” of minority youth for minor misbehavior, feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Skelton, 2024). This unequal impact raises serious civil rights and equity concerns, prompting calls for schools to reform discipline practices that unintentionally discriminate.

Racial disparities and implicit biases are two main themes studies highlight as reasons why harsher punishment for African American students over their White counterparts occur. Researchers contend Black and multiracial Black children are more likely to experience academic failure, dropout, and psychological distress (Riddle et al., 2019). Students who experience expulsion and suspension are vulnerable to increased criminal involvement, including prison entry. Fowler (2003) emphasized that one of the strongest indicators of potential involvement in the juvenile justice system is a student's history of school disciplinary referrals. Research has increasingly pointed to a connection between school discipline practices and juvenile court involvement, suggesting that this overlap may play a significant role in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. For more than thirty years, data have shown that Black students are disciplined at disproportionately higher rates than their White peers. In fact, research by Ware (2018) revealed that in 29% of U.S. states, over 5% of Black students enrolled were subjected to exclusionary disciplinary actions, compared to only four states where suspension rates reached that level for White students.

According to Fix et al. (2023), Smith et al. (2023), Welsh, R. O. et al. (2023), and Henry, F. A. et al. (2023), African American students are at risk of being punished harsher for less serious infractions and may be subject to racial bias constructed social

systems that unfairly target them, which may account for higher rates of justice system involvement and may experience poor educational experiences compared to non-Black students. In 2016, national data characterized Black youth as comprising 15% of the U.S. child population, while accounting for 35% of juvenile arrests the same year. Although race and criminology might logically appear to have a connection, poverty tends to be the leading bridge that presents the greatest threat to adolescents and youth in lower-socioeconomic communities. African Americans and other minority groups are both similarly impacted (Sentencing Project, 2018). Racism in elementary school discipline can perpetuate distress in today's educational system. The racial demographic of the Metro Atlanta School district combined with historically reported barriers, and discriminatory practices may yield similar deficits as reported in recent studies. Among the impacted population, Kothari et al. (2018) noted that youth in foster care often struggle academically, performing lower on standardized assessments, facing a heightened risk of school failure, and experiencing school discipline more frequently than their non-foster peers. Foster care youth are three times more likely to experience a discipline event. Research suggests the impact of race, and gender differences in school discipline, conclude youth in foster care settings, students of color, apart from their siblings, and in upper-grade levels experience excessive discipline events (Kothari et al., 2018; Levy et al., 2014; Pears et al., 2018).

Community leaders, teacher unions, impacted students and parental stakeholders allege how discipline is implemented within the Metro Atlanta School District is inconsistent and unfair. Research considers the various conceptualizations of discipline

which leaders, staff, and teachers rely on when judging the extent to which the discipline event will occur. Discipline events are inconsistently applied to impose oppressive sanctions on students in an unfair manner. Race, gender, disabled, and zero tolerance rules increase the rate by which these students are impacted. Students who are considered non-offending students are found to be accused while being bystanders (Hannigan, 2018; Irby et al., 2018; Slee, 1995; Wiley, 2020).

Restorative Practice

Implementation of restorative practices such as social emotional learning provide a more nurturing approach, considers emotional wellness, and increases student achievement outcomes (Holvershorn et al., 2018). Research emphasizes that school districts should proactively implement restorative practices to enhance student achievement and minimize exclusionary discipline. These approaches are associated with a more positive school climate, stronger peer and teacher relationships, and increased student engagement and connectedness (Mayer, Nickerson, & Jimerson, 2021).

According to Zakszeski et al. (2021), Gregory (2016), and Morrison et al. (2011), restorative justice approaches in schools have gained popularity given their potential to build safer and more positive school communities, offer alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and promote equity in school outcomes. When considering restorative practices, trauma-informed models are credited as promoting positive behavior that counteracts negative behavior. While race and gender are cited as key issues in how students are disciplined, the literature lacks evidence that supports traditional school discipline and provides students with the resources necessary to experience a positive

school environment, thus prohibiting the ability to perform academically. Furthermore, sources report African Americans and minority students are vulnerable to harsher punishment. Some 35% of schools reported taking at least one such action for specific offenses. Much higher rates of use were reported by high/secondary schools (74%) and middle schools (61%) than for elementary schools (16%; US Department of Education, 2022). Noteworthy, the literature promotes racial disparities as a significant concern, but these claims do not account for the sole purpose of the challenges students face academically. Furthermore, studies contend, when it comes to defining disparities in education, less attention has been paid to disparities in disciplinary outcomes for other racial and ethnic groups for Hispanic students, the results are inconsistent (Gregory 2015; Skiba 2016; Welsh et al., 2018). For more than 3 decades, African Americans have been disproportionately disciplined compared to White students. Studies indicate that 29% of states' suspension rates indicate that over 5% of the total number of enrolled Black students had been subject to exclusionary punishment. By contrast, only four states were found to have suspended as much as 5% of their enrolled White students (Ware, 2018).

African American students are at risk of being punished harsher for less serious infractions and may be subject to racial bias constructed social systems that unfairly target them, which may account for higher rates of justice system involvement and may experience poor educational experiences compared to non-Black students (Brody, G. H. et al., 2023). In 2016, national data characterized Black youth as comprising 15% of the U.S. child population, while accounting for 35% of juvenile arrests the same year. Although race and criminology might logically appear to have a connection, poverty

tends to be the leading bridge that presents the greatest threat to adolescents and youth in lower-socioeconomic communities. African Americans and other minority groups are both similarly impacted (Sentencing Project, 2018).

Progressive Discipline

Progressive discipline practices that lead to out-of-school suspensions increase the risk of poor school experiences, and students diminished interest in attending school, and may become targeted and labeled by school administrators as troublemakers. African Americans represent the highest number of school discipline referrals sent to juvenile court for justice supervision. Discipline referrals are not evenly distributed across student groups. Gender difference in expelled or suspended students tends to occur with males from poor communities, and in special education and lower achievers tend to experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline than females with similar socioeconomic status. (Blake et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2020; Lehmann et al., 2021).

When considering male discipline referrals, Black males rank higher rates of exclusionary discipline than Black females, who compared to white students also experience harsher discipline. Minority youth in Georgia, specifically, African Americans from 2006 to 2014 represented 76% of referrals to juvenile justice courts. African American youth comprise 34% of the population in Georgia, yet account for 60% of juvenile referrals and 62% of all petitioned cases (Gonzales et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2020). Fulton County, Georgia ranks among the top 10 counties in Georgia with disproportionate rates of youth with court referrals. Noteworthy, the white juvenile population decreased significantly in Georgia between 2006 and 2014, while referrals

remained consistently vast for African Americans. Schools are often the haven for students who reside in impoverished communities and serve as the first responders to much of the young lives of adolescents and youth. The discipline policy for the Metro Atlanta Board of Education must be implementing preventative and restorative models that reduce the rate of juvenile court referrals. For these reasons, this study will contribute to solving this problem by evaluating the current discipline protocol to determine its effectiveness and make a recommendation for change.

Problem Statement

The problem is a Metro Atlanta Board of Education is without the proper data to determine if the current implemented discipline policy is effective. Community leaders, teacher unions, impacted students, and parental stakeholders have expressed concern regarding how school discipline is implemented within the Metro Atlanta School District. These concerns center on the perceived inequities within the district's disciplinary practices, particularly the negative consequences for minority students, which may adversely affect their academic achievement. The current problem lies in the school district's lack of sufficient data to assess the effectiveness of its existing discipline policy. As a result, stakeholders, including parents and teacher unions, have criticized the discipline practices as being unfair, particularly targeting minority students.

One significant gap in the current policy is the absence of a clear protocol for evaluating the effectiveness of the disciplinary measures being used. Without such a system, it is difficult to determine whether the policy is achieving its intended outcomes, such as reducing disruptive behavior, promoting a positive learning environment, and

ensuring fairness across the student body. This lack of clarity creates an environment where the disciplinary system is seen as unjust and not necessarily effective in promoting long-term student success.

To address these issues and improve the district's discipline practices, a comprehensive review of the current school discipline policy is needed. This review should not only assess the existing protocols but also explore potential revisions aimed at removing any barriers that may disproportionately impact student achievement. Specifically, the district should consider alternatives to traditional punitive measures, such as implementing restorative practices that emphasize reconciliation and community-building over punishment. Such an approach may help to lower suspension rates and reduce behavioral referrals by focusing on addressing the root causes of student misbehavior rather than simply punishing it.

By examining and revising the current discipline practices, the district has an opportunity to make the disciplinary process more equitable, ensuring that all students, particularly those from minority backgrounds, are treated fairly. Furthermore, an improved system could potentially enhance student achievement by reducing the negative consequences of suspension, which has been linked to lower academic performance and increased dropout rates. If the current disciplinary practices are allowed to continue without revision, the district may face further negative consequences, including lower graduation rates, poor life experiences, disproportionate involvement with the criminal justice system, and lower college entry rates.

Finally, the Metro Atlanta School District must take proactive steps to assess and revise its discipline policies to ensure that they promote a positive learning environment for all students, regardless of their background. The implementation of restorative practices and the careful consideration of data-driven solutions will be crucial in improving student outcomes and addressing the concerns of stakeholders within the community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative professional administrative study (PAS) is to evaluate the effectiveness of the current discipline policy. The study utilizes focus group interviews with parents of affected students, community advocates, school staff responsible for processing or implementing discipline, and community members concerned about school discipline.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and experiences of those directly impacted by school discipline policies, I adopted a qualitative research design. This approach is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena and capturing the nuanced voices of students, educators, and administrators (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through methods such as interviews and thematic analysis, qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to uncover patterns of meaning and interpret how discipline practices are experienced in educational settings. The findings derived from this approach guide the development of recommendations to reform disciplinary strategies, enhance student outcomes, and support the integration of restorative

frameworks into school policies (Dodson, 2014; Hall, 2019; McWilliams, 2010; Poor, 2021).

Research Question

This qualitative PAS was designed to answer the research question, “Is a Metro Atlanta Board of Education’s currently implemented discipline policy effective in promoting equitable student outcomes and reducing exclusionary practices?”

Nature of The Study

To address the research question, this qualitative study employs an exploratory approach (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016). The study relies on internal secondary data analysis of current discipline data, teacher surveys, focus group interviews with stakeholders, open-ended survey responses, and input from administrators and staff responsible for administering or processing discipline. This approach examines how the discipline policy is implemented district-wide, assesses whether the data reflects inequities in the process, and determines the effectiveness of the currently implemented discipline policy (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Laureate Education, 2017b, 2017e).

This study employs a participatory method to ensure unbiased reporting, emphasizing participants’ first-hand knowledge of the issue. Additionally, it conducts an exhaustive literature review, incorporating journal articles and case studies on program evaluation. While research highlights racial disparities in discipline rates between Black and White students nationally, limited knowledge exists regarding racial bias as a primary contributing factor.

Significance of the Study

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education lacks proper data to determine the effectiveness of its current discipline policy. As a result, this qualitative PAS uses the program evaluation model to evaluate complaints from stakeholders who attest that the practices are ineffective. Existing literature explains that disparities in race and gender are significant barriers to student achievement. These disparities derive from secondary data source reporting, such as state agencies, federal agencies, and local databases. Opposing views affirm that race alone isn't the single cause; other factors contribute to the longstanding problem. For this reason, this study aims to review the established discipline policy and determine whether the employed practices are up to par. Moreover, this study offers positive insight to support policy revision, organizational change, improved practices, and positive student achievement outcomes, as well as help improve the school climate for the Atlanta Board of Education.

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education lacks proper data to determine the effectiveness of its current discipline policy. As a result, this qualitative PAS uses the program evaluation model to evaluate complaints from stakeholders who attest that the practices are ineffective. Existing literature explains that disparities in race and gender are significant barriers to student achievement. These disparities derive from secondary data source reporting, such as state agencies, federal agencies, and local databases. Opposing views affirm that race alone isn't the single cause; other factors contribute to the longstanding problem. For this reason, this study aims to review the established discipline policy and determine whether the employed practices are up to par. Moreover,

this study offers positive insight to support policy revision, organizational change, improved practices, and positive student achievement outcomes, as well as help improve the school climate for the Atlanta Board of Education.

A Systematic Process of Evaluation

Evaluation is the systematic assessment of the operation and or outcome of a program that seeks to answer a question or set of questions (Barnet et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2012; DiNardo et al., 2011; Milanesi, 2011). The Centers for Disease Control (1999) outlines a six-step process that begins with engaging stakeholders; providing the program description; being focused on the evaluation design; gathering credible evidence; justifying conclusions and guaranteeing the use and contributed knowledge provided. Program evaluation overall has the unique ability to foster organizational change, is amenable to doctoral research, and supports the qualitative approach by answering how much and to what extent. The practice of program evaluation has an extensive yet varying history that highlights the use of many other disciplines, which makes its practice trustworthy. Each discipline has its process for evaluating the success of its program. Program evaluation is often mistakenly viewed as a recent phenomenon. People date its beginning from the late 1960s with the infusion by the federal government of large sums of money into a wide range of human service programs, including education (Madius et al., 1983). As an applied research paradigm that is amenable to a variety of applications that is amenable to a variety of applications, therefore will serve as the most efficient resource to investigate the effectiveness of a Metro Atlanta Board of Education's discipline policy (Alkin, 2004).

The evaluation model has regard for both internal and external viewpoints. Internal compared to external may have more privilege of making immediate adjustments to ensure the program outcomes aren't negated due to inefficacies. External evaluators are more likely to be more objective in their analysis of the program model. Both approaches contribute to providing timely and accurate and focused information that will affect social change through effective and efficient programs, practices, policies, and interventions. Furthermore, this study seeks to provide an extensive analysis of the discipline policy to determine its current functionality and make recommendations for improvement.

Summary

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education is without proper data to determine the effectiveness of its discipline practices. Parents, teacher unions, and stakeholders allege the policy is implemented unfairly and negatively impacts the school climate and student achievement. Considering these concerns, this study will use the program evaluation model to assess the current implemented discipline policy employed by conducting focus group interviews to gather first-hand knowledge about the problem from stakeholders.

In Section 1, I provided discussions on the context of the client organization, the history of the problem, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, the nature of the administrative study, significance, significance to practice, and significance to social change. Section 2 will highlight the conceptual framework, relevance to public organizations, organization background and context, and role of the researcher.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

Introduction

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education lacks the necessary data to assess the effectiveness of its current discipline policy. Consequently, this study explores the strategies and practices currently in use and identifies methods to improve the administration of school discipline. To address this issue, this Administrative Professional Study (PAS) employs a program evaluation/outcome effectiveness approach to determine strengths, identify areas for improvement, and provide recommendations for change. This study incorporates the concerns, opinions, and suggestions of stakeholders to minimize biased reporting. Additionally, Section 2 discusses the conceptual framework, program theory, key concepts, relevance to the organization, organizational background and context, and the role of the researcher.

Conceptual Framework (Concepts, Models, and Theories)

This study is guided by a dual framework that integrates the constructivist paradigm with a program evaluation model to assess the effectiveness and equity of school discipline practices. The constructivist paradigm serves as the study's foundational worldview, emphasizing that individuals construct meaning through their experiences, interactions, and environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach aligns with qualitative inquiry by centering the voices and lived experiences of participants. In the context of this study, constructivism supports an in-depth exploration of how educators, administrators, and other stakeholders interpret and experience the implementation and outcomes of school discipline policies. Because the

goal is to understand stakeholder perspectives and how these perspectives shape the perceived effectiveness of disciplinary practices, the constructivist lens is appropriate for guiding both data collection and interpretation.

Complementing this paradigm, the study employs a program evaluation framework, which provides a structured approach to assess whether the school district's discipline policy is meeting its intended goals. Specifically, the evaluation is based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (2011) six-step model: (1) engaging stakeholders, (2) describing the program, (3) focusing the evaluation design, (4) gathering credible evidence, (5) justifying conclusions, and (6) sharing lessons learned. These steps ensure that the evaluation is systematic, participatory, and oriented toward improvement (CDC, 2011; Patton, 2008). Together, the constructivist paradigm and program evaluation framework allow for a rich understanding of both the subjective experiences of those impacted by the policy and the objective processes used to assess its effectiveness. This combined framework ensures that stakeholder perspectives are not only captured but also used to inform actionable recommendations for improving discipline practices within the district.

Relevance of Program Evaluation

Research conducted by Sørli (2021, 2015, 2011) underscores the role of outcome effectiveness in shaping teacher outcomes, fostering positive student-teacher relationships, and preventing behavioral issues. Program evaluation offers a systematic approach that engages stakeholders, facilitates collaboration, and provides logical explanations for program effectiveness or shortcomings. In education, program

evaluation is a critical tool for enhancing school climate, curriculum, and educational processes.

The CDC (2011) identifies five types of program evaluation: formative evaluation, process implementation/evaluation, outcome effectiveness/evaluation, impact evaluation, and process evaluation. The use of evaluation in public education is widely recognized for improving literacy rates, graduation rates, school discipline policies, and student outcomes (Ariana et al., 2019; Lian, 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Tabroni et al., 2022; Wandasari, 2019).

Gottfredson (2020) highlighted program evaluation's role in determining the impact of school resource officers (SROs) on school safety. The findings suggest that an increase in SROs led to unintended consequences, such as heightened weapons- and drug-related offenses. The study emphasizes the importance of evaluating program outcomes to inform policy decisions. Program evaluation not only identifies strengths and weaknesses but also uncovers unforeseen factors that may hinder progress.

Impact of Program Evaluation on Policy Development

Program evaluation directly influences policy changes that shape organizational outcomes. If policies fail to function as intended, evaluations can highlight necessary modifications. Policy evaluation fosters social responsibility, continuous learning, and increased public sector efficiency through informed decision-making.

Existing research (Finkelhor et al., 2021; Fraguas et al., 2021; Gaffney et al., 2021; Nasaescu et al., 2020; Gundumogula, 2020) validates the use of program evaluation in shaping policies related to school food management, bullying prevention,

school improvement, and program effectiveness. Policy impact evaluation assesses changes in key indicators since the implementation of a policy and determines the extent to which these changes are attributable to the policy (CDC, n.d.). The systematic approach to policy evaluation includes problem identification, policy analysis, strategy and policy development, policy enactment, and policy implementation.

This PAS focuses on evaluating how the discipline policy is implemented to determine its effectiveness, quality, and overall impact. Identifying operational challenges is essential for assessing the effectiveness of the existing policy. A well-executed evaluation is honest, inclusive, and replicable. Furthermore, theoretical considerations must align with the evaluation's intended use to ensure contextual appropriateness (Csurka et al., 2013; Kimber et al., 2000; Pawson, 2003; Gundumogula, 2020).

Distinction Between Policy and Program Evaluation

Policy evaluation and program evaluation serve distinct functions. Policy analysis improves the implications of a policy-adopted program, whereas policy evaluation assesses an established policy that is either fixed or subject to change. Performance-based policy evaluation ensures administrative accountability by examining procedural adherence (Grisom et al., 2011; Johnson, 2021). Through procedural analysis, researchers determine whether a program is being implemented as intended.

Given these considerations, this PAS follows a structured plan for conducting program evaluation. A well-designed evaluation framework yields more effective

outcomes for stakeholders, ensuring a systematic approach to measuring program success.

Framework for Effective Program Evaluation

According to Harris (2016), Milstein et al. (2000), and the CDC (2000), six key steps guide a quality program evaluation:

1. Engage stakeholders
2. Describe the program
3. Focus the evaluation
4. Gather credible evidence
5. Justify conclusions
6. Ensure use and share lessons learned

Additionally, feasibility, utility, propriety, and accuracy serve as key standards for effective evaluation (Milstein et al., 2000).

Engaging stakeholders is a critical strategy for fostering collaboration and obtaining direct insights into problems and potential solutions. Research highlights the significance of stakeholder input in decision-making processes (Hayes et al., 2022; Kujala et al., 2022; Nartey et al., 2021; Sachs et al., 2021). Stakeholder engagement enhances equity, facilitates local decision-making, and promotes social learning. However, research suggests that stakeholder engagement varies across disciplines and is not a one-size-fits-all approach (Berado et al., 2018; Long et al., 2019).

A program description clearly identifies the program's name, mission, vision, purpose, and objectives. Before engaging in evaluation, stakeholders must understand

how the program operates and its personal impact. A clear program description enables evaluators to determine whether stakeholder perceptions align with the program's actual function.

A focused evaluation approach ensures that assessments address specific questions and lead to actionable conclusions. Literature supports the idea that credible evidence serves as the foundation of an effective evaluation process (CDC, 2011; Kettner et al., 2015; McDavid et al., 2018; Milstein et al., 2000; Punch, 2014). Data analysis must be linked to evidence to justify findings and support program improvements (Milstein et al., 2000; Patton, 2018).

Ensuring feasibility, utility, accuracy, and propriety in program evaluations allows for balanced, ethical assessments that align with organizational goals (Barsch et al., 2011; Cheng, 2008; Creswell, 2017; Lio et al., 2018; Merten et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2020; Valencia et al., 2020). A well-planned evaluation offers a structured approach for improving school discipline policies, benefiting both students and educational institutions.

Relevance of The Organization

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education has existed since 1872 and is one of the seven educational systems established due to the 1866 Freedmen's Bureau federal public policy aimed at educating Black individuals. The school board exercises control and management over the Metro Atlanta Public School system and is responsible for overseeing the Atlanta Independent School System. This governmental entity operates

separately from the City of Atlanta and the State of Georgia (Atlanta Board of Education, 2022).

Located in the downtown metropolitan central business district of Fulton County—the largest county in Georgia—the district serves over 51,000 students across 87 schools, with a 90% minority population. Demographic data indicate that 53.2% of the student population is economically disadvantaged and belongs to a minority group (Atlanta Public Schools Performance and Information Technology, 2023). The school board consists of nine elected members, each representing a specific local, state, or federal congressional district and serving a four-year term. According to the school charter, board members are responsible for supporting the Metropolitan Atlanta Independent School District in achieving its strategic objectives through a systematic, disciplined approach that evaluates and improves the effectiveness of risk management, control, and governance processes (Atlanta Board of Education, 2022).

Stakeholder complaints question the school district's ability to assess discipline practices effectively due to the absence of a reliable method for evaluating staff performance in administering discipline. As a result, concerns regarding the district's credibility, equity, and fairness in managing student behavior persist. Student achievement gaps correlate with these issues, further exacerbating educational disparities. Conducting a comprehensive program evaluation strengthens service quality and enhances student achievement outcomes (Csurka et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2020; Hurt-Avila et al., 2021; Isic, 2020; Kearney, 2021; Kimber et al., 2000; Linfield et al., 2019; Pawson, 2003; Wandasari et al., 2019).

National discipline trends indicate that minority youth are more likely to face punitive actions, experience negative school environments, and become vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline, affecting their ability to lead productive adult lives (Hayes et al., 2022; Lossen et al., 2020; Shiff, 2013; Wadha, 2015). A thorough review of discipline practices within a Metro Atlanta school system informs board governance responsibilities to ensure fairness and quality assurance. Ethical research methodologies, including focus group interviews, open-ended surveys, unbiased participant selection, and systematic data collection and analysis, provide an evidence-based approach to answering the research question: "Is the current discipline policy effective?"

Organization Background and Context

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education has existed since 1872 and is one of the seven educational systems established due to the 1866 Freedmen's Bureau federal public policy aimed at educating Black individuals. The school board exercises control and management over the Metro Atlanta Public School system and is responsible for overseeing the Atlanta Independent School System. This governmental entity operates separately from the City of Atlanta and the State of Georgia (Atlanta Board of Education, 2022).

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Role of the Researcher

The Board of Education governs the local public school system. As a former teacher within the district, I have had the opportunity to provide special education instruction to students with learning and behavioral deficits, as well as diverse learning needs. Additionally, through a summer policy fellowship, I contributed to the research and development of a now-adopted trauma-informed policy. These experiences inform my role as a qualitative researcher, which includes gathering and interpreting data, publishing results, and discussing study limitations (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell, 2014).

To maintain objectivity, this PAS ensures that research findings do not stem from personal biases. Qualitative research provides a platform for individuals to express their lived experiences and must be conducted with integrity, ethical rigor, and impartiality (Bussetto et al., 2020). Given my prior employment within the Atlanta Public Schools District, I must rely solely on evidence obtained from study participants rather than personal perspectives. Acknowledging the potential for bias, I adhere to ethical research guidelines that promote feasibility, accuracy, utility, and propriety (Kwan et al., 2018; Ronni et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2018 Suri, 2020).

My role as a researcher involves formulating questions directly aligned with the study's focus. Conducting research involving vulnerable populations necessitates ethical

safeguards, as in-depth interviews may explore sensitive issues with interpersonal and political implications (Taquetta et al., 2020). To uphold ethical integrity, I adhere to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) standards, which include:

- Obtaining informed consent from research participants
- Minimizing potential risks to participants
- Protecting participant anonymity and confidentiality
- Ensuring participants have the right to withdraw at any time

(Arfin, 2018; Babbie, 2017, Berkovich et al., 2021; Burkholder, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020; Moriña et al., 2021).

Guidelines for conducting non-bias and ethical research and ensure the plan for program evaluation meets ethical standards including feasibility, accuracy, utility, and propriety procedures (Kwan et al., 2018; Ronni et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2018; Suri, 2020). Noteworthy, I will focus on asking questions that are directly related to the focused question and purpose of this study.

From an ethical viewpoint, conducting research with vulnerable populations requires protection for them because data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews with sensible themes, can delve into interpersonally and politically charged matters, which can create potentially conflicting situations (Taquetta et al., 2020). In this regard, I intend to follow the ethical guidelines cited by the RECs of (a) obtain informed consent for research participants; (b) minimize the risk of harm to participants; (c) protect anonymity and confidentiality; and (d) give participants the right to withdraw (Arfin,

2018, Babbie, 2017; Berkovich et al., 2021; Burkholder, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020; Moraña et al, 2021).

Summary

Section 2 focused on the conceptual framework, key study concepts, theoretical framework, relevance to public organizations, organizational background and context, and the role of the researcher. Section 3 will highlight practice-focused questions, evidence collection for this administrative study, data sources, participant selection, procedures, instrumentation, ethical considerations, recruitment plans, consent and privacy protocols, client organization approvals, human subject protections, and Walden IRB approval.

Furthermore, Section 3 will outline analytical and synthesis methods, data integrity measures, and analysis techniques to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. It also details strategies for addressing omitted material and upholding research standards to ensure the integrity of the evaluation process.

Section 3: Data Collection Process and Methods

Introduction

A Metro Atlanta Board of Education does not have proper data to determine the effectiveness of its discipline policy. As such, this study explores how discipline is implemented by evaluating the current discipline policy through a qualitative PAS. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for examining how individuals interpret and respond to disciplinary practices within educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By conducting in-depth interviews, the study gathers detailed, first-hand accounts from stakeholders involved in both the enforcement and the receipt of school discipline. These narratives provide insight into how discipline policies are applied, experienced, and understood across different roles in the school community. Centering participants' perspectives enables a richer understanding of the contextual, cultural, and interpersonal factors that influence disciplinary decision-making (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The Metro Atlanta Board of Education establishes and approves the policies that govern the public school system (Atlanta Board of Education, 2022). One solution to improve this issue is to implement an ongoing evaluative plan and adopt restorative practices. Therefore, Section 3 addresses and discusses data analysis, the instruments used to collect participants' responses, ethical procedures, the participant recruitment plan, consent and privacy protocols, client organization approval, Walden IRB approval, and the analysis and synthesis process—which includes analysis systems, analysis procedures, and data integrity (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability)—followed by a summary.

Practice-Focused Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of disciplinary practices on student academic outcomes within a Metro Atlanta school district. Is the currently implemented discipline policy effective in promoting equitable student outcomes and reducing exclusionary practices is the practice focused question this study seeks to answer. Although efforts have been made to reduce exclusionary practices, stakeholders continue to raise concerns regarding the perceived inequities and the overall impact of disciplinary actions on students of color and students with disabilities. The district lacks sufficient data to assess the effectiveness of its current discipline policy, prompting questions about whether the policy supports academic success and equitable outcomes.

Stakeholders, including parents, educators, and union representatives, have voiced concerns that current discipline protocols are inconsistently applied and fail to address root causes of behavioral issues. There is also a growing perception that discipline decisions disproportionately target certain student groups, resulting in adverse academic and social consequences. What remains unclear is whether the district's current approach to discipline achieves its intended outcomes or whether alternative strategies may yield better results.

I sought to explore how school leaders, educators, and stakeholders interpret the effectiveness of current disciplinary practices. A qualitative program evaluation will guide the inquiry, using interviews, focus groups, and secondary data to identify key themes and experiences. The following practice-focused questions will guide the research:

1. How do educators and administrators perceive the relationship between school discipline practices and student academic achievement?
2. What patterns emerge from stakeholder experiences with the implementation and outcomes of current disciplinary practices?
3. How do current strategies influence student academic performance, engagement, and classroom behavior?
4. What alternative or restorative approaches to discipline have been implemented, and how are they evaluated by practitioners?
5. How do stakeholders describe their role in promoting equity and accountability within school discipline systems?

These guiding questions are grounded in the need for actionable insights and program improvement. They provide a foundation for assessing whether the district's discipline policy supports student achievement, fosters equitable treatment, and aligns with broader educational goals. This inquiry sets the stage for Section 3, where the methodology and data collection process are described in detail.

Sources of Evidence

Interviews

Data for this PAS is collected from 17 respondents who experience school discipline in some way (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Walden University Center for Research Quality, n.d.-c). The primary data sources include individual interviews and focus group interviews with stakeholders such as teacher unions, parents, and staff responsible for administering and processing discipline. These data sources provide

perspectives and evidence for discovering strategies and approaches that determine the effectiveness of the current discipline policy and offer recommendations for improvement.

A focus group is defined as a group interview on a particular topic led by a trained moderator whose goal is to provide useful insights on that topic (Collins et al., 2003; Grundumogula, 2020). Focus group interviews for a qualitative study allow the researcher to collect a substantial amount of data in a shorter time and provide insight into complex problems where opinions and attitudes about the topic vary depending on the extent to which the issue affects participants (Barbour, 2018; Cyr, 2018; Nyumba et al., 2018). By engaging with stakeholder participants and gaining meaningful insight into their experiences with school discipline, the researcher can make informed recommendations for improving discipline practices.

Published Outcomes and Research

This study investigates relevant statistics from databases such as journal articles, dissertations, theses, scholarly works, government collections, public administration abstracts, and other publications. These resources are obtained from search engines such as Google, EBSCO, JSTOR, and the Walden Library to identify trends and outcomes that shed light on the organization's problem. Key terms and a mixture of search terms support the inquiry of the focus question. These search terms include "School Discipline," "Racial Disparities in School Discipline," "Suspension," "Exclusionary Discipline," "School to Prison Pipeline," "Gender Differences in Discipline," "Black Males," "Black Females," "Students with Disabilities," "Zero Tolerance," "Student

Achievement,” “Student,” “School Governance,” “The Role of School Leadership,” “Program Evaluation,” “Participatory Program Evaluation,” and “Focus Groups.” All sources related to this PAS are closely evaluated over a period of 12 months by authors, scholars, and practitioners.

The selected sources consist of a wide range of viewpoints, perspectives, and attitudes toward school discipline and the overall topic of this study (Bowen, 2008; ELO et al., 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Lunnay, 2015; Nelson, 2016). This comprehensive evaluation employs a well-planned and organized review of diverse literature, seminal works, and current published empirical research to contribute to the existing knowledge and to identify solutions that address the problem discussed in this PAS.

Archival and Operational Data (Document Analysis)

Current relevant sources—such as available school discipline data from a Metro Atlanta School District, the current student code of conduct and discipline policy, student outcome data, and external data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Georgia Department of Education, and the United States Department of Education—as well as focus group data are reviewed and examined for this study (Yin, 2014). These sources provide essential information about discipline policies, discipline data, student outcomes, and local government-reported statistics, thereby helping to determine the connection between school and community. To ensure integrity in gathering these sources, the researcher submits a letter to the Metro Atlanta School District to request discipline data for the last five years and requests guidance on obtaining student achievement data

collected by external contracted partners who serve students involved in school discipline interventions.

To ensure the organization and alignment of sources relevant to this study, the researcher implements data collection methods and data analysis procedures as suggested by Yin (2014), Babbie (2017), and Locke et al. (2014). This process follows an eight-step research process:

1. Gather relevant documents,
2. Review documents,
3. Develop an organization protocol and make duplicates to preserve originals,
4. Explore biases, and
5. Investigate the contents of documents (including their purpose and relevance).

All materials retrieved from these sources are properly cited and referenced to avoid plagiarism and to ensure the integrity of the study.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

Evidence for this PAS is generated using a qualitative approach that includes focus group interviews, a review of the current discipline policy, available discipline data, external data, and data from non-governmental, state, and federal governmental agencies (Babbie, (2017); Burkholder et al., 2016) These methodologies are selected to provide accurate insights into the focus questions and to justify recommendations for improving school discipline practices.

Participants

A variety of participants is considered for this study, including parents, teacher union representatives, and school board members from the community and across the school district (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016). To maintain the integrity of this qualitative study, the researcher consults with the client host agency to determine the best method for selecting participants. Research indicates that participatory research increases community and stakeholder participation, which augments program pertinence, quality, outcomes, sustainability, uptake, and transferability (Macaulay et al., 2012). Participatory research experts also assert that increased community and stakeholder involvement enhances these program attributes (Jagosh et al., 2015). For this reason, the study relies on participants' responses and employs semi-structured, open-ended survey questions that seek positive input on school discipline. The study is limited by its inability to interview students directly; therefore, it lacks their firsthand experiences and perspectives. Instead, the study gathers indirect, third-party insights from parents who interact with school staff responsible for administering discipline.

Procedures

Program evaluation of public service programs is vital to determining the success and impact achieved. This study seeks to understand the process by which discipline is administered and whether it is effective. This qualitative study explores how individuals experience and interpret school discipline policies through a series of in-depth interviews. By engaging participants directly affected by these policies, the research gathers rich, descriptive data that reflects personal perspectives and lived realities. Qualitative

interviews are designed to elicit detailed narratives, allowing for the exploration of context, meaning, and emotion in participants' responses. Each session is conducted in a private and convenient setting, with interviews lasting between 45 to 90 minutes over a 2-week period (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016). This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how discipline is perceived and implemented across stakeholder groups.

Accessible external school discipline data and open-ended qualitative survey questions are utilized to record all data collected from interviews and document analyses (Kayesa et al., 2021; Yin, 2014). To secure potential participants, virtual and phone options are offered to minimize participant unavailability. In cases where a participant is unable to join the study, the researcher relies on existing archival data, news reports, and student academic outcome data to develop report findings while acknowledging study limitations (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, program evaluation planning techniques intentionally focus on recruiting stakeholders to assist in selecting an appropriate assessment tool design. I provided various options—including audio, virtual, open-ended survey questions, and group sessions—to increase participation. Research affirms that participation rates in both observational and experimental studies vary significantly across social groups and contexts and, in some instances, may be declining over time (Halpern et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2008).

I communicated the nature and extent of the study with participants in person, virtually, and in writing. This communication covered the research objectives, procedures, ethical obligations, consent processes, data collection procedures, and the

Bill of Rights for Research Participants. Participants were offered the study results and the opportunity to provide feedback. Additionally, the researcher developed culturally relevant materials to engage participants and to facilitate stakeholder input in the design, interpretation, and administration of the surveys, interviews, and data collection (Linfield et al., 2019; Merten et al., 2019; Polinin et al., 2019).

Instrumentation

The researcher employed Qualtrics XM, survey platform to collect qualitative responses from selected participants. Qualtrics provides a robust platform for collecting, managing, and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data in academic research. It offers a user-friendly interface, customizable survey options, and advanced data analytics, enhancing the reliability and efficiency of data collection (Barnhoorn et al., 2015). Additionally, its ability to integrate various question formats and automate data processing ensures accuracy and reduces researcher bias (Evans & Mathur, 2018). The platform also supports secure data storage and compliance with institutional research ethics, making it a valuable tool for conducting structured surveys and focus group research.

Conducting an effective focus group requires careful planning, structured facilitation, and systematic data analysis. The first step involves clearly defining the research objective and selecting participants who represent diverse perspectives relevant to the study topic (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The ideal focus group consists of six to ten participants to ensure rich discussions while maintaining manageability (Morgan, 2019). Next, the researcher develops a semi-structured discussion guide with open-ended

questions that encourage participants to share insights freely (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The environment should be comfortable and non-threatening to foster honest dialogue, and the facilitator should establish ground rules to maintain a respectful and inclusive discussion (Patton, 2015). Additionally, a skilled moderator plays a critical role in guiding the conversation, ensuring balanced participation, and probing deeper into responses when necessary (Guest et al., 2017).

Following data collection, the researcher transcribes and analyzes the discussion, identifying recurring themes and patterns through qualitative coding techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis helps to interpret participant perspectives while ensuring validity through triangulation with other data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers should also engage in member checking by allowing participants to review preliminary findings to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality, must be maintained throughout the process (Bryman, 2016). When executed effectively, focus groups provide valuable qualitative insights that contribute to comprehensive research findings.

Ethical Procedures

The researcher implemented the following procedures to ensure the integrity of the study and participants:

Strategies for Recruitment

Krushe (2014), Weber (2021), Roulston et al. (2015), and McCormack et al. (2013) asserted that recruitment of potential participants must include explicit

information about the nature, extent, and intended outcome of the study, reframe from unfair and bias practices that compromise the study results, provide multiple options and timeframes to participate, provide clear and concise insight about the study, inform the geographical location and inform how the research contributes to research offers. By implying the language, participants will be able to understand the study's focus.

Consent and Privacy

To ensure the integrity of the study, researchers obtain informed consent from potential study participants to minimize the possibility of bias or coercion (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Gringer, 2002; Gregory, 2003; Oliver, 2003; Wiles et al., 2004). The informed consent provides sufficient information to potential participants, in a language they easily understand, so they can voluntarily decide whether to participate in the study. It assures confidentiality of records, outlines the participant's Bill of Rights, explains potential risks, and explicitly states that participation is voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Gringer, 2002; Gregory, 2003; Oliver, 2003; Wiles et al., 2004).

Researchers face challenges at every stage of a study; therefore, it is important to implement safeguards that protect the privacy of potential research participants. These include anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, and researchers' potential impact on participants, and vice versa. Burkholder et al. (2016), Babbie (2017), Wright et al. (2004), and Locke et al. (2014) supported the use of protective measures, including physical safeguards that secure the socio-geographic location of confidential and

sensitive participant information to prevent any compromise. Administrative safeguards focus on minimizing the number of individuals with access to participant data. Enforcing technical safeguards promotes secure protection of research and participant statistics through passwords, firewalls, encryption, and measures against loss or theft. Research design safeguards encourage storing data separately from coding lists and discarding duplicate sensitive information upon study completion.

Walden IRB Approval

I completed and applied to Walden's Institutional Review Board for approval to conduct this PAS. Supporting information such as details on research participants, client organization approval, consent and privacy procedures, and general principles for the treatment of participants were among the (Locke et al., 2014; Walden Center for Research Quality, n.d.-a). I applied general principles for the treatment of potential research participants, recognizing everyone's personal dignity and autonomy (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016; Locke et al., 2014). Specific attention was given to protecting participants from harm while highlighting the study's benefits. IRB application form for review and received approval to start the study.

Analysis and Synthesis

To analyze the effectiveness of the school discipline policy for a Metro Atlanta Board of Education, content analysis and deductive analysis are implemented. Content analysis is used to determine patterns in recorded information (File et al., 2024; Szabo, 2024). The data collection method for this PAS relies on focus group participants and recorded responses to provide a robust basis for analysis. Deductive analysis, a

qualitative method, begins with predetermined themes or categories—derived from existing theories or prior research—and then examines the data to assess how well it fits within those established frameworks (File et al., 2024; Szabo, 2024).

Analysis Procedures (Coding)

All recordings, documents, and field notes are manually coded with a focus on thematic coding. Thematic analysis involves an emergent and interactive process of interpreting a set of messages, resulting in a thematic structure (Morelians, 2025, pp. 57–87). This approach is flexible, adaptable to various research types, promotes a deep understanding of the data, and facilitates comparison. This PAS relies on theme nodes to code and represent the various themes emerging from the interview questions. Furthermore, inductive manual coding is implemented to capture themes directly generated from the data. This process involves immersing oneself in the data—reading and digesting it—to develop a comprehensive understanding of the entire dataset (Azunga, 2018).

Data Integrity

This PAS emphasizes data integrity in both collection and analysis by employing several strategies:

- **Credibility:** Establishing trustworthiness in empirical research is fundamental. According to Creswell (2013), safeguarding participants' views and perspectives involves:

1. **Triangulation:** Employing multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the programmatic issues (Carter et al., 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Fusch et al., 2018).
 2. **Pulse Survey:** Conducting a pulse survey to troubleshoot participant concerns and assess their understanding, assistance needs, and need for clarification (Ferguson, 2012).
- **Transferability:** To provide an explicit and detailed account of participant experiences, the researcher implements the thick description technique (Yin, 2014; Anyan, 2014; Cope, 2014). Additionally, intentional cultural connections are made to explain the social and cultural context of the data, thereby clarifying the interview process.
 - **Dependability:** The researcher utilizes triangulation and recodes the data to ensure reliability and consistency throughout the analysis. The code-recode procedure helps verify consistency in data interpretation (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), and triangulation further reinforces the validity of the analysis (Carter et al., 2014;).
 - **Confirmability:** Confirmability refers to the extent to which the study's findings are based on the respondents' experiences rather than the researcher's biases. The researcher captures authentic participant responses through coding and recording, thereby providing clear explanations for the emergence of themes (Kyngäs et al., 2020; Burkholder et al., 2016).

Reflexivity

The researcher employs reflexivity to describe the intersecting contextual relationships (e.g., race, socio-economic status, age, cultural background) between participants and the researcher. This process not only increases the credibility of the findings (Berger, 2015) but also deepens the overall understanding of the work (Dodgson, 2019). The study focuses on participants' cultural backgrounds, geographical locations, and economic and racial demographics to articulate similarities and differences, thereby advancing knowledge for both participants and readers. Furthermore, to ensure authenticity and minimize bias, the researcher critically reflects on her role and former position as a schoolteacher. This reflection helps identify potential compromises or improvements in the research topic, methodology, data analysis, interpretation of results, and presentation of conclusions (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016). Although the researcher's experience provides direct knowledge of the discipline policy as written and partially observed in practice, not including the voices of students limits the ability to capture firsthand student perspectives. Instead, the study primarily relies on accounts from parents who interact with school staff administering discipline.

Summary

Section 3 discussed the data analysis process, the instruments used to collect participant responses, ethical procedures, participant recruitment plan, consent and privacy measures, client organization approval, Walden IRB approval, and the methods for analysis and synthesis. It also outlined analysis systems and procedures, ensuring data integrity through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Section 3 concluded by reinforcing the study's methodological rigor and the steps taken to ensure ethical and trustworthy research practices. This solid foundation supports the transition into Section 4, which presents the study's findings. Section 4 builds directly upon the methodology by organizing and interpreting data in alignment with the research questions, ultimately advancing the study's objective of informing effective succession planning within the client organization.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendation

Introduction

A Metro Atlanta School District currently lacks the proper data to determine the effectiveness of its implemented discipline policy. This qualitative study seeks to gain explicit insight into the lived experiences of stakeholders who experience school discipline in various ways. This section provides an in-depth review of participant characteristics, data collection methods, analysis procedures, findings, implications, and recommendations. By highlighting participant characteristics and explaining their responses—while offering methods and strategies for change—the study contributes to educating the public about solutions to improve school discipline policy and practice. Additionally, direct quotes from participants and the researcher’s overall conceptualization of the data help answer the proposed research question: “Is the current discipline policy effective?”

Data Collection

Stakeholders are concerned with how school discipline is implemented at a Metro Atlanta School District. This study highlights the lived experiences of respondents who have, in various ways, experienced or administered school discipline. Focusing on the research question, “Is the current discipline policy effective?” the data reveal that most participants believe the current disciplinary methods are not effective. Participants’ responses reflect real-life experiences. The research is conducted with stringent adherence to ethical principles, including obtaining informed consent from all participants to protect their data and implementing protocols consistent with Walden

University guidelines to minimize potential risks. This study is reviewed and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board and is conducted in accordance with all applicable ethical guidelines. Qualitative results are presented in summary of participant responses and charts and figures.

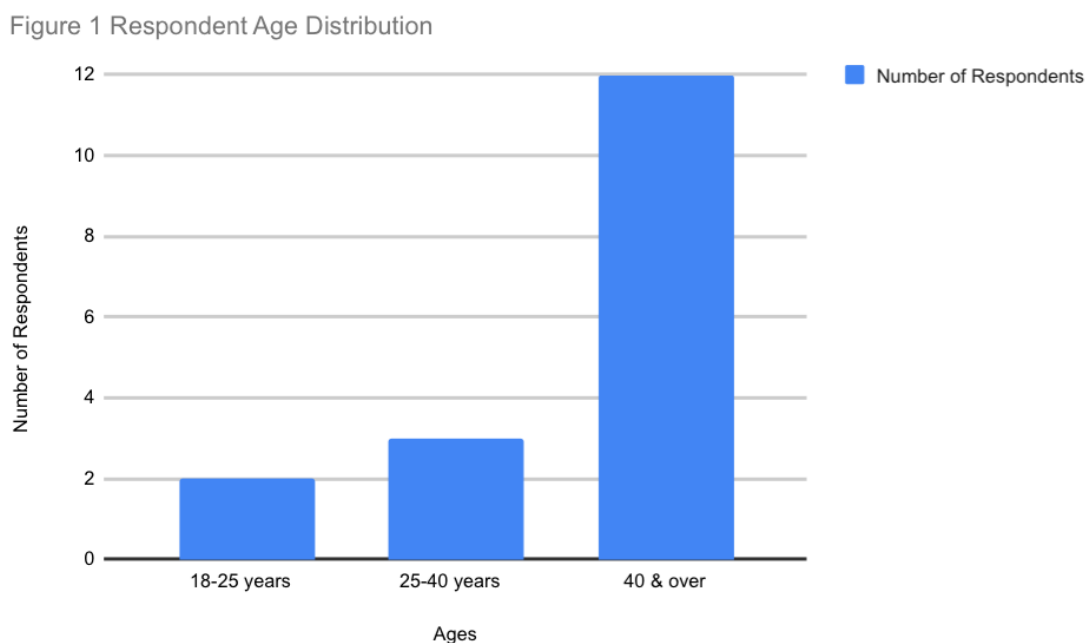
Participants

Seventeen participants consented to attending an online focus group. Each participant was provided a pseudonym to protect their identity and camera use was prohibited to reinforce anonymity. Each participant completed an 18- open-ended survey questions to understand the nature and extent of their experience with school discipline. The participant demographics consisted of respondents, "40 & over" age group (10 individuals), followed by the "25-40 year" group (five individuals) and the "18-25 years" group (two individuals). The gender distribution skews heavily female, with 14 women compared to three men. Professionally, the sample is diverse, with education-related roles standing out. Among the professions, "Teacher" is the most common, with four individuals, while others include "School Improvement Specialist," "Registered Behavior Technician," and "Regional Supervisor for a Federal Agency." Focusing on school-related roles, this subset comprises nine individuals, predominantly female (six women and three men), with most being over 40 years old. Roles within this group include "Teacher," "School Improvement Specialist," "Educator," "School Counselor," and "Assistant Principal at an Elementary School." Participants openly discussed these experiences and provided explicit feedback. Beginning with question seven, participants responded with specific consideration to the identified themes embedded within the data

sample. Figure 1 presents the age distribution of study respondents, visually depicting the range and frequency of participant ages. This breakdown provides demographic context and helps identify trends tied to age-related experiences within the study.

Figure 1

Respondent Age Distribution

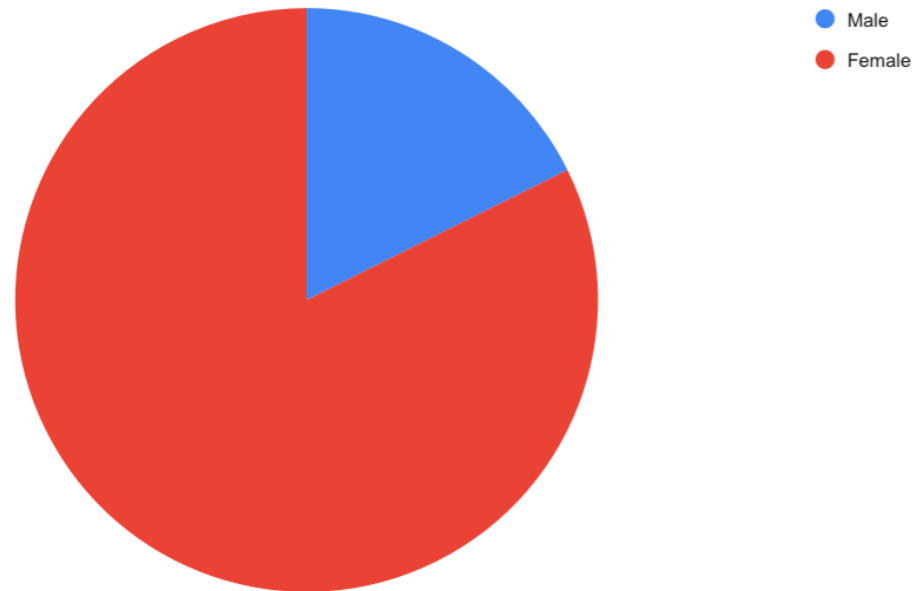


This bar graph shows the number of survey respondents in different age groups.

Figure 2 presents the gender distribution of the study's respondents. This figure highlights the proportion of participants by gender, offering insight into the demographic balance of the sample and supporting interpretation of gender-related patterns in the study's findings.

Figure 2*Gender Distribution of Respondents*

Figure 2 Gender Distribution of Respondents



This pie graph represents the gender distribution among survey respondents.

Data Collection Procedure

This qualitative PAS was developed to answer the research question, “Is the Metro Atlanta Board of Education's current implemented discipline policy effective?” I posted a flyer announcing the criterion for participation on Next Door, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Participants were able to scan the accessible qr code on the flyer, which led them to complete the prescreening. After verification of all participants, researchers provided consent by email and received log onto the virtual platform to complete the focus group interview. I successfully recruited 17 participants. Two online focus group sessions were held on Zoom, eight participants attended the first session and

nine for the second session. Each session lasted 90 minutes. Ethical considerations to protect anonymity were implemented. Participants were provided with pseudonyms to protect their identity and default camera off was activated with instructions to participants to not turn off cameras while in the session. I probed participants with the research question, “Is the current discipline policy effective? The participants completed an 18 item open ended questionnaire to capture qualitative responses of the lived experiences of stakeholders with school discipline. The survey was administered by Qualtrics during the focus group. Participants were rewarded with a \$25.00 gift card as a courtesy for their contributions to the study. I filed the raw data in a password protected folder. Respondents’ qualitative responses to their experiences with school discipline is capture beginning at survey question seven. Questions 1 through 6 reflect participant criterion responses only.

R7. Familiarity With School Discipline

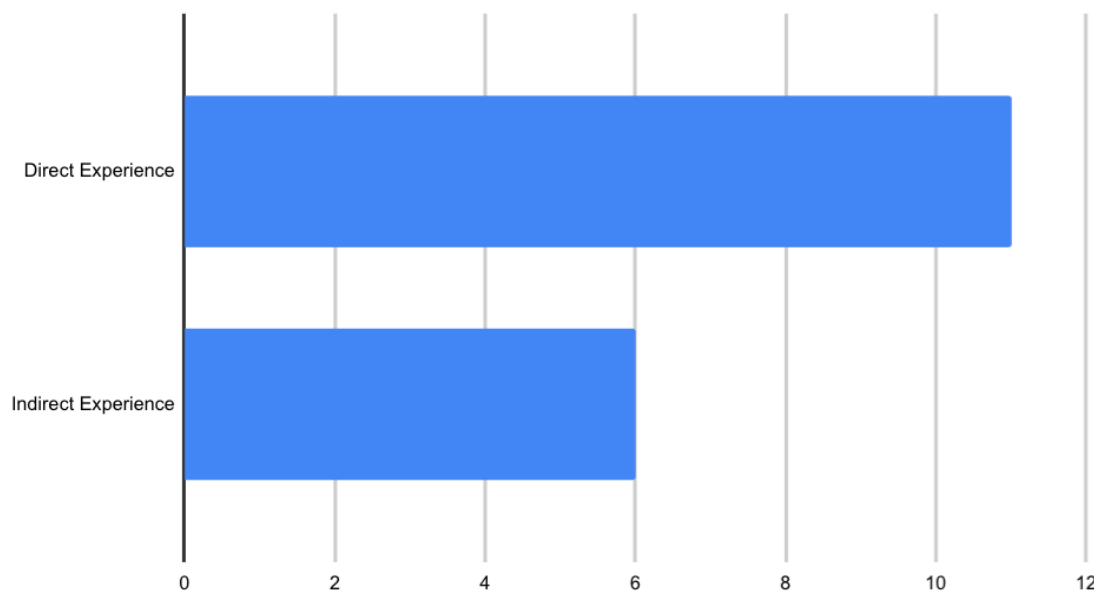
Many participants reported a high degree of familiarity with school discipline practices. Common observations included participants having a general understanding of the types of discipline practices used. For the most part participants cited common traditional practices of suspension, in school suspension and expulsion as the most familiar types of implemented punishments. Some expressed concern about the lack of alternative strategies, such as in-school suspensions or restorative practices. Parental involvement: Several participants noted the importance of parental advocacy in addressing disciplinary issues. Disciplinary challenges: A few participants highlighted inconsistencies in how discipline is applied, leading to perceptions of unfairness.

Figure 3 displays respondents' experience with school discipline, illustrating the extent and type of disciplinary involvement reported. This figure helps contextualize participants' insights by showing their direct or observed engagement with discipline practices.

Figure 3

Experience with School Discipline

Figure 3 Experience with School Discipline



This bar graph shows the number of respondents with direct and indirect experience with school discipline.

R8. The Use of a Rubric

Participants' responses regarding the use of a rubric to determine the need for discipline were mixed. Positive views: Respondents acknowledged the potential for rubrics to ensure consistency and fairness in disciplinary actions. Critiques: Others

argued that rubrics can lack flexibility, failing to account for individual circumstances, such as trauma or underlying behavioral challenges.

R9. Most Common Disciplinary Actions

Most respondents identified in-school and out-of-school suspension as the most frequently used disciplinary method. However, there was significant concern that the Five respondents expressed concerns related to fair implementation of punishment. For example, one respondent recorded the following:

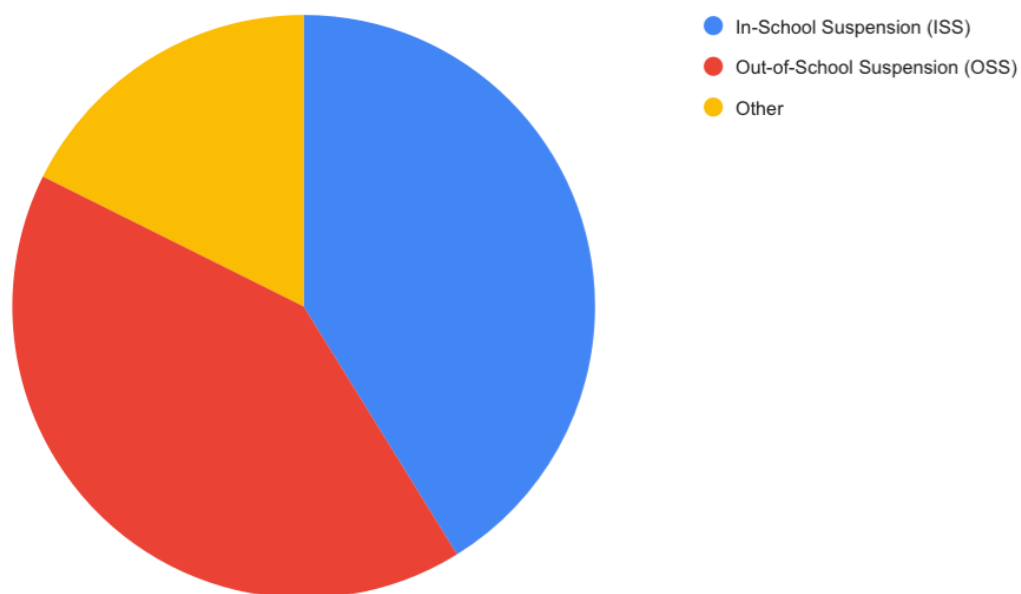
In my experiences, students who frequently display disruptive behaviors may receive more frequent infractions and are subjected to being targeted. The discipline of these students may require other interventions to aid them with improving how they respond in the learning environment.

Figure 4 illustrates the various methods of discipline reported by respondents. This figure highlights the disciplinary strategies most commonly observed or implemented, providing insight into prevailing practices within the school setting.

Figure 4

Methods of Discipline Used

Figure 4 Methods of Discipline Used.



This pie chart represents the different methods of discipline mentioned by respondents.

R10: Do You Believe Discipline Referrals are Properly Documented?

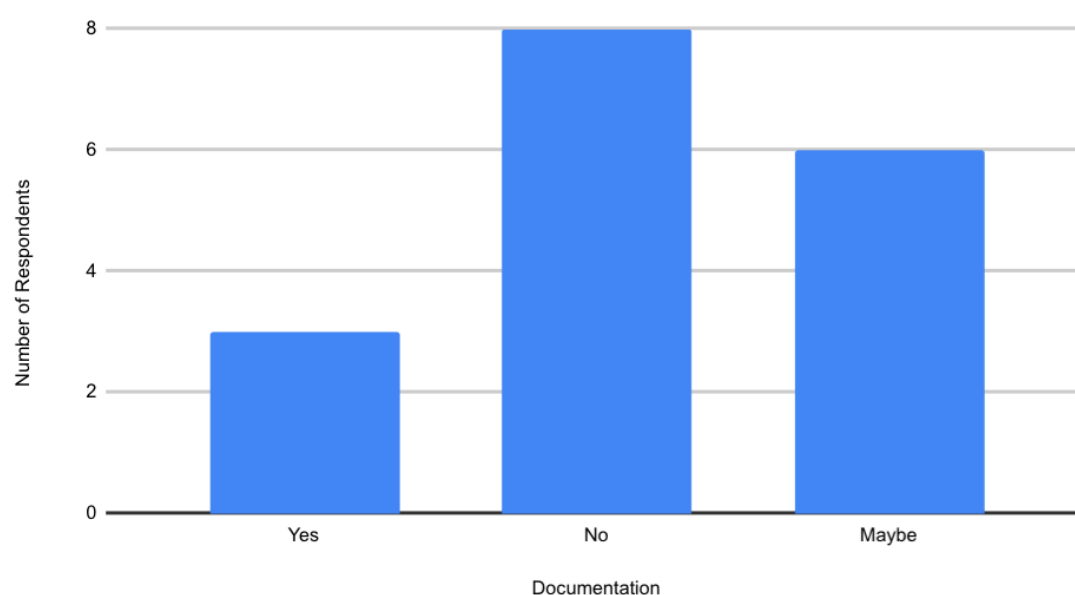
Most respondents believed that discipline referrals are inconsistently documented. Some noted that teachers and staff often handle issues informally to avoid creating a "paper trail," which can lead to underreporting and a lack of accountability. Figure 5 displays how discipline referrals are documented within school

settings. This figure provides insight into the consistency and methods used for tracking disciplinary actions, which is critical for evaluating policy implementation and accountability practices.

Figure 5

Documentation of Discipline Referrals

Figure 5 Documentation of Discipline Referrals



This bar graph shows the responses to whether discipline referrals are properly documented.

R11. Impact of Discipline Practices on School Culture

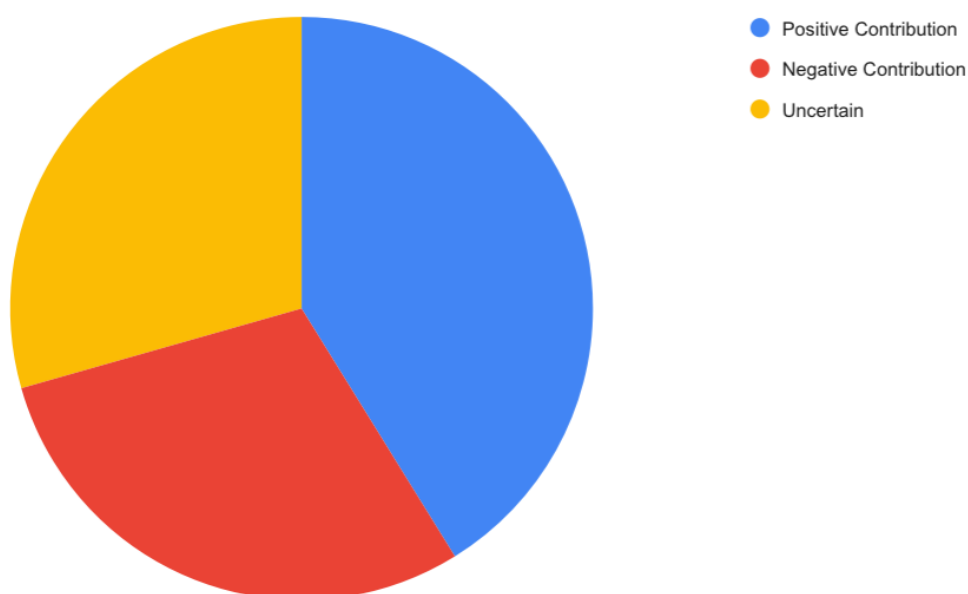
Most respondents provided nuanced perspectives on how discipline influences school culture. This means positive effects of the probability that school discipline improves the culture and climate, responses indicate fair, consistent discipline practices can contribute to a safe and respectful and safe learning and working environment. On

the contrary, other participants provided nuanced perspectives on how discipline influences school culture. Finally, negative effects were cited as harsh or contributing to inconsistent discipline that undermine trust and morale among students and staff was noted. Figure 6 presents respondents' beliefs about school discipline and school culture. This figure highlights perceptions of how disciplinary practices relate to the overall school climate, offering valuable insight into stakeholder attitudes and the broader impact on educational environments.

Figure 6

Beliefs About School Discipline and School Culture

Figure 6 Beliefs about School Discipline and School Culture



This pie chart illustrates the respondents' beliefs on whether school discipline practices contribute positively or negatively to school culture.

R11: Do You Believe School Discipline Practices Contribute to a Positive School

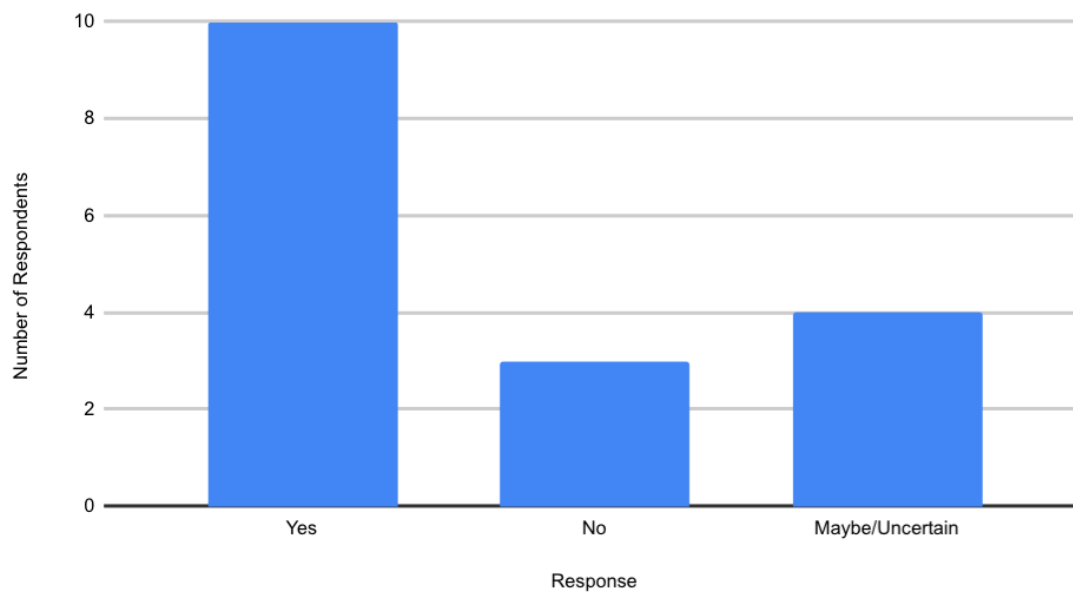
Culture and Climate?

Respondents emphasized that school discipline practices can contribute positively to school culture when they are fair, consistent, and restorative. However, punitive and exclusionary practices were widely criticized for harming student morale and creating a negative school climate. Figure 7 illustrates respondents' beliefs about the relationship between school discipline practices and the development of a positive school culture. This figure provides insight into how stakeholders perceive the role of discipline in fostering a respectful, inclusive, and supportive learning environment.

Figure 7

Beliefs on School Discipline Practices and Positive School Culture

Figure 7 Beliefs on School Discipline Practices and Positive School Culture



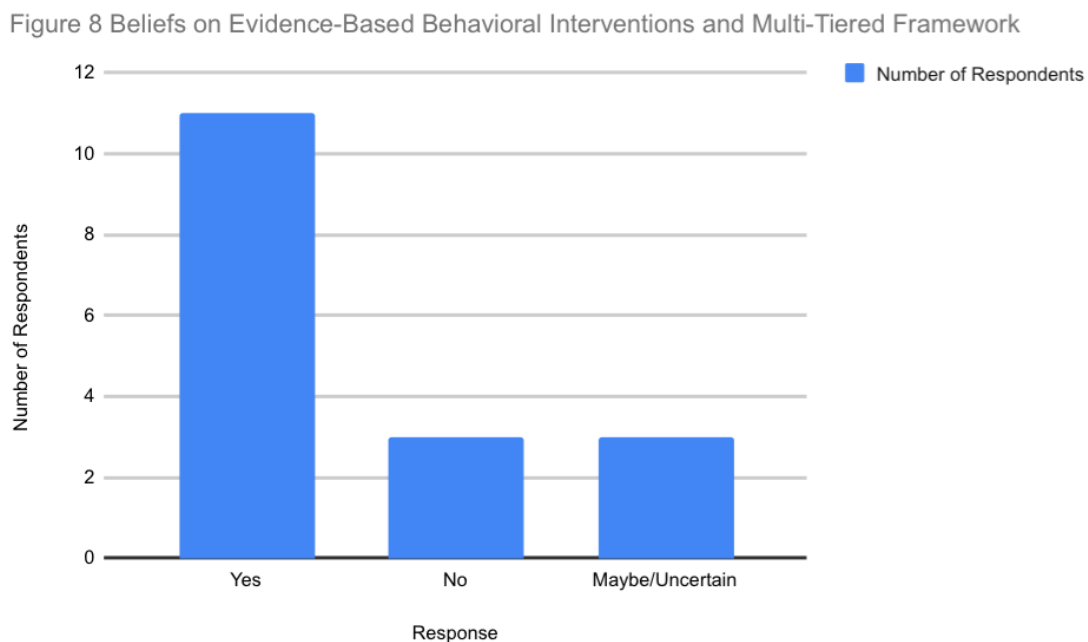
This bar graph shows the number of respondents who believe that school discipline practices contribute to a positive school culture and climate.

R12: Do You Believe Evidence-Based Behavioral Interventions are Embedded Within a Multi-Tiered Framework?

Many respondents felt that evidence-based interventions, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), are not consistently embedded within disciplinary frameworks. This lack of integration was seen as a missed opportunity to address behavioral issues constructively and equitably. Figure 8 presents respondents' beliefs about evidence-based behavioral interventions and the use of a multi-tiered framework. This figure reflects perceptions on the effectiveness and implementation of structured support systems in promoting positive student behavior and improving school discipline outcomes.

Figure 8

Beliefs on Evidence-Based Behavioral Interventions and Multi-Tiered Framework



This bar graph shows the number of respondents who believe that evidence-based behavioral interventions are embedded within a multi-tiered framework.

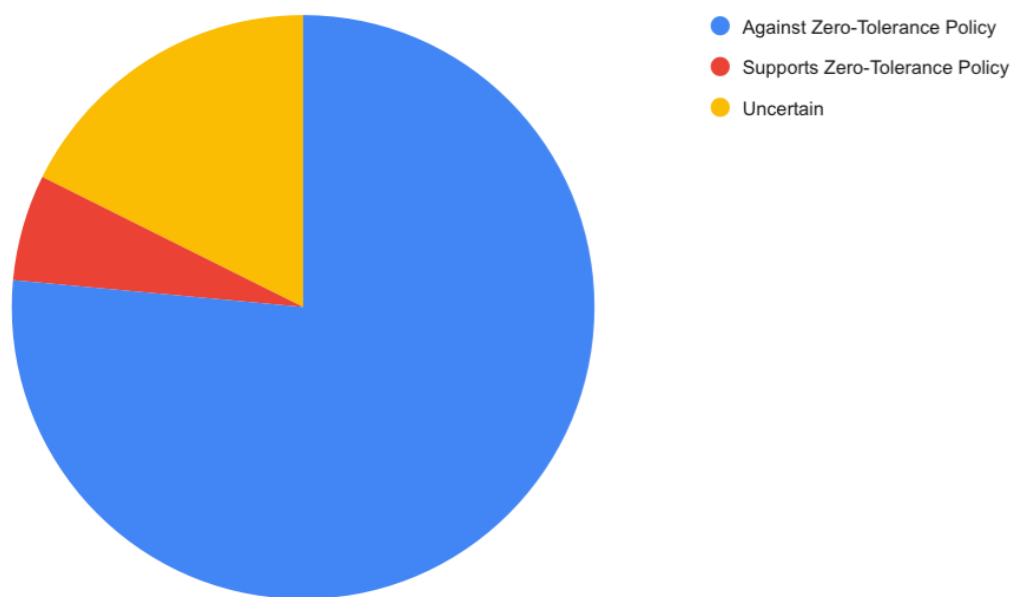
R13: Do You Agree With the Zero-Tolerance Law?

Most respondents opposed zero-tolerance policies, arguing that they are overly punitive, lack flexibility, and disproportionately affect minority students. Many advocated for a more context-based approach that considers the individual circumstances of each case. Figure 9 displays respondents' opinions on zero-tolerance policies in schools. This figure captures perceptions regarding the fairness, effectiveness, and potential consequences of such policies, shedding light on stakeholder attitudes toward rigid disciplinary approaches.

Figure 9

Opinions on Zero-Tolerance Policy

Figure 9 Opinions on Zero-Tolerance Policy



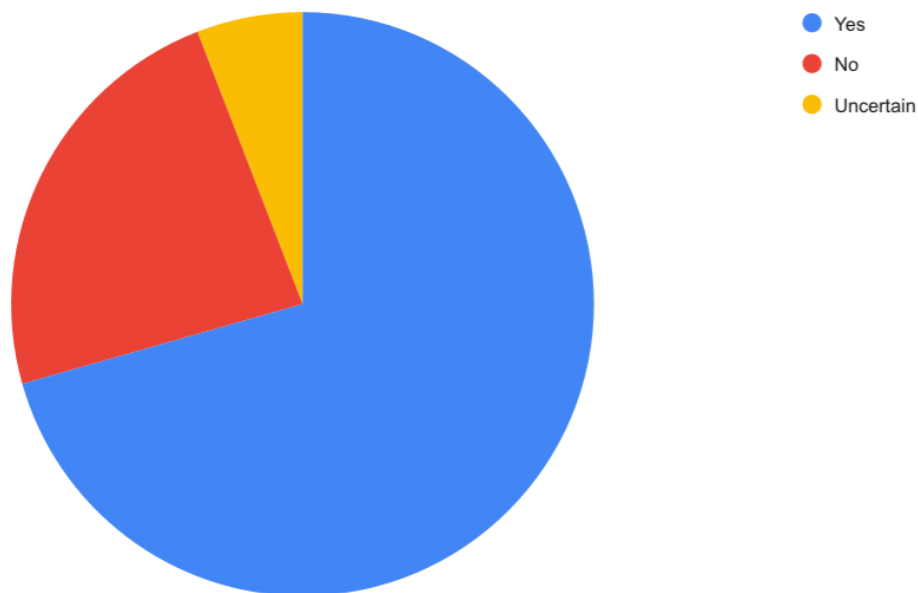
This pie chart shows the respondents' opinions on the zero-tolerance policy in school discipline.

Q14. Racial Disparities in Discipline

While 71% of participants indicated racial biases as a primary concern related to their personal experiences, qualitative responses from employed schools' staff who are privy to district discipline data, insisted that Black and students with disabilities account for the highest processed referrals than their White peers. School discipline has garnered increasing attention due to well-documented racial disparities. Although overall suspension rates have declined in the past decade, there is mounting evidence that Black students are disproportionately removed from classrooms, receive harsher punishment than their peers for similar transgressions, and lose millions of instructional days due to suspensions (Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024, p. 140). Figure 10 illustrates respondents' beliefs about racial disparities in school discipline. This figure highlights perceptions of whether students of different racial backgrounds are disciplined equitably, offering insight into concerns about bias and systemic inequality within disciplinary practices.

Figure 10*Beliefs on Racial Disparities in School Discipline*

Figure 10 Beliefs on Racial Disparities in School Discipline



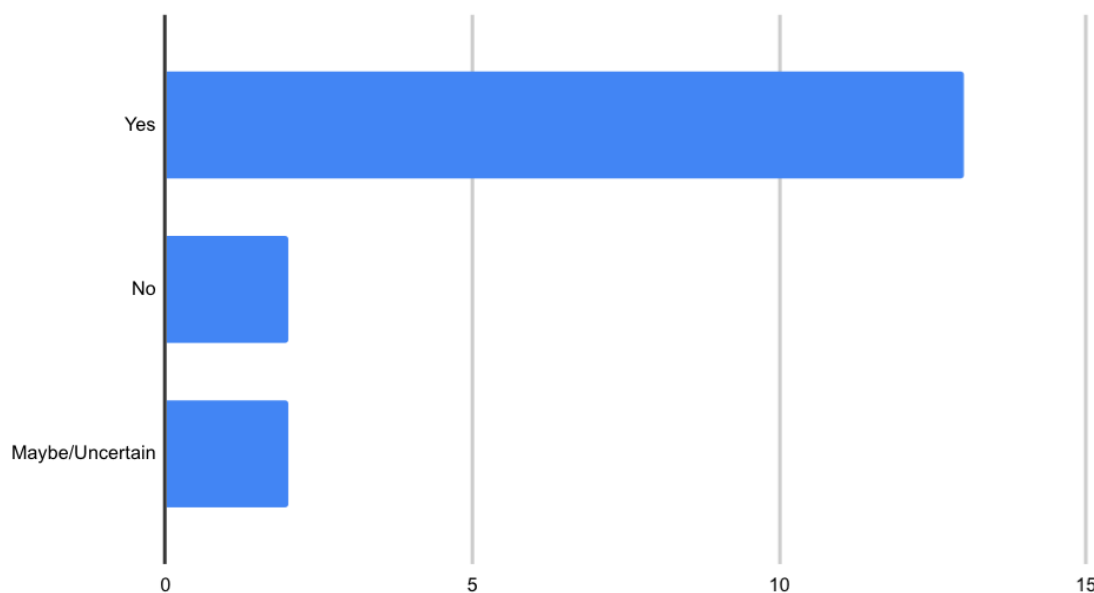
This pie chart shows the number of respondents who believe there are racial disparities in school discipline.

R15: Do You Believe School Discipline Negatively Impacts Academic Achievement?

Respondents strongly agreed that exclusionary discipline practices harm academic achievement by reducing instructional time and increasing disengagement. Many advocated for keeping students in the classroom while addressing behavioral issues through restorative practices. Figure 11 presents respondents' beliefs about the relationship between school discipline and academic achievement. This figure provides insight into how disciplinary practices are perceived to influence student learning outcomes and overall academic success.

Figure 11*Beliefs on School Discipline and Academic Achievement*

Figure 11 Beliefs on School Discipline and Academic Achievement



This bar graph shows the number of respondents who believe that school discipline negatively impacts academic achievement.

R16: What Changes Would You Recommend Improving School Discipline Policy?

Common recommendations included implementing restorative practices, providing staff training on bias and cultural competence, reducing reliance on exclusionary practices, and fostering greater community and family involvement. Respondents also called for clearer and more consistent disciplinary guidelines.

R17: What are Your Experiences With School Discipline?

Respondents shared a wide range of personal experiences, from administering discipline as educators to advocating for their children as parents. Many highlighted

systemic issues, such as racial disparities and inconsistencies in enforcement, and emphasized the need for reforms that prioritize equity and student support.

R18: Is There Any Additional Feedback You Would Like to Share?

Additional feedback emphasized the need for systemic reform, leadership accountability, and inclusive decision-making processes. Respondents advocated for addressing the root causes of student behavior and ensuring equitable access to resources and support.

Analysis and Findings

Overall, respondents asserted their disapproval for the zero-tolerance rule. Zero tolerance laws were created to remove those who present a serious threat to the learning environment and to remove students who are involved in physical altercations, drug offenses and all specified infractions considered disruptive and dangerous to the learning institution. (Alnaim, 2018; Henson, 2012). While zero tolerance may direct why a student may be disciplined, respondents complained that how punishment is implemented is inconsistent and raises concern related to its fairness.

According to Sader (2006), zero tolerance policies with the emphasis on school safety, have been effective in reducing the incidents of weapons and violence in public schools, yet some applications of zero tolerance, however, seem to defy common sense. Implemented during the 1994 federal crime bill, the zero-tolerance rule for discipline has a reputation of hosting racial biases that result in harsher punishment of Black students. Despite vast evidence of the negative impact on students and schools, disciplinary policies that overemphasize the use of exclusion remain in place within many districts

across the country to deal with perceived threats (Santiago-Rosario, 2023). Similarly, participants' responses suggest that the policy does not promote resolve discipline concerns in a way that supports student success. Currently, parents, stakeholders, and teacher unions criticize the current discipline practice as an unfair process that targets minority students and affects academic achievement adversely. What is not known is the protocol for administering school discipline. A Metro Atlanta School District is without the proper data to determine the effectiveness of the current implemented discipline policy.

The data overall reflects a predominantly older, female, and professionally varied population, with a notable emphasis on roles within the education sector. Responses highlighted the lived experiences of participants who have encountered or experienced administering school discipline in some way. The data overall revealed key areas for needed improvement such as improving policy ineffectiveness, addressing racial disparities, stakeholders' concern with inconsistency in discipline practices and over reliance on exclusionary practices. To ensure participants' lived experiences were highlighted, thematic coding was implemented. Themes included familiarity with school discipline, use of a rubric, common disciplinary actions, properly documented discipline referral, discipline practices on positive school culture and climate, evidence-based behavior interventions, a zero-tolerance law, racial disparities in discipline, school discipline negatively impacting academic achievement and changes recommended to improve school discipline police and the recommended changes that should be implemented.

Interpretation of Results

Policy ineffectiveness, racial disparities, stakeholder concerns and exclusionary practices ranked the highest of concern among participants. The data revealed that zero tolerance discipline policy does not effectively address behavioral issues. Instead, it disproportionately impacts minority students and those with disabilities, creating a punitive environment rather than one conducive to learning and growth. According to Stewart and Ezzell (2024), “punitive school discipline promoted by zero-tolerance policies, as commonly adopted within the American public education system, have been widely critiqued by educators and researchers for both their overall ineffectiveness in mitigating conflict and for their discriminatory outcomes towards Black students” (p.9).

Participant stakeholders expressed concerns with the inconsistent way discipline is applied, and lack of clear guidelines for administering school staff. Parents noted that the current practices erode trust in the school system and negatively affect students’ morale. While stakeholders' responses indicate racial disparities may be considered a reason why Black students are punished more harshly than White students; the data did not exclusively reveal race and ethnicity was a significant concern to the implementation of school discipline. What this means is, participants' experiences with discipline occurred in predominantly Black schools where the student population did not include White students.

Reliance on suspensions and expulsions as primary disciplinary actions exacerbates educational disparities, increases dropout rates, and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Respondents placed emphasis on exclusionary discipline as

counterproductive to the academic achievement of students and insisted that schools need to adopt restorative practices. When considering the impact of school discipline on academic achievement, responses revealed that schools lack in ensuring students receive make-up instruction. Participants insist that this concern is directly related to exclusionary discipline in which students are prohibited from attending school during this period.

Participant qualitative responses revealed that zero-tolerance discipline policies disproportionately impact African American students, leading to increased suspension and expulsion rates while failing to serve as an effective deterrent for misconduct. Recent research indicated that schools employing restorative justice practices instead of punitive measures have seen a notable reduction in disciplinary referrals and racial disparities (Kaur, 2024). This aligns with the growing body of empirical work that suggests punitive models such as zero tolerance do not improve school safety or academic performance but instead contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (May 2024).

When considering restorative practices, participant responses supported evidence-based approaches to include but not limited to school, community based and stakeholders' involvement. Bigham (2024) explored the role of community-building circles in improving discipline outcomes for African American students. The study found that schools implementing these restorative approaches experienced a 35% decrease in disciplinary referrals, highlighting the potential benefits of shifting from exclusionary policies to more equitable behavioral interventions. Cureton et al. (2024) reinforced this perspective, insisting that hyper-disciplinary policies exacerbate educational inequities

and that restorative practices foster a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Considering the qualitative response from participants in this study, a call for ending exclusionary practices, implementing restorative practices and training of staff to rid biases can contribute to ending ed change to the discipline policy, with a specific focus on implementing restorative practices that they believe can strengthen the academic outcomes for affected students. This strongly suggests that the current discipline model employed by the Metro Atlanta Board of Education may not be achieving its intended objectives. Instead of improving student behavior, the reliance on rigid punishment appears to disproportionately harm minority students, contributing to long-term academic and social challenges. A comprehensive policy review that integrates evidence-based restorative strategies is necessary to address these concerns effectively. Considering this study's research question, "Is the current discipline policy effective", the qualitative responses of participants contend that the deficit in the practice is what makes it ineffective.

Evaluation and Implications

Results implied organizational, community and positive social changes are essential focuses that should be considered when making policy changes. Participants' responses overall lend to various implications about the knowledge of school discipline, its influence on school climate and culture for students, particularly minorities, experiencing reduced opportunities for academic and personal growth due to exclusionary discipline practices. Participants relied on their personal experiences with

discipline and heightened concern about the negative impact exclusionary practices have on student achievement rates. Noteworthy, this school district's student population consists of majority African American students. While the claim of racial disparities was considered, due to the large representation of attending African American and minority students, future research should consider districtwide review of discipline data to compare the rate in which all students are disciplined.

Organizational Implications

Qualitative response in this study revealed organizational implication that the Metro Atlanta School District risks losing stakeholder trust and faces potential legal and reputational challenges if it does not address the issues of bias and inequity in discipline. Furthermore, the consequences of low academic performance may increase poor quality of life experiences for students who are more prone to exclusionary discipline, live in lower socio-economic communities and experience negative school experiences. Berkowitz et al. (2024) found that cumulative home and neighborhood risk factors in underprivileged communities were linked to more negative school environments, which in turn correlated with lower academic performance. However, this pattern did not hold for secondary schools, where a positive school climate did not appear to significantly impact test scores. This means, when schools prioritize a positive climate who experience socio-economic barriers do not impede student achievement rates. In this school regard, school discipline practice can influence negative and positive school climate culture.

Implications for Community

A failure to reform discipline policies perpetuates inequities and harms the community by increasing juvenile justice involvement and reducing the likelihood of positive long-term outcomes for affected students. With this regard, stakeholder engagement must allow for the voices of the community to be heard. Inclusive participation in public education policy fosters more positive influences that lead to increasing the educational experiences and positive outcomes for students. Noteworthy, the zero-tolerance law also known as Gun Free School Safety Act (GFSA) of 1994, enforced stricter guidelines for implementing punishment for students bringing weapons into schools. Contrary, Fallo and Larwin's (2022) study insisted that despite provisions within the legislation also calling for conflict resolution, mediation, and counseling, the primary result of the GFSA of 1994 was an increase in the suspension and expulsion of students, especially students of color and students with disabilities. While community involvement is essential, zero tolerance adherence safe guarded schools from losing federal funding. It can be argued that schools would opt to prioritize meeting the federal standard over receiving stakeholder input that promotes changes to discipline policies.

Positive Social Change

Addressing the gaps in the discipline policy can foster a more equitable learning environment, improve academic achievement, and reduce systemic barriers for minority students. Equitable learning exhibits culturally relevant pedagogy that addresses a large diverse population with emphasis on addressing the needs of all students. This includes being mindful of the varying social economic and cultural environments that influence

student learning and developing culturally responsive academic programs that minimize the use of exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices.

Recommendations

School discipline policy and how it is implemented within a Metro Atlanta School District has become a focus of concern. In this PAS, participants' stakeholder lived experiences with school discipline responses were captured. Participants' responses overall lend to the promotion for change, with specific focus on adopting and implementing restorative practices, and redesigning policy that includes the elimination of zero tolerance was to improve academic experiences for students appeared to be a priority. As a result, I offer the following recommendations:

- **Redesign the discipline policy** to include restorative practices and trauma-informed approaches that address behavioral issues constructively.
- **Data-Driven Evaluation:** Implement standardized data collection and analysis protocols to monitor disciplinary outcomes and ensure transparency and equity.
- **Professional Development:** Provide training for teachers, administrators, and staff on implicit bias, cultural competency, and equitable discipline practices.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve parents, students, and community members in the review and revision of discipline policies to ensure they reflect community values and priorities.

Redesigning policy to promote positive learning experiences can contribute to increasing student achievement rates. Reducing the incidents of exclusionary

punishments by implementing restorative practice and evidence-based approaches is acclaimed to increase test scores. Craig and Martin's (2023) study on school discipline policy reform suggested that students affected by exclusionary punishments may encounter lower test scores. On the contrary, the threat of strict discipline may contribute to less offending students and thus increase test scores. The value of transparency in public education builds trust, improves communication and promotes student learning, which is why implementing a data driven evaluative process to track and monitor the frequency of discipline determines the success of student outcomes.

Professional development and providing ongoing training for teachers, administrators, and staff, limit implicit bias and promotes cultural competency and enforces equity in discipline practices. Research suggests inequities among students in discipline exist, racial disparities that promote bias toward Black and minority students who experience increased rates and harsher discipline than white students. Although the problem of discipline disparities is well established, there is limited evidence of effective interventions designed to address these disparities. Austin et Al. (2024) suggested that professional development can contribute to discipline disparities and suggest a schoolwide approach to addressing equity training may contribute to reducing disparities in discipline. According to participant responses, the Atlanta Metro School District has not met the objectives of the implemented discipline policy and will benefit from expanding training that emphasizes equity.

Stakeholder engagement is very important to building collective consensus about social problems that have a direct impact on its constituency. The participants in this

study raised key concerns related to the lack of consistency, unfairness, distrust of zero tolerance rules and the use of exclusionary discipline practices that negatively impact academic achievement of affected students. This Metro Atlanta School district is without an evaluative process that measures the effectiveness of its current implemented discipline policy. There does not appear to be communication protocols in place to inform or receive stakeholder's input. Stakeholder engagement in the decision-making processes that enhances overall school effectiveness, as it cultivates a sense of ownership and underpinning for school initiatives. The research underscores the importance of management empowerment in educational leadership and calls for policymakers to create supportive structures and policies that grant school leaders greater autonomy.

Findings and Limitations

This study identified consistent concerns among educators regarding the academic and social consequences of exclusionary discipline policies. Participants described how students, particularly Black students, were often suspended or removed from class for broadly defined or subjective behaviors. These removals frequently resulted in missed instruction, academic decline, and a sense of alienation from the school environment. Some educators expressed frustration with the lack of consistent implementation of restorative practices, noting that while such practices are encouraged, they are not always supported with training or administrative guidance.

There was also a shared recognition of the disconnect between disciplinary policy and students' cultural and social realities. Several participants emphasized the need for more culturally responsive strategies that address student behavior without reinforcing

inequities. The findings reflect a desire among educators for discipline approaches that are fair, developmentally appropriate, and more closely aligned with the goal of keeping students engaged in their learning.

At the same time, the study has several important limitations. First, the geographic scope was narrow, focused on schools within a single metropolitan region. While this focus allowed for a deeper understanding of local policy implementation, it limits the generalizability of the results to other regions with different demographics or policy frameworks.

Another limitation involves the range of voices represented in the study. Because the interviews included only school personnel, the perspectives of parents, and other community stakeholders were not captured. These voices are essential to understanding the broader consequences of disciplinary actions on family relationships and community trust.

In addition, because the study relied on interviews, the findings reflect participants' perceptions, which may be influenced by memory, bias, or social desirability. The absence of quantitative data, such as academic performance metrics, limits the ability to directly connect discipline practices with academic achievement. Moreover, the study did not track outcomes over time, which restricts the ability to examine long-term effects. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into the lived realities of educators working within systems where discipline and achievement intersect. It contributes to the ongoing conversation about how schools can build policies that are both equitable and effective.

Strengths and Limitations of The Project

One of the main strengths of this study is the variety of participants involved, offering a broad range of experiences with school discipline. This helps to make the findings more applicable to different groups and gives a deeper insight into how different people experience discipline at school. The personal stories and accounts shared by the participants are valuable because they show the complexity of the issue beyond just numbers and statistics.

That said, there are some limitations. Since the study relies on participants' self-reports, there is a chance that their responses might be influenced by biases, either from wanting to present themselves in a better light or from their own personal views on discipline. This can affect the accuracy of the data. Additionally, the study did not include responses from teachers, principals, or district leadership, which would have added another layer to understanding how discipline policies are viewed from an administrative or teaching perspective. Students were also not asked directly about their own experiences with discipline, which is an important gap in the research since their personal views and feedback are crucial in understanding the full impact of these policies.

Future Research Considerations

Looking ahead, future studies should look at expanding the range of participants to include not only school staff but also students, as their direct experiences with discipline policies are essential. Gathering feedback from teachers and administrators would also give a more complete picture of how these policies are implemented and perceived at all levels within the school system.

Additionally, it would be valuable to track the long-term effects of discipline strategies through longitudinal studies. This type of research could help determine whether certain approaches have lasting impacts on student behavior, academic performance, or the overall atmosphere in schools. A mixed-methods approach—combining interviews or focus groups with surveys and quantitative data—could strengthen findings and provide a fuller understanding of the issue.

Future studies could also explore how external factors, like culture, community support, and socioeconomic status, play a role in how discipline is carried out and how it affects students. By diving into these areas, researchers could identify potential challenges specific to different environments and tailor discipline strategies to meet the unique needs of each school community.

Summary

Section 4 presented the qualitative responses from 17 participants who consented to participate in a 60-to-90-minute virtual focus group. This section defined data characteristics and provides an in-depth interpretation of the findings, highlighting participants' lived experiences with school discipline policies. The feedback directly addresses the research question: "Is the current discipline policy effective?" and offers insight into stakeholders' concerns regarding school discipline.

The analysis of participant responses reveals a wide range of concerns related to the implementation of school discipline. Participants overwhelmingly indicate that inconsistent practices, zero-tolerance policies, racial biases, and exclusionary discipline

measures negatively impact student academic achievement, therefore the recommended interventions contribute to improving practice.

Additionally, findings suggest that the current discipline model employed by the Metro Atlanta Board of Education may not be achieving its intended objectives. Rather than improving student behavior, the reliance on rigid punitive measures appears to disproportionately affect minority students, contributing to long-term academic and social challenges.

Moving forward, Section 5 outlines a plan for disseminating these findings to the organization experiencing this issue. This final section discusses the implications of these findings and provides recommendations for policy reform and practice improvements to enhance equity and effectiveness in school discipline policies. Finally, strengths and project limitations are outlined and promotes these limitations as future research opportunities.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

Introduction

School discipline policies significantly impact student outcomes, particularly for African American students who disproportionately experience punitive disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2014). The findings from this qualitative study, which engaged 17 stakeholders from a metro Atlanta school district, provide valuable insights into how discipline policies affect student achievement. The purpose of this dissemination plan is to ensure that these findings reach key stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, community leaders, and researchers, to foster meaningful policy reforms. Effective dissemination of research is essential for promoting data-driven decision-making and policy transformation (Daly et al., 2021).

A dissemination plan should be audience-centered, meaning that it considers the needs, interests, and language of the target population. Tailoring messages increases the likelihood that the audience will understand and engage with the information (Brownson et al., 2018). Without a clearly defined audience, dissemination efforts risk being too broad, reducing their effectiveness.

Different audiences have varying levels of access to communication channels. Researchers, policymakers, healthcare professionals, and community members all consume information in different ways. Identifying the right channels, such as academic journals, policy briefs, social media, or community workshops, ensures that the information reaches the intended group effectively (Wilson et al., 2010).

Ultimately, the dissemination is to inform, persuade, and facilitate change. If the right audience is targeted, the likelihood of achieving the desired impact is higher. When dissemination strategies align with the values, priorities, and decision-making processes of the audience, they are more likely to be acted upon (Schillinger et al., 2017).

Targeted Audience for Dissemination of Research Findings

This plan outlines multiple strategies to distribute research findings across different systems and audiences, emphasizing the importance of leveraging diverse communication channels. The target audience includes the following:

Educational Institutions and School District Leaders

Methods of Dissemination

- Present findings at local school board meetings.
- Develop an executive summary of key findings for district administrators and principals.
- Develop an oppositional editorial page (op-ed).
- Organize professional development workshops for teachers and staff.

Impact

- Equips educators with evidence-based strategies to implement restorative justice practices.
- Encourages school districts to reassess their disciplinary policies to promote equity.

In developing an executive summary of key findings for district administrators and principals, it is important to distill complex research into clear, concise, and

actionable points. An executive summary ensures that busy stakeholders can quickly grasp the most crucial findings of the study, without sifting through lengthy reports. By presenting the results in a simplified manner, administrators can make informed decisions regarding school discipline policies, student behavior interventions, and resource allocation (Smith & Jones, 2022). This approach not only highlights key trends and challenges but also provides actionable recommendations for improving disciplinary practices (Brown, 2021). Furthermore, it aids in communicating the findings to other stakeholders such as school staff, parents, and community members, ensuring alignment on solutions and goals.

An effective executive summary fosters accountability and transparency within the school district, encouraging administrators to back their decisions with evidence (Adams, 2020). It also plays a vital role in guiding professional development by pinpointing areas where staff may need further training or support (Green, 2023). By summarizing key trends in school discipline, the summary supports long-term planning, helping administrators create strategies that cultivate a positive school culture and reduce disciplinary incidents over time (Harris, 2021). Ultimately, the executive summary acts as a bridge between research findings and practical, data-driven action, facilitating improvements in both immediate and future school discipline outcomes.

School discipline policies significantly impact students' mental health and academic outcomes. Research highlights the disproportionate effects on marginalized students, particularly those with disabilities and mental health conditions (Skiba et al., 2014). While academic journals provide valuable insights, they are often inaccessible to

those most affected by these policies. Op-ed editorials offer an effective medium for disseminating research findings directly to students, parents, and educators, fostering awareness and driving policy change.

One of the key advantages of using op-ed editorials is their accessibility. Unlike academic articles, which are typically behind paywalls and written in complex language, op-eds present research findings in an engaging, digestible manner (Barzilai-Nahon, 2019). By simplifying and contextualizing research on school discipline, patients and families can better understand the implications of policies such as zero-tolerance approaches, exclusionary discipline, and restorative justice practices.

Op-eds are also instrumental in influencing policymakers and educators. Studies show that public opinion can sway legislative decisions, particularly when data is presented in a compelling and relatable manner (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). By publishing op-eds in widely read newspapers or online platforms, researchers can ensure their findings reach decision-makers who have the power to implement policy changes that promote restorative justice and mental health support over punitive measures.

Using op-ed editorials to disseminate research findings about school discipline policies is an effective strategy to educate, empower, and advocate for affected students. By translating complex research into accessible language, these editorials bridge the gap between academia and the public, ultimately driving meaningful change in school disciplinary practices.

Policymakers and Government Agencies

Methods of Dissemination

- Submit policy briefs to state and federal education agencies.
- Engage with legislators to present findings at committee hearings.
- Collaborate with advocacy organizations to influence policy recommendations.

Impact

- Provides policymakers with empirical evidence to support legislative changes.
- Advocates for systemic reforms to address racial disparities in discipline.
- Encouraged policy co-authorship for legislative approval.

Submit Policy Brief to State and Federal Education Agencies

To inform evidence-based decision-making, education policy researchers should prepare and submit comprehensive policy briefs to state and federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and state-level boards of education. Policy briefs should synthesize current research, provide data-driven recommendations, and highlight implications for student outcomes (Smith, 2020). Research suggests that well-structured policy briefs can significantly impact legislative priorities by providing concise, actionable insights (Brown & Jones, 2019). In the near future, the researcher plans to compose an executive policy brief highlighting the findings, recommendations to the Metro Atlanta School district and the Georgia Board of Education.

Engage With Legislators to Present Findings at Committee Hearings

Direct engagement with policymakers, particularly through committee hearings, is crucial in shaping education policy. Researchers and education advocates should actively seek opportunities to testify before legislative committees at both the state and federal levels (Johnson & Taylor, 2021). Studies indicate that expert testimony can enhance

legislators' understanding of policy issues and contribute to more informed decision-making (National Education Policy Institute [NEPI], 2022). Furthermore, providing empirical evidence and real-world case studies during hearings increases the likelihood of policy adoption (Gonzalez & Miller, 2020). This researcher plans to schedule a meeting with the current elected Georgia State House District 67 Representative Lydia Glaize, who leads the state education committee. This approach further expands my work as a researcher and reinforces my service as an elected public official.

Influencing Education Policy Through Research and Advocacy

To effectively shape education policy, researchers and stakeholders must actively engage with policymakers through various channels. One critical strategy is submitting policy briefs to state and federal education agencies. Policy briefs serve as concise, evidence-based documents that translate research findings into actionable recommendations. Policymakers often rely on synthesized research to inform their decisions, as they may not have the time or expertise to analyze complex studies in detail (Weiss, 1977). Well-crafted policy briefs can influence decisions on critical issues such as school funding, curriculum standards, and teacher training (Stone, 2012). Additionally, Nutley et al. (2007) emphasized that policy briefs must be accessible, relevant, and tailored to the priorities of the agencies they are intended to reach.

Beyond written advocacy, direct engagement with legislators is crucial for ensuring that research findings inform education policy. Presenting findings at committee hearings provides an opportunity to communicate key insights directly to policymakers. Research suggests that face-to-face interactions, such as testimony before legislative

committees, enhance the likelihood of research being integrated into policy decisions (Cairney & Oliver, 2017). Committee hearings serve as forums where researchers can provide empirical evidence on pressing educational challenges, influencing the legislative agenda (Boaz et al., 2008). Engaging with legislators also allows for real-time discussions, clarification of research implications, and the opportunity to counter misinformation that may affect policy decisions.

Moreover, collaboration with advocacy organizations is a strategic approach to amplifying the impact of educational research. Advocacy groups serve as intermediaries between researchers and policymakers, ensuring that research findings reach decision-makers in a compelling and persuasive manner (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). These organizations have established networks and expertise in policy communication, which enhances the dissemination of research-backed recommendations. Shiffman and Smith (2007) highlighted that coalitions between researchers and advocacy groups increase the effectiveness of policy influence by presenting a united and well-supported stance on key education issues. Furthermore, Kingdon (2011) noted that when advocacy groups and researchers work together, they can better navigate the complexities of the policy process, increasing the likelihood of meaningful legislative change.

Researchers aiming to influence education policy must actively engage with policymakers through multiple channels. Submitting policy briefs, participating in legislative hearings, and collaborating with advocacy organizations are essential strategies for ensuring that research informs decision-making. By leveraging these

approaches, educational stakeholders can contribute to the development of evidence-based policies that enhance learning outcomes and promote educational equity.

Community Organizations and Parent Advocacy Groups

Methods of Dissemination

- Host town hall meetings to share findings with parents and community members.
- Create infographics and fact sheets for public distribution.
- Partner with local advocacy groups to promote awareness campaigns.

Impact

- Empowers parents with knowledge to advocate for fair disciplinary practices.
- Strengthens community engagement in educational equity discussions.

Academic and Research Communities

Methods of Dissemination

- Publish findings in peer-reviewed journals such as *The Journal of Negro Education* and *Urban Education*.
- Present at national conferences (e.g., American Educational Research Association).
- Develop an open-access online repository of study materials.

Impact

- Expands scholarly discourse on racial disparities in school discipline.
- Encourages future research and replication studies in other districts.
- Can be used to inform legislation

To effectively disseminate the findings of this research, publishing in peer-reviewed journals such as *The Journal of Negro Education*, *Urban Education*, *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, and *The International Journal of Educational Development* will be a primary strategy. These journals are well-respected in the educational field, focusing on issues of urban education, equity, and global educational development. By publishing in these venues, I aim to ensure that the study reaches a broad academic audience, including educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to addressing disparities in educational outcomes and promoting inclusive education worldwide (Smith & Johnson, 2021). I intend to tailor the manuscript to align with the journals' focus on promoting understanding and addressing systemic challenges in education, thus contributing to ongoing dialogues about equity and inclusion.

In addition to journal publications, presenting the findings at national conferences such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting will facilitate direct engagement with scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in education. This face-to-face dissemination approach will allow for immediate feedback and discussions that can help refine the findings and promote practical applications of the research (Brown & Harris, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher plans to develop an open-access online repository to make the study's materials freely accessible. This repository will host the research findings, methodology, and supplementary resources, enabling broader access to the data and fostering transparency in the research process (Green, 2022). By leveraging these strategies, the researcher hopes to maximize the reach and impact of the study in both academic and practical educational contexts.

Potential Consequences of Not Implementing the Dissemination Plan

Failure to effectively disseminate these research findings can perpetuate inequitable disciplinary practices and exacerbate negative outcomes for African American students. Research has shown that exclusionary discipline policies contribute to academic disengagement, increased dropout rates, and long-term socio-economic disadvantages (Gregory et al., 2016). Without dissemination, policymakers and educators may continue to rely on outdated disciplinary models that do not align with best practices in restorative justice (Losen & Martinez, 2020). The lack of awareness and advocacy could further marginalize affected students, deepening educational disparities and reinforcing systemic biases.

Considerations for Future Research

Looking ahead, future studies should look at expanding the range of participants to include not only school staff but also students, as their direct experiences with discipline policies are essential. Gathering feedback from teachers and administrators would also give a more complete picture of how these policies are implemented and perceived at all levels within the school system.

Additionally, it would be valuable to track the long-term effects of discipline strategies through longitudinal studies. This type of research could help determine whether certain approaches have lasting impacts on student behavior, academic performance, or the overall atmosphere in schools. A mixed-methods approach—combining interviews or focus groups with surveys and quantitative data—could strengthen findings and provide a fuller understanding of the issue.

Future studies could also explore how external factors, like culture, community support, and socioeconomic status, play a role in how discipline is carried out and how it affects students. By diving into these areas, researchers could identify potential challenges specific to different environments and tailor discipline strategies to meet the unique needs of each school community.

Summary

The research discussed in Section 5 emphasizes the significant impact of school discipline policies, especially on African American students, who face disproportionately high rates of punitive measures like suspensions and expulsions. The findings from this qualitative study, involving 17 stakeholders from a metro Atlanta school district, shed light on how these policies affect student achievement. The purpose of the dissemination plan outlined in this section is to ensure that the research findings reach key stakeholders—including educators, policymakers, community leaders, and researchers—to encourage evidence-based policy reforms.

A tailored approach to dissemination is essential, as different audiences engage with information in distinct ways. The study proposes various methods to share the findings across diverse platforms and channels to ensure the information is accessible to the target audiences. These include presenting findings at school board meetings, submitting policy briefs, engaging with legislators, and hosting community workshops. Additionally, op-ed editorials are seen as an effective way to simplify complex research for wider public understanding, especially for marginalized groups directly impacted by discipline policies.

The dissemination strategies focus on informing, persuading, and facilitating meaningful changes in school discipline policies. The goal is to encourage policy reforms that promote equity and restorative justice practices, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes, particularly for African American students. Project strengths and limitations were discussed, noting the areas of future research guided by limitations that provide opportunity for ongoing empirical inquiry.

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Appendix A: Scope of Work PAS

1. Client Information	
<i>Name of Client Organization</i>	<i>Name of Student/Researcher</i>
A Metro Board of Education- Masked	
<i>Client Contact's Mailing Address</i>	
2. Project Description	
<p>The purpose of this qualitative Professional Administrative Study is to determine the effectiveness of the current discipline policy. The study will use focus group interviews with stakeholders, open-ended survey questions, recent discipline data, and secondary data analysis of local, state, and federal data to identify trends. The results of this study will assist the researcher with making recommendations to improve discipline practice that increases student outcomes and administer expert consultation on policy revision that considers restorative approaches (Poor 2021, Dodson, 2014, Hall 2019, McWilliams 2010). To improve the academic outcomes for students to increase morale, and the current discipline practice, the Atlanta School Board of Education will need to review its current procedures to ensure equity and fairness in the process of administering corrective action.</p>	
3. Tasks to be completed by Researcher	

To conduct a robust review of the topic, multiple databases will be explored for information such as Scholarly Works, Theses, Journal Articles, Dissertations, Sage Public Administration Abstracts Publications, and. These data were obtained from search engines like EBSCO, Google, JSTOR, and Walden Library to find relevant research related to the problem. Further, existing appropriate organizational documentation such as available discipline data for the last five years, Annual Reports (local, state, and federal) discipline reports (internal & external) (Yin, 2014).

The researcher anticipates approaching the analysis and synthesis of documents and secondary data as suggested by Babbie (2017), Datt & Chetty et al., (2016) Locke et al. (2014), and Yin (2014) through implementing the following eight-step process:

Assemble relevant documents. Make copies of original artifacts for annotation. Define the unit and theme of analysis. Develop categories and coding schemes. Assess the consistency of the coding. Draw inferences based on the coding and themes. Finally, the presentation of results.

Data for this Professional Administrative Study (PAS) will be collected from primary sources (Walden University Center Research Quality, n.d-c: Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2016). The primary data sources will include individual and focus group interviews with stakeholders (teacher unions, parents, and staff who administer and process discipline in some way). These proposed resources of evidence will be applied to gain perspectives and evidence to discover strategies and approaches used to determine the effectiveness of the current applied discipline policy and provide recommendations for improvement. A Focus group is, a group interview on a particular

topic, led by a trained moderator...the goal is to provide useful insights on the topic (Gundumogula, 2020; Collins et al., 2003). To reduce the incidence of low participant involvement, various opportunities such as in-person focus groups, zoom virtual platform, google meets, email (google form) and researcher pre-recorded video messages to email participants with instructions on how to complete the interview process. Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2017).

The established trust between researchers and participants is important to the collection process and analysis. Thus, the researcher will meet one on one with participants to discuss the study procedures and check for understanding (Silverman, 1997; Olsen 2012; and Elmersjö 2022). Participants will be informed of the study title, the purpose of the study, the researcher's name, and contact information and distribute thank you cards to participants for their time spent participating in the study, obtain consent and provide results.

A focus group protocol was implemented to inform participants of the nature and extent of the study and how participant data will be collected and analyzed, and participant liability. (Marshall and Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). Further, it embodies a list of questions, procedures for interviewing participants, a script of what will be said before the interview and prompts for obtaining informed consent and relevant information (Mannay and Morgan, 2015; Yin, 2014; Jacob, 2014). According to Yin (2014), the interview protocol provides participants with explicit details that pertain to the study and their involvement. Thus, promoting transparency and credible data collection.

<p>To analyze the effectiveness of school discipline policy for the Metro Atlanta Board of Education, research participants completed a qualitative survey administered through Qualtrics XM.</p>
<p>4. Assistance (including data) to be provided by Client Organization</p> <p>The Metro Atlanta Board of Education aims to support this Professional Administrative Study by providing accommodation to host the focus group, and interviews, and provide internal available reports related to discipline practices and policies. These resources will support the researcher's efforts in assessing the data, rating the outcomes, and providing recommendations to improve the practice.</p>
<p>5. Deliverables for the Client Organization</p> <p>Due to the client organization being masked, results will be made available to the public in various ways to include, op-ed publication, professional development workshop, blog post on social media and/or publication in scholarly journal.</p>

6. Project Approval & Signature	
<i>Signature of Client Contact Person</i>	Date November 12, 2022
<i>Name of Client Contact Person</i>	
<i>Title of Client Contact Person</i>	

Appendix B: School Discipline & Academic Achievement Participant Survey

Default Question Block

Q1

What is your age?

18-25 years 25-40 year 40 & over

Q2

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary / third gender Prefer not to say

Q3

What is your current profession?

Q4

Are you a school staff? If so, what is your role? Teacher

Principal

Administrator

Resource Officer Other

Q5

Are you a parent, community member, or other?

Parent

Community Member Other

Q6

To the best of your knowledge, describe your familiarity with school discipline.

Q7 In response to challenging behaviors, do you believe schools rely on a rubric system:

In response to challenging behaviors, do you believe schools rely on a rubric system: a list of behaviors students is prohibited from exhibiting and clear procedures for how adults should respond to those behaviors if they are exhibited?

Explain in detail below.

Q8

Do you have school-age children?

Yes No

Q09

To the best of your knowledge, do you believe discipline referrals are properly documented? Please explain in detail below.

Yes Maybe No

Q10

Do you believe that school discipline practices contributed to positive school culture and climate?

Please explain in detail:

Q11

To the best of your knowledge do you believe evidence-based behavioral interventions and supports are embedded within a multi-tiered framework that influence how school discipline is administered?

Explain in detail below:

yes Maybe No

Q12

To the best of your knowledge, which discipline method is most frequently administered?

Please explain in detail below:

In school suspension

Out of school suspension Expulsion

Other, Explain:

Q13

Black students are more likely than White students to be referred for disciplinary action for subjective infractions such as disruption or defiance compared to objective infractions such as tardiness or truancy. Do you believe that racial disparities exist in how Black compared to White students are discipline? To the best of your knowledge please explain in detail.

Explain in detail below:

Yes No

Q14

Do you believe school discipline negatively impact the academic achievement of students?

Explain in detail below:

Yes

No Explain:

Q15

What changes would you recommend be made to improve school discipline policy? Explain in detail below:

Q16

In Georgia, the "zero-tolerance law" in school discipline refers to a policy that was previously in place where schools were required to enforce strict punishments, like suspension or expulsion, for certain student behaviors, regardless of the severity or context of the infraction, essentially meaning "zero tolerance" for any violation of specific rules. Do you agree with this rule? Explain in detail below:

Q17

Is there any additional feedback that you would like to share? If, so please explain in detail below.

Q18

What are your experiences with school discipline? Explain in detail below:

End of Survey

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

[https://qualtricsxmc6q3x9rgl.pdx1.qualtrics.com/survey-builder/SV_0Vd67CwSzPLyg2/edit 5/5](https://qualtricsxmc6q3x9rgl.pdx1.qualtrics.com/survey-builder/SV_0Vd67CwSzPLyg2/edit/5/5)

In summary, this dual framework ensures that the study captures both the lived experiences of stakeholders and the measurable outcomes of discipline policy implementation. It provides a balanced lens through which to evaluate effectiveness and equity, guiding the development of practical recommendations.

Recommendation	Related Finding
Redesign discipline policy to include restorative practices	Policy ineffectiveness and exclusionary practices
Implement standardized data collection protocols	Lack of data and transparency
Provide staff training on bias and cultural competency	Racial disparities and stakeholder concerns
Engage stakeholders in policy review	Community distrust and lack of input