**A Quantitative Exploration of Relationships Between School Accountability Designations**

**and the Use of Suspension and Expulsion in Tennessee's K-12 Public Schools**

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This dissertation titled

**A Quantitative Exploration of Relationships Between School Accountability Designations**

**and the Use of Suspension and Expulsion in Tennessee's K-12 Public Schools**

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**Abstract**

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<u>A Quantitative Exploration of Relationships Between School Accountability Designations</u>

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The significant problems tied to using exclusionary school discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion are well documented across multiple fields. Research also reveals the disproportionate use of these practices with students based on categories such as race, ability, and economics. Effective alternatives exist but only work for some situations. The variables that maintain the widespread use of exclusionary discipline practices despite such concerns are varied and complex, as have been the states' response to federal recommendations to remove this barrier to educational equity. Each state must report discipline data by demographic subgroup and establish school performance criteria as accountability measures. Tennessee is representative of states that have explicitly set a goal to reduce the disproportional use of exclusionary discipline practices, yet progress is slow. The purpose of this casual-comparative study was to explore differences in the use of exclusionary discipline between Tennessee's public schools that received the 2018 performance accountability designation of *Reward*, which indicated high performing, and those schools designated as *Priority*, which indicated low performing. Specifically, this research sought to identify differences between those performance accountability designations related to discipline types and certain subgroups.

Findings indicated statistically significant differences in expulsion, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension between the two sets of schools. The 2018 *Priority* (low performing) schools reported higher usage rates of exclusionary discipline than 2018 *Reward* schools across all categories. Statistically significant differences also were found in the rates that Black/Hispanic/Native American,

students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students in 2018 *Priority* (low-performing)

schools were removed from classrooms compared to members of the same subgroup who attended

*Reward* (high-performing) schools that year. The rates that English learners were removed from *Priority*

school classrooms also was higher than those who attended *Reward* schools, but the difference was not

statistically significant for that subgroup.

Being identified as economically disadvantaged, Black/Hispanic/Native American, or having a

disability predicted involvement with exclusionary discipline in both high- and low-performing schools.

In high-performing schools, the strongest predictor was being economically disadvantaged. In low-

performing schools, the strongest predictor was being included in the Black/Hispanic/Native American

subgroup. Both performance designations revealed correlations between the Black/Hispanic/Native

American, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities subgroups. The economically

disadvantaged and Black/Hispanic/Native American subgroups had the strongest relationship in both

designation sets. These findings suggest the annual school performance accountability designations may

serve as a leverage point to improve efforts to reduce exclusionary discipline practices, while

exponentially improving several other key education measures. By injecting funding, training, and other

resources needed to successfully implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices specifically

into schools identified as the lowest-performing, improvements also may be triggered in areas with

known associations, such as improved academic performance, dropout rates, and attendance.

Additional conclusions, implications, recommendations, and opportunities for future research are

included in the final chapter.

## Dedication

*At the center of this work and my life are my eight children, my husband, and my family of origin.*

*Each taught me different lessons regarding the value and reasons to celebrate uniqueness,*

*proving daily that what sets us apart also tends to be what makes us special.*

*It is with deep gratitude that I dedicate this work to each of them as individuals.*

*They remain my most influential teachers and constant inspiration.*

## Acknowledgments

The English language and the space available are inadequate for expressing my deep appreciation and gratitude to the many who walked beside me on this odyssey, but the people below did more than cheer me along – they made it possible.

To describe Dr. Tori Colson simply as my dissertation chair barely hints at the extent and depth of the unwavering belief, support, and trust she provided. No matter my challenge, she remained calm, confident, and my committed champion and advocate. I will be forever grateful!

Dr. Joy Howard's guidance in helping me see beyond what I once thought was the horizon regarding equity issues was invaluable on this committee. She also helped me realize that even when there are mountains beyond mountains, I must pause on each summit to look around, breathe, and celebrate! The impact of that gift reaches far beyond the completion of this work.

I am grateful for Dr. Jill Raisor's unhesitating acceptance of my passion for teacher preparation, as it enabled me to fast-forward my academic agenda by several years. The wisdom she offered early in her committee notes regarding tone and tact also was of constant service throughout this process.

Nor could I have completed this work without the amazing support, intelligence, optimism, and humor of USI's EdD Cohort #2, as well as my dear friend, Darla Grossman. Sometimes you realize you are blessed simply to be in the same orbit as certain people. These are my people!

Most importantly, I want to acknowledge and share my gratitude and respect for my family. Some of you taught me firsthand the dangers of allowing educational inequities to stand unchallenged. It is for you that I do this work. I also recognize and appreciate those who set aside their own needs and desires for a time so I could complete this quest. I love you all!

Finally, to my dear husband and mother…You know best why this was so important.

Thanks for sticking it out with me. I promise I'm done now!

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**Background**

Research draws a direct connection between receiving exclusionary school discipline, having

problems with the justice system, and numerous other negative outcomes (Anyon et al., 2016; Fabelo et

al., 2011; Jacobsen, 2019; Losen & Martinez; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Skiba, Arrendondo, et al., 2014;

Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014; Vinson & Waldman, 2020). Of particular concern is the disproportionate use

of methods such as expulsion and suspension with vulnerable populations (Caldera, 2018; Losen &

Martinez, 2020; Skiba, Arrendondo et al., 2014; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). Numerous studies from

across the nation and multiple disciplines demonstrate that students who are Black, receive Special

Education, or are economically disadvantaged are more likely to be banned from their classrooms than

White students without known cognitive, food, or housing challenges (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Gregory

et al., 2014; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights [USCCR],

2019; U.S. Department of Education, [USDoE], 2021). Those living at the intersection of one or more of

those demographics fare the worst. The contributing variables for these outcomes are varied and

complex. Research indicates subjectivity associated with the personal attitudes, experiences, and beliefs

of the adults involved rank among the top contributors (Dionisio & Gray-Nicolas, 2023; Greene, 2018;

Owens, 2022; Skiba et al., 2002; The IRIS Center, 2012, 2021), along with cultural mismatching of

students and teachers (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003), and developmentally inappropriate

expectations (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; USCCR, 2019).

At the federal level, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires states to

collect and analyze data to monitor incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions. The Every

Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) requires states to develop, and report plans to allow for public

monitoring of student learning and achievement. These metrics are required to be compiled and

published in an easily accessible State Report Card. The disparate use of expulsion and suspension rates

with vulnerable student populations is one of the numerous measurements required by ESSA - the main federal law that governs American education from kindergarten through 12th grade (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Tennessee Department of Education [TDoE], 2018f). Yet, despite the well-documented harm traced to exclusionary discipline practices, state responses vary (Council of State Governments, Justice Center, 2014; Education Commission of the States, 2023; Kelley et al., 2021; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2022; Nishioka et al., 2017; USDoE/OESE, 2018). Several organizations maintain extensive databases documenting states' legislation, policies, and data on the topic (Education Commission of the States, Council of State Governments, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights). These databases show that some states have worked diligently for a decade to make discipline practices more equitable. They are credited with the recent downward turn of a trendline that had been steeply escalating for decades. Others took actions focused on compliance with the federal statutes while maintaining authoritarian discipline practices as the standard. In some states, including Tennessee, the legislature directed educators regarding exclusionary discipline practices.

In 2017 and again in 2020, the Tennessee legislature passed laws that governed how, when and with whom educators could use suspension and expulsion. The 2017 law banned suspension and expulsion in public preschools, while the 2020 law provided teachers with a detailed process to use when they want a student out of their classroom. Between the passing of those laws, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDoE) published its 2018 report, *The Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook* (*Playbook*, 2018c). In it, the TDoE made seven "equity commitments" (TDoE, 2018c, p. 2). The second commitment listed in the *Playbook* was to "Reduce Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates" (TDoE, 2018c, pp. 2, 8-9). For that commitment, the *Playbook* provided 22 recommendations directing schools, districts, school boards, and communities on steps that should be taken to address the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in Tennessee (see Appendix 3). Since the widely

publicized release of that report, little more has been said about that equity commitment by state agencies beyond including the *Playbook* as a resource in a few TDoE reports on other initiatives. Tennessee's competing contingencies related to the current and future use of exclusionary discipline provide an example of the complexities involved with combatting this problem. As a result, a causal-comparative study on Tennessee's rates of exclusionary discipline in schools designated as either low- or high-performing was conducted as part of a search to identify a leverage point that could be used for better outcomes in the future.

A wide menu of alternative practices that effectively reduce suspension and expulsion while maintaining safety and allowing learning objectives to be reached is well-documented (Anyon et al., 2016). Less understood is the interconnection between elements within America's education system that maintain the continued use of practices known to cause harm. Nor is it clear how to quickly increase the consistent and effective use of alternatives nationwide, despite existing models of success. Recent research suggests that using a systems approach to identify where individual elements involved in the complex discipline process interconnect and impact each other may offer useful insight (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022). This study examined one of those points of interconnectedness – the relationship between school performance accountability designations and the use of exclusionary discipline practices in Tennessee's K-12 schools.

**Problem of Practice Statement**

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) defines a problem of practice as a specific unrelenting issue encountered in the applied work of an educator that can lead to multiple positive outcomes if improved (CPED, 2019). Systems theory framework practitioners use process mapping to gain visibility into various components and interactions contributing to a chronic and complex problem (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Often included in that process is the search for *leverage*

*points,* described by Meadows (1999) as the points or places within a complex system where a single change can make a significant impact in multiple areas.

The problems with exclusionary school discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion are well documented across multiple fields of study. Also, well supported in research is the disproportional use of these practices with students based on categories such as race, gender, and disability status. Research indicates that subjective interpretations and conditioned perceptions based on race, or ability led to Black children and those with disabilities being punished at higher rates. Finding one or more leverage points that enable pragmatic interventions to reliably interrupt these and other negative outcomes in the complex real world of education could positively change the future for untold numbers of children and their families. Many efforts have been underway for nearly a decade, including major initiatives such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, and increased counseling services in schools, along with enhanced attention to the social and emotional needs of students (Warmbold-Brann et al., 2017). However, many barriers have stifled the widespread adoption of such alternatives, including limited time, money, and training required for implementation. Additional barriers include cultural and political ideology, as well as subjective preferences. These points will be detailed in Chapter 2.

The problem of practice at the foundation of this study is the need to identify leverage point(s) that already exist in the current system that can be reimagined in ways that may reliably disrupt the use of exclusionary school discipline practices with minimal additional resources or effort. If such a leverage point could also improve other school performance measures that are negatively impacted by discipline practices of concern, that would be ideal. Meadows (1999) suggested there are 12 places to look for leverage points within most systems (see Appendix A). Constraining the search for leverage points to components that already exist in the system reduces the effort and resources needed to effect change, while increasing the likelihood of adoption and sustainability, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**

*The Impact of Leverage Points on Change*
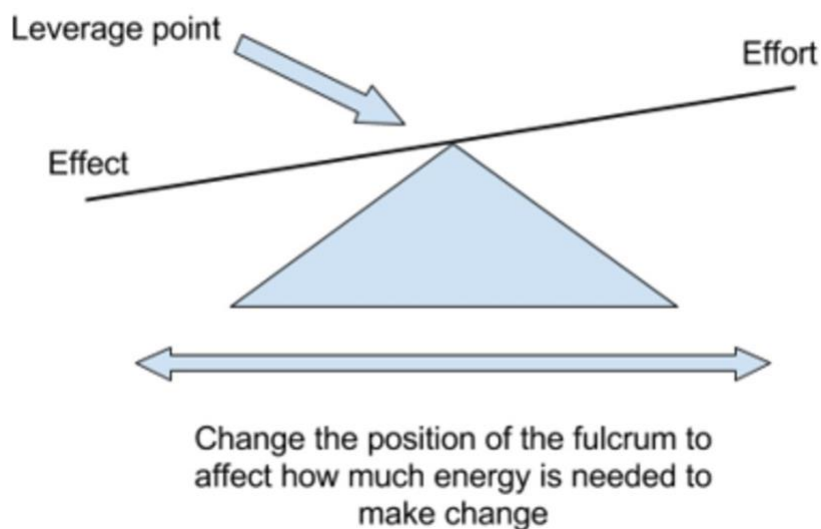


Note: From Dixon and Spotten (2015). *Leverage Points.* Permaculture Productions. *Used with permission.*

Once a potential leverage point is identified, it is common to discover additional research and data gaps that must be addressed before moving forward. Closing such a gap is the purpose of this study, the first of a planned research series that explores whether the school performance accountability designation might be a useful guide for intentional investment of resources to lower the use of exclusionary discipline. The purpose of this study was to compare differences in the use of exclusionary discipline between Tennessee's public schools that received the 2018 accountability designation of Reward, which meant high-performing, and those designated as Priority, which indicated low-performing. Specifically, this research sought to identify differences between those performance accountability designations related to discipline types and certain subgroups.

**Theoretical Framework**

Meadows (2008) described a *system* as an interconnected collection of elements (or components) organized for a function or purpose. A system's parts do not operate independently of

each other. Instead, they impact and interconnect with each other. These interconnections are formed by relationships that hold the separate elements together. As a result, the system may adapt, evolve, and even exhibit behaviors aimed at self-preservation. The interconnectedness that produces such active metamorphosis is accomplished through information.

As early as 2001, Morrison and Skiba warned of the multidimensionality of the school discipline system and stressed that any attempt to develop a predictive model of school discipline also must consider the many dynamic and layered elements involved. Rodriguez and Welsh (2022) found that capturing the entire school discipline system required a focus on indicators within the interconnectedness of school discipline patterns. They stressed that multiple measures are required to reveal the factors involved with discipline use in schools and that diverse and complex situations may not allow for one-size-fits-all policies. Following that logic, the underpinning for this study is the systems theory framework.

Systems theory emphasizes the interactions between and within the separate parts that make up the whole by considering how they are connected, related, and relevant to the system they combine to create (McMahon, 2017). When one system element changes, the effect on other elements may be a ripple, an explosion, or something in between. As systems are dynamic with continuous change, this framework makes it possible to consider the problem from a holistic vantage point, with the recognition that the best opportunity for improvement comes from ability to control variability and measure outcomes within the system supporting the problem (Bryk et al., 2017). The following research questions guided this study to examine the interconnectedness or relationship of school accountability designations in Tennessee and the use of exclusionary discipline practices:

**Research Questions**

*Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension?

*Research Question 2*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension?

*Research Question 3*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion?

*Research Question 4*

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools?

*Research Question 5*

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school

suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools?

**Research Design**

Causal-comparative research designs explore differences between pre-existing or derived populations on dependent variables or outcomes (Schenker & Rumrill, 2004). In this study, the populations had been assigned one of two TDoE-labeled school performance designations - high-performing (Reward) or low-performing (Priority). There is considerable overlap in the schools assigned to the third accountability designation used in Tennessee, *Focused*, and those designated as Priority so only the upper and lower performance designations were included in this study. Also considered were select population subgroups monitored by ESSA: Black/Hispanic/Native American (BHN), economically disadvantaged (ED), English learners (EL), and students with disabilities (SWD). These variables were considered in relation to three distinct types of exclusionary discipline practices - expulsion, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension.

**Key Terms Defined**

Three discipline practices commonly used in America's schools fit this study's definition of exclusionary as related to equity – in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. See Table 1 for definitions of these and other key terms relevant to this study.

**Table 1.**

*Relevant Terms Defined*

| Term | Definition | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Accountability Designations | A key element of Tennessee's accountability system designed to comply with federal law, TDoE names schools considered to be doing well and those in need of additional support. The computations and reporting formats have evolved since the designations were first published in Tennessee for 2017-2018. However, Reward schools consistently have referenced those schools considered high-performing or improving in achievement and growth for all students and student groups. Conversely, the Priority school designation is assigned to schools considered in most need of support and improvement. | (TDoE, 2017, 2018g, 2019c, 2021d, 2022b) |
| Equity | "In the field of education, equity means that every student has access to effective teachers and the resources, experiences, and rigor they need to be successful." | (TDoE, 2018c, p. 20) |
| Exclusionary discipline | "The removal of a student from his/her regular academic program for disciplinary purposes. "This study includes expulsion, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension in this definition. | (TDoE, 2018c, p. 20) |
| Expulsion | A student was expelled from all school districts. settings, for more than 10 days (about 1 and a half weeks), with total cessation of educational services. | (TDoE, 2022b) |
| In-school Suspension | A student was removed from their regular classroom and assigned to an in-school suspension. program for 10 or fewer days. Incidences of greater than one-half of a school day are recorded. | (TDoE, 2022b) |
| Leading Indicators | A measure(s) used within the systems theory framework that can be used as an alert about a risk that a negative trend or problem is likely to occur in the future with a certain population, in a specific environment, or at a specific time. | (Meadows, 1999) |
| Out-of-school Suspension | A student was removed from their regular classroom and barred from school grounds for 10. or fewer days and did not receive educational. services. | (TDoE, 2022b) |
| System | An interconnected collection of elements (or components) organized for a function or purpose. A system's parts do not operate independently of each other. As a result, the system may adapt, evolve, change, and exhibit behaviors aimed at self-preservation. | (Meadows, 2008) |

**Dissertation Organization**

Chapter 1 established the context within which the problem of practice exists. It also identifies

the purpose of the study, and explains the theoretical construct that informs this research. Finally, the

research questions are first presented in this chapter, along with a summary of the research design, a table of relevant terms, and this chapter guide.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the study. It provides an in-depth look at concerns about exclusionary school discipline practices, discusses the demands for change, sources for alternative options, federal requirements, state responses, and the complexities of the issue in Tennessee. A summary is provided of what the literature review reveals and what is missing relevant to the problem of practice.

Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology. In this chapter, the research questions are restated along with the relevant processes and statistical methods used to evaluate them following commonly used quantitative research reporting protocols. Chapter 4 provides the statistical results of the five research questions presented via narratives and tables, following commonly used quantitative research reporting protocols. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the data and statistical analysis. Implications, recommendations for consideration by the public, the educational sector, and future researchers also are provided in this concluding chapter.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The following literature review provides context for the problem of the continued use of exclusionary school discipline practices – specifically, expulsion and all forms of suspension – despite numerous countries and fields of study warning of potential generational harm to children. It considers components related to the problem that may influence educators' decisions related to discipline. It lays the groundwork for applying a systems-level, continuous improvement approach to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices and identifies gaps in the literature relevant to the research questions.

**A Macro-view of the Problem**

The clamor to stop using damaging school discipline practices because of growing proof of long-term harm has been rising across multiple areas of expertise in recent years. While several commonly used discipline practices are included in this concern, those that exclude students from learning in a classroom with their peers are among the most egregious, critics say (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2003; Arcia, 2006; Hemphill et al., 2006; Perry, 2001; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). During the 2015-2016 academic year, (the most complete national dataset available at the time of this study), more than 2.7 million K–12 public school students across the nation received one or more out-of-school suspensions (USCCR, 2019). That represented about 6 percent of all children attending a public school that year. The most impacted tend to be already at risk in American society (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Kaufman et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). The true extent of how often such practices are used in schools is unknown. No comprehensive national database defines or tracks all instances and outcomes of school discipline in the United States (Gerlinger et al., 2021). The best available dataset is collected and housed by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (USDoE/OCR, 2014, 2018, 2021, 2022a). That data originates as a self-report by individual schools, which is progressively aggregated through district, state, and national levels. Underreporting is commonplace (Ball, 2021; Lyon-Ballay, 2019; Schimke & Asmar, 2016).

*Defining the Harm*

While many educators consider expulsion and suspension as integral and necessary parts of the education process (Nese & McIntosh, 2016), a growing body of research from fields as diverse as neuroscience, psychology, sociology, applied behavior analysis, anthropology, and economics agree that punitive and exclusionary discipline practices have long-term negative ramifications (Craven, 2021; Gershoff, 2010; Perry, 2001; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Sousa, 2010). Articles and books abound that document the damage commonly used disciplinary practices such as expulsion and suspension have on the brain; particularly for those with a past trauma history (Day et al., 2017; Greene, 2018; Hammond, 2015). The American Academy of Pediatrics warned that a single brief suspension could set a child up for a lifetime of problems (Hemphill et al., 2006).

As cross-disciplinary evidence converged with recently fanned interest in social justice reforms, research publications that detail the numerous short and long-term negative impacts of such practices in schools have increased. The literature collectively positions America's schools as an early conditioning environment for systemic bias applied to race and ability, with devastating outcomes (Cohen, 2016). Child development, neuroscience, and economic experts agree that how a country uses its children's early school years dramatically impacts each person's adulthood and the generations that follow (Daruich, 2018; Heckman, 2008; Jacobsen, 2019).

Any moment wasted while a child is at school is a lost opportunity to increase abilities that could impact their future outcomes (García et al., 2017). The need to ensure children learn positive lessons without fear or damage to themselves or others puts increased urgency and weight onto the daily decisions made inside school buildings (Magnuson et al., 2007). The literature emphasizes that without systemic change across U.S. education, common school discipline practices will continue to wreak havoc on the future (Ryan & Goodram, 2013), with concerns including, but not limited, to:

- Lower academic achievement at the individual and school levels, including increasing drop-out rates and failure to graduate on time (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2019; Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Losen, 2015; Nese et al., 2021; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014a; Warmbold-Brann et al., 2017)

- Injury and abuse (physical, psychological, emotional) (Baker, 2019; Gershoff, 2010)

- Extended mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Gershoff, 2010)

- Erosion of engagement with school and teachers (Dishion & Snyder, 2016; Gershoff, 2010)

- Reduced cognitive ability (Gershoff, 2010)

- Increased delinquency rates (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014a; TDOE, 2018a; Tobin et al., 1996)

- Increased adult aggression and antisocial behavior (Gershoff, 2010; Perry & Morris, 2014)

- Missed instruction (Arcia, 2006; Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; TDOE, 2018a; USDoE/OCR & USDoJ/CRD, 2014)

- Negative labeling of students (Baker, 2019; Losen, 2015; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; TDoE, 2018a)

- Failure to identify students' misbehavior as a potential symptom of other problems (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Greene, 2018; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003)

- Negative impact on non-punished peers (Perry & Morris, 2014)

### The Most Impacted

The literature documents significant concern about the continuing impact of authoritarian practices that offer minimal, if any, flexibility for children living with known disabilities and those who are not White. The numbers are particularly stark for males of Black, Brown, or Mixed heritage (Bateman et al., 2015; Bloom & Owens, 2013; Cohen, 2016; Mallett, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Morris, 2016;

Smolkowski et al., 2016; Sousa, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Young et al., 2018).

A single measure graphically illustrates the reason for this concern – the number of days of lost

instruction per 100 students by race and disability in 2015-2016 (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). That year,

Black students were kicked out of their classrooms nearly five times as often as their White peers. Black

students nationally lost 66 days (about 2 months) of instruction to suspension per 100 students

compared to 14 days (about 2 weeks) per 100 White students. The concern is amplified when

considering that Black students in grades K-12 only accounted for about 15 percent of total student

enrollment in 2015-2016 (Civil Rights Data Collection). Black students regularly are overrepresented in

school disciplinary actions (USDoE/OCR, 2018; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). For

example, that same year, Black students accounted for approximately:

- 31% of the students referred to law enforcement or arrested.

- 39% of students who received out-of-school suspension.

- 33% of students who were expelled.

- 27% of students restrained in school.

- 23% of students secluded in school.

While the problem impacts Black students the most, others also struggle. During the 2015-2016

school year, students with known disabilities lost 44 days (about 1 and a half months) of instruction per

100 students to suspension, compared to nondisabled peers' loss of 20 days (about 3 weeks) per 100

students (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). To combat this and other issues of discrimination based on ability,

the IDEA (2004) requires states to monitor numerous metrics in each school (Lee, n.d.). The issue

becomes even more problematic at the intersection of race and ability. The USDoE data demonstrates a

consistent pattern of schools kicking out Black students with disabilities at much higher rates than those

with disabilities who are not Black (USCCR, 2019).

Pushing students out of school when they do not comply with adult expectations starts early.
According to a 2014 joint federal report (USDoE/OCR & USDHHS), children in state-funded preschool
programs were expelled from voluntary programs at three times the rate of children in kindergarten
through 12th grade. In most cases, the children were kicked out for non-violent offenses, such as not
following school rules. Child development and behavior experts point out that 3- and 4-year-olds are too
young to follow all directions and expectations, particularly if they have language or other cognitive
development difficulties (LeBlanc et al., 2006; McGreevy & Fry, 2012). In March 2017, the Center on
Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) warned that preschool behavior problems are the best
predictor of adolescent and adult imprisonment. It followed with a series of strong recommendations
designed to reduce the instances of young children being suspended or expelled from school (Connors-
Tadros & Hammond, 2017).

While Black students and those with disabilities are the most impacted, environments that focus
on controlling through punishment also impact students who were not kicked out of school (Leung-
Gagné et al., 2022). Research shows that students who attend schools that use harsh practices but are
not expelled or suspended produce lower test scores compared to students' scores from schools that do
not use exclusionary discipline practices as often.

***Sustaining Forces***

Despite the numerous articles and books exploring disproportionality at the intersection of race,
special education, and discipline, no consensus has yet emerged that links the three to a specific root
cause (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2020). While it is beyond the scope of this study to
analyze all potential factors, it is important to note that the color of a child's skin does not track to the
increased likelihood of misbehavior at school. Instead, numerous other factors seem to contribute, such
as incorrect assumptions and subjective opinions about what a child can or should do.

**Incorrect Assumptions.** Adults tend to punish children with the incorrect assumption that it will accomplish one or more of the following short and long-term goals (Gershoff, 2010):

- Immediate safety

- Short-term compliance

- Long-term compliance

- Reduce long-term aggression and antisocial behavior.

Many adults assume that exclusionary discipline practices increase safety in schools by putting distance between a disruptive child and their peers and teachers. The literature does not support that assumption (Gerlinger, 2022; Gershoff, 2010; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Valant, 2018). The literature cites zero-tolerance policies – those that automatically force educators to apply predetermined punishments for specific student offenses - as one of many common policies that contribute to systemic bias against already marginalized students without increasing safety (Kafka, 2013). Instead, zero-tolerance school policies and practices effectively push public school students – particularly those of color or living with disabilities – out of their classrooms and into the criminal justice system (Cohen, 2016; Kafka, 2013).

Others assume that school discipline practices positively impact educational outcomes. For example, school discipline is routinely applied with the expectation that it will increase a student's ability to develop self-control (Osher et al., 2010). Research shows the effect size varies with the individual, with most gains only being small to moderate, inconsistent person-to-person, and rarely long-lasting (Li et al., 2020).

**The Challenge of Subjectivity.** Literature related to school discipline decision-making reveals numerous studies reflecting subjective opinion and inference. There is some agreement in the literature that significant safety concerns should be quickly addressed. Serious offenses such as bringing a weapon or drugs to school or causing physical harm to others sometimes occur and require immediate action to

protect everyone at the time and deter the likelihood of future incidents, according to the U.S.

Government Accountability Office (2018).

Consensus evaporates when considering which other antecedents should lead to discipline,

particularly when involving Black and Brown males and/or students considered to have disabilities.

Common behaviors that often get students into trouble, such as eye-rolling, smirking instead of

studying, and talking back, are subjective. What one teacher may label as talking back and being

disrespectful, another may find clever and funny. The result is that most discipline is meted out for

minor infractions, such as disrupting the instruction, not following directions, and other behaviors

labeled subjectively as defiant and noncompliant (Amemiya et al., 2020; Baker, 2019; Eliason et al.,

2013; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011).

In a 2012 study of all 9th & 10th graders in a Midwestern state during a single year, Baker studied

student and school characteristics in relation to expulsion and suspension for defiance. She found that

certain specific student characteristics (race, socioeconomic status, and achievement scores) predicted

the students most likely to be suspended or expelled for behavior labeled as defiance. The same study

found specific school characteristics, such as race, the percentage of students receiving free/reduced

lunch, teacher experience, teacher race, dropout rate, and the school's locale, also were predictive of

where students would be banned from attending school for behavior labeled as defiance. School

characteristics proved to be a stronger predictor than individual student characteristics, with the

behavior of the adults in certain schools also contributing to adverse student behavioral outcomes

(Baker, 2019). Talking back, talking out, getting up, sleeping in class, laughing when expected to be

serious, not following directions, not following rules, and a host of other so-called offenses that vary

from school to school and person by person are examples of the types of behavior that most often get

students into trouble in America (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Many such behaviors

can be traced to differences between the adult and child's cultural perspectives or past skills training

and conditioning (Baker, 2019; Hammond, 2015). Limited self-awareness on the part of the adult

regarding the implicit bias humans carry into each interaction can also influence the outcome (Baker,

2019; Greene, 2009; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Subjectivity and interpretation create significant problems

for otherwise minor offenses. Table 2 provides some known perspective differences across cultures that

contribute to misunderstandings and adult misinterpretations of student behavior (The IRIS Center,

2012, 2021). While not an explanation for every gap between student behavior and adult expectations,

cultural gaps are an invisible antecedent for many encounters that lead to student punishment,

according to an ongoing collection of interviews conducted by social justice advocates trying to break

apart the school-to-prison pipeline (Lives in the Balance, 2023).

**Table 2.**

*Known Perspective Differences Across Cultures*

| Perspective #1 | Perspective #2 |
|---|---|
| Respect for authority figures | |
| Teachers are automatically regarded as an authority figure (based on role/position or age). | As a new member of the community, teachers must earn respect. |
| Interpersonal space | |
| Standing close to someone when speaking is seen as violating personal space. | Standing close to someone when speaking indicates a close relationship. |
| Eye contact | |
| Eye contact conveys listening. | A lack of eye contact indicates deference or respect. |
| Verbal interactions | |
| Verbally conveying information in a direct and assertive manner is valued. | Verbally conveying information in an indirect and passive manner is valued. |
| Providing directions | |
| Providing directions in the form of a question (e.g., "Can you join us for group time?") implies an expectation to comply. | Providing directions in the form of a question implies an expectation of choice or an option to decline. |

*Note: Adapted from The IRIS Center (2012, 2021).*

Another contributing issue with subjectivity is that some adults expect children to exhibit skills that are not yet in their repertoire and do not understand that skill proficiency changes with the environment and other variables (Greene, 2018; Greene & Ablon, 2005). The literature also demonstrates an increased understanding that when a child does not meet adult expectations, many of the behaviors of concern are out of the child's reliable developmental and learned control (Greene, 2018; Greene & Ablon, 2005; Perry, 2001; Sousa, 2010). In other words, the gap labeled by many adults as defiance or disobedience often does not emerge because a child will not do as an adult expects; it typically is because the child cannot yet do the skills expected.

The American Academy of Pediatrics provides a developmental checklist that outlines skills found in 75% or more of children at specific ages. The 2022 guidelines for 3-year-olds suggest setting a few, simple-to-follow rules for children to follow. It provides instructions on how to respond when the child complies. When a child breaks the rule, the guidance is to model the correct behavior, not punishment. These guidelines make it clear that learning to follow rules is a skill that must be taught to children of preschool age and cannot be expected to be mastered at that age.

*Calls For Change*

**The World Is Watching.** The literature indicates the world is watching America cling to some of the most damaging ways of demanding social compliance from school children while other countries race to outlaw them. When measuring what constitutes free and equitable quality education, United Nations ranks America behind numerous countries often considered among the world's most economically poor when measuring how members were doing on the 2015 joint commitment toward sustainable development. The United States and the other members of the United Nations signed the commitment. It was intended to drive a 15-year agenda that contains 17 goals designed to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and opportunities of people around the world. The goals include a promise to provide all children with quality, equitable education, free from cost,

discrimination, and violence regardless of life circumstances (Afifi et al., 2017; World Health

Organization, 2019). With less than a decade before the 2030 deadline, America repeatedly lagged far

behind on many of the education measures tracked by the United Nations, primarily because of limited

progress on justice and equity measures (U.S. Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.). Among the

discipline practices the U.N. has called to end are all punishment practices that keep children from their

classrooms, including suspension and expulsion. Responses to federal directives issued in part to meet

the country's U.N. commitment on this topic confirm that the states are far from united on the

approach forward (Brooks & Erwin, 2019).

      **Relevant Federal Directives.** On January 8, 2014, the USDoE issued a joint "Dear Colleague"

letter with the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (USDoE/OCR & USDoJ/CRD). It shared

research by the Civil Rights Data Collection office that demonstrated students of certain racial or ethnic

groups were disciplined more than their White peers. It reported Black students without disabilities

were three times more likely than White students without disabilities to be expelled or suspended.

While only 15% of the sample population, Black students accounted for 35% of students suspended one

time that year - 44% of those suspended more than once. They made up 36% of students expelled. The

letter called for action to remedy the "disparate impact," warning that schools may be in violation of

civil rights laws if they continued using policies that negatively impacted certain student groups, even if

the policies were not created or implemented with deliberate discriminatory intent (Blad, 2021;

USDoE/OCR & USDoJ/CRD, 2014).

      A few months later, the USDoE issued a joint statement with the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services (USDoE/OCR & USDHHS, 2014) reporting that being expelled or suspended in early

childhood increased the odds the student would drop out of school before graduation by as much as 10

times. It also warned that exclusionary discipline practices increased the risk of academic failure, grade

retention, negative school attitudes, and incarceration. According to that report, this happened to boys

4.5 times more often than girls, with Black boys making up at least 42 percent of the preschoolers expelled.

ESSA was signed into law on Dec. 10, 2015. Included were reporting requirements, such as requiring each state to annually public a *State Report Card*. It also included several provisions designed to encourage states to implement alternatives to discipline that pushed children out of school or risked harm. For example, it made federal funds available to schools for the implementation of alternative programs such as a popular program known as *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*, professional development to update classroom management practices, trauma-responsive education, and school-based mental health services (Dignity in Schools, n.d.). Through ESSA, the federal government expanded requirements to include annual reporting of all incidents that forced students out of the classroom. This included expulsion, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension (USDoE/OCR & USDHHS, 2014). These requirements are framed as protecting students' civil rights, standing upon the foundation laid by IDEA (2004) in support of effective education of individuals with disabilities. In its September 2019 guidance document regarding the State Report Card requirements, the USDoE provided a checklist to assist states, districts, and schools in preparing and disseminating the required report cards (USDoE/OESE, 2019). The checklist includes 19 individual report card elements related to student or teacher performance data and indicates when disaggregated reporting by student subgroup is required. Among those elements are the three exclusionary discipline practices of interest to this study: in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. Those metrics must be disaggregated at the school level into the following subgroups: all students, each major racial and ethnic group, children with disabilities, English learners, and by gender. The literature indicates that all but one of the remaining 16 required elements are negatively impacted by exclusionary school discipline practices. (See Appendix B for a list of ESSA Report Card Metrics Negatively Impacted by Exclusionary

Discipline). Summaries of district and statewide discipline data are available on the federal Civil Rights

Data Collection website.

In 2016, the U.S. Justice and Education departments issued another joint statement emphasizing

the need to change common school discipline practices, including exclusionary practices. In the

accompanying publication, *Rethinking School Discipline Guidance*, the federal government encouraged

state officials to adopt one or more of the many alternative discipline practices proven capable of

developing, supporting, and educating children in ways that build up, rather than undermine, their

futures (USDoE/OCR & USDoJ/CRD, 2016).

In July 2019, the USCCR released its briefing report, *Beyond Suspensions: Examining School*

*Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities*

to the White House and Congress. Highlights from the report's recommendations include:

- Support for the USDoE's OCR to continue offering guidance to school communities regarding how to comply with federal nondiscrimination laws related to race and disability in the imposition of school discipline.

- Ensuring all teachers receive resources, guidance, training, and support to stop discriminatory discipline in schools.

- Increased funding from Congress to help states and school districts provide the needed training and support.

- Expanded grants from the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education to fund these necessary changes.

- Rigorous enforcement of civil rights laws to address discrimination in school discipline policies.

On July 19, 2022, the USDoE's OCR published six guidance documents to remind parents,

educators, and other stakeholders of the need to support students with disabilities and how to avoid the

discriminatory use of student discipline under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The

guidance was framed as a civil rights issue. The documents included the extensive list of potentially

negative outcomes that accompany exclusionary discipline practices, as well as directives on how to implement evidence-based alternatives.

**Other Voices.** The federal calls to action have been joined by numerous interested parties, both in and out of education. Calls for change can be found in the public, private, non-for-profit, and governmental sectors. The following examples represent only a small sample.

As early as 2003, the American Academy of Pediatrics warned that academic issues, student alienation, crime, substance abuse, and other challenges to an individual's future could follow suspension and expulsion. In 2008, the American Psychological Association released the conclusions of an extensive investigation of zero-tolerance school policies conducted by a 20-member task force. The report found minimal if any evidence of effectiveness for such policies, while raising serious concerns about the continued use of exclusionary and related practices. The National Education Association passed a resolution in 2015 to focus its membership, representing the largest U.S. labor union, on fighting institutional racism (NEA Center for Social Justice, 2021). Included was a commitment to support programs designed to dismantle factors that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, such as exclusionary discipline practices. Shortly after, the American Federation of Teachers formed a racial equity task force to determine how the union could reform discipline practices in schools, among other related actions (Cohen, 2016).

At the preschool level, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes developed a detailed report in 2017 to provide information and resources to assist states in developing better policies on early childhood suspension and expulsion (Connors-Tadros & Hammond, 2017). The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments tracks a list of school discipline laws by state. Its most recent compilation, published in 2022, required more than 4,600 pages to detail all relevant school discipline laws across the nation.

Numerous organizations focusing on social justice, including the ACLU, the NAACP, and the

Council of State Governments, Justice Center have long called for systemic change in school discipline

practices across the U.S. (Council of State Governments, Justice Center, 2014; Losen & Whitaker, 2018;

NAACP, 2010). Each report investing thousands of hours and other resources to conceptualize studies,

collect and analyze data and prepare reports advocating for change in the name of equality and justice

for the students, particularly those living on the margins of society. The literature reveals nearly two

decades of attention on this problem related to social justice, with interest escalating steeply in the past

five years. These and the many other efforts and calls for action inform the need to find leverage points

that make it easier and more effective to reduce exclusionary discipline practices, particularly the

disproportionate use against children who suffer other inequalities.

### *Promising Alternatives Exist*

Some progress has been made, with 32 states having taken some legislative action related to

exclusionary discipline practices as of November 2020, though few banned it completely (Georgetown

Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020). For the first time in American school history, literature and

practice offer numerous promising options for replacing punitive discipline practices such as expulsion

and suspension. It is beyond the scope of this study to review all of the alternatives that exist to replace

exclusionary discipline practices, but a growing body of evidence stress the need for comprehensive

adoption at least at the school-building level and fidelity in implementation (see Lives in the Balance; the

Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support; The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and

Emotional Learning, [CASEL]; and the IRIS Center, developed and maintained by Vanderbilt University's

Peabody College).

**Adopting Alternatives.** Many school districts have responded to the call for change and have

made the necessary investments. Within a year after the 2014 federal call to action, 23 of the 100

largest U.S. school districts had reformed their discipline policies (Cohen, 2016). Approaches varied from

limiting the use of suspension to completely banning certain types of suspension or reducing how long

students could be banned from their classrooms. Others defined what discipline practices could be used

for what level of offenses (Cohen, 2016). Skiba et al. (2014b) found that school-level variables, including

principals' perspectives on discipline, appear to be among the strongest predictors of racial disparities

related to the use of suspensions and expulsion in schools. They found that schools and districts wanting

to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in discipline did best when focusing interventions at the school

and classroom level.

The National Conference of State Legislatures tracks states' responses to calls to eliminate

punitive and exclusionary practices, efforts to implement restorative discipline practices, and monitoring

for the disparate use of discipline in population subgroups (Brooks & Erwin, 2019). According to the

nonprofit, the results remain mixed at the time of this study, with several states passing laws to make it

illegal to use the discipline practices of concern and others using legislative controls to constrain their

use. For example, California quickly joined the movement and in 2014, became the first state to make it

illegal to suspend young students for "willful defiance," which included behavior such as refusing to take

off a hat or putting away a cell phone (Cohen, 2016). Out-of-class rates there plummeted. Comparable

results followed in other states that quickly acted (Brooks & Erwin, 2019). A review of several databases

that aggregate state responses on this topic (Council of State Governments, Justice Center, 2014;

Education Commission of the States, 2023; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments,

2022) reveal dramatically different responses exist across the nation. For example, a subset of North

Carolina schools is labeled in the literature as "persistently exclusionary" (Lindsay, 2018). Those schools

report suspending about 25 percent of their student population yearly, for multiple years.

**Barriers to Adopting Alternatives.** Sometimes factors outside of education intervene. For

example, an important pivot from the federal focus on eliminating punitive and exclusionary practices in

public schools occurred in 2018 (Brooks & Erwin, 2019). The Trump administration officially rescinded

the 2014 federal "Dear Colleague" guidance referenced above following the recommendation of the

federal Commission on School Safety (Blad, 2021). The new federal Commission was formed after 17

students and staff members lost their lives when a former student open-fired at a Parkland, FL, high

school on Feb. 14, 2018. The Obama administration had touted the Broward County School District's use

of alternative school discipline practices in its schools, including Parkland's Stoneman Douglas High

School, where the shooting occurred. Some victims' families, survivors, and Republican members of

Congress claimed the mass shooting proved the ineffectiveness of the alternative discipline program

(Blad, 2021). In its 2018 publication titled, *The Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety*,

the new Commission pushed decision-making power about school discipline firmly into the hands of

state and local governments. The 2018 publication, *Questions & Answers,* accompanied the recension

document, *On Racial Discrimination and School Discipline*. It stated the previous guidance was not

necessary given the provisions of the federal Title VI, which prohibits discrimination based on race.

The recension of the 2014 "Dear Colleague" guidance raised concerns among those who support

eliminating punitive and exclusionary discipline practices (American Education Research Association,

2021; Lindsay, 2018), while being praised by those who prefer local educators decide how to handle

school environments, they feel are unsafe (Blad, 2021). When the Democrats regained federal control in

2020, the focus on eliminating exclusionary practices resumed, albeit tempered. For example, a report

released by the USDoE, OCR in June 2021 noted that Black boys received both in-school suspensions

(20.1%) and out-of-school suspensions (24.9%) at rates more than three times their share of total

student enrollment (7.7%). This was the largest disparity across all race/ethnicity and gender groupings

addressed in the report. However, the literature also shows that this time the federal government

stopped short of returning to the full-throated focus on removing exclusionary discipline practices. For

example, while the 2014 "Dear Colleague" letter referenced above remains on the OCR website at the

time of this study, immediately above the letter was a notation in red text dated July 30, 2021, that

cautions the document and its statements are "UNDER REVIEW" (USDoE/OCR & USDoJ/CRD, 2014). The notation highlights a Request for Information issued by the USDoE on June 8, 2021, that solicited written comments from the public regarding school discipline practices for pre-K through 12th grade. Comments were accepted until July 23, 2021 (Request for Information Regarding the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline, 2021). At the time of this study, the notation on the OCR website stated that the caution should not be interpreted as a reinstatement of the guidance provided in the 2014 "Dear Colleague" letter. The results of the Request for Information were not found during this literature review.

Similar fluctuations in focus were found in several states, including Tennessee, where educators attempt to comply with federal ESSA requirements while also trying to appease directives from state lawmakers. A review of discipline laws for the 50 states, District of Columbia, and U.S. Territories (USDoE, 2022) revealed significant variability in the laws governing school discipline and public monitoring (Kelley et al., 2021; Rafa, 2018a). The variability found in the literature at the federal and state levels increases the challenge for educators interested in finding a viable alternative to exclusionary discipline. It also reflects the arguments of critics of discipline reform who insist that banning or restricting suspension and expulsion take away the limited options educators already have for addressing student misbehavior and may increase safety concerns (Rafa, 2018b). Such concerns ignore the evidence that suspension and expulsion do not make schools safer or reduce future misbehavior by the same children (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). The literature indicated that resolving the exclusionary discipline debate will require a solution flexible enough to address the concerns on both sides of the issue – and do so in a way that requires minimal additional effort or resources if widespread acceptance is to be achieved. Reducing variability is one approach used in systems theory when trying to make improvements (Bryk et al., 2017). Given the variations among the states regarding school

discipline, the current study focuses on a single state that has publicly struggled with the complexities of the issue - Tennessee.

**Tensions in Tennessee**

*A Representative State*

Tennessee is an example of one of the states that moved publicly to address its exclusionary discipline problem in 2018 in alignment with the federal government push tied to ESSA but since has made little visible progress. A review of the literature, reports by and about the Tennessee Department of Education (TDoE), and legislation related to school discipline practices passed by the state in recent years provide insight into the challenges facing Tennessee educators interested in educational equity. A selection of those factors summarized below provides context for the complexities that impede resolution. As a result, Tennessee provides a representative system within which to search for possible leverage points with the potential to reduce exclusionary discipline and other equity concerns despite competing contingencies.

*Kicking Them Out Early*

The need to resolve the concerns in Tennessee starts with the youngest students and continues through all grades. The state ranks high on lists for the worst conditions for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and children living with disabilities partly because of high rates and disparate use of punitive and exclusionary discipline practices (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). For example, in 2018, the TDoE reported that 120 districts offered voluntary preschool during the 2016-2017 school year. Twenty-five of those districts banned preschoolers from attending school a combined total of 110 times that year. Breaking school rules was the most common reason these 3- or 4-year-olds were excluded from school, despite it being developmentally appropriate for a child in that age group to have trouble following rules. The Tennessee report does not explain why these young children were punished for exhibiting developmentally appropriate behaviors. That same year, more than 1,169 kindergarteners across

Tennessee received disciplinary action significant enough to be reported to the state. More than 80 percent of these were for not following the rules. Eighteen percent were for violent offenses. (TDOE, 2018a).

*TDoE's Response to the Federal Call to Action*

TDoE long had been working toward improving performance on the 14 compliance indicators required by IDEA (2004). Some of the effort was forced by the federal government. For example, each state must monitor and resolve significant discrepancies for children with IEPs, as well as for factors related to race or ethnicity for children with IEPs (Rollins, 2022). To monitor IDEA indicators and ESSA requirements, the TDoE released several publications in 2017 and 2018 to guide priorities and inform policies to meet federal mandates.

**Protecting Preschoolers.** In 2017, in response to federal guidance and the TDoE's own report noted above, the Tennessee Legislature passed Chapter 204 of the Public Acts of 2017, which made it illegal to suspend preschoolers. As part of that law, the TDoE also was directed to review all laws and policies related to exclusionary discipline practices in public schools for students in pre-K and kindergarten, and to review discipline data for that population. It also was required to review the impact of exclusionary discipline, the benefits of restorative practices, plus compile resources available for teachers and parents. Today, those licensed to teach preschool and kindergarten in Tennessee must take preparatory courses in child development.

Tennessee's Commission on Children and Youth followed with a policy brief in February 2018. It highlighted the national problem of preschool children being pushed out of schools and supported extensive reform to the state's school discipline practices. The brief instructed Tennessee educators to take a multiple-tier approach with the implementation of evidence-based alternative strategies at the school, classroom, and individual student levels to support equity and build a strong educational foundation for generations to come.

**Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook.** The *Playbook* (TDoE, 2018c) was among the TDoE's

guiding publications to support ESSA compliance. It also reflected an effort by the TDoE to demonstrate

to the public that the equity concerns identified in numerous districts and schools had been heard and

were being addressed. The *Playbook* included seven "equity commitments," including "Reduce

Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates" (TDoE, 2018c, pp. 2, 8-9). Specific to that

commitment were 22 recommendations for actions by schools, districts, school boards, and community

members (See Appendix C for the discipline commitment and list of related recommendations).

**Tennessee's ESSA Response.** The *Playbook* was followed by the release of the *Every Child*

*Succeeds Act: Building on Success in Tennessee, ESSA State Plan* (TDOE, 2018f). Provisions in ESSA

required states to increase indicators of student success and school quality under a school accountability

metric (TDOE, 2018f). In response, Tennessee's new ESSA plan introduced new metrics that assigned

accountability designations to each school based on a criteria-based performance spectrum, ranking

each on a scale that ranges from low performance to highly successful. The state's plan received federal

approval for the implementation and high accolades for its approach to meeting equity efforts.

**Trauma-Informed Discipline.** In May 2019, the Tennessee Legislature passed HB405,

acknowledging a child's reaction to trauma can interfere with brain development, learning, and behavior

and requiring Tennessee districts and schools to adopt a "trauma-informed discipline policy." In

response in August 2019, the TDoE released guidance instructing districts to develop discipline policies

that attempted to straddle the line of balancing accountability with consideration of the behaviors that

traumatic backgrounds may influence, set expectations of school and classroom rules that minimize

disruptions, while using proactive positive supports to counter issues and several other components

designed to reduce violence in schools. The required criteria mirrored the verbiage included in the

signed legislation (TDoE, 2019d; Tennessee Secretary of State, 2023). The TDoE guidance warned that

the "discipline practices, such as restraint, corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion, also have

the potential to re-traumatize students" (p. 4) and directed schools to reduce the use of exclusionary

discipline practices for all students – not just those who have known adverse life experiences. While

TDoE's efforts in 2017 and 2019 to update discipline practices received support from the state

legislature, the literature suggests such progress abruptly stalled in recent years, offering a glimpse into

the complexities of improving equity measures.

### *Recent Related Decisions in Tennessee*

Current Tennessee Governor Bill Lee was elected to his first term in November 2018, taking

office the following January. The *Playbook* was published in the Spring of 2018, just as another

Republican governor, Bill Haslam, wrapped up his eighth year leading the state. He was supported by

Commissioner of Education Candice McQueen at its publication. The Tennessee Constitution allows the

governor to appoint the Commissioner of Education to lead the TDoE, specifically stating that person

"serves at the pleasure of the governor" (Tenn. Code Ann. § 4-3-102). Lee campaigned as a deeply

religious conservative (Meyer, 2018) and made education reform a cornerstone of his political platform.

As the administration changed, Commissioner McQueen, who is personally acknowledged in the

*Playbook* for efforts leading to its creation (TDoE, 2018c, p. 21), left public service to work for an

education not-for-profit (Gonzales, 2018). Lee appointed Penny Schwinn as Commissioner of Education

when he became governor. She remained in that role during this study. Several laws have been passed

in Tennessee in the past five years that concern those advocating against the disproportionate use of

discipline in Tennessee schools.

**The Teacher's Discipline Act.** In 2021, Lee also championed a law aimed at eliminating

exclusionary school discipline practices. That year, Tennessee's Legislature debated HB0016, dubbed *The*

*Teacher's Discipline Act* (Aldrich, 2021; Tennessee General Assembly, 2021a). Republicans pushed

through the primarily partisan effort to establish requirements and procedures for teachers to discipline

students in their classrooms. The proposal passed and Lee signed it into law. They went into effect on

Jan. 1, 2022. If a prescribed process is followed, teachers now are authorized to remove a child from

their classroom for unwanted behavior. Once a child is removed from the classroom, the responsibility

for resolving the issue shifts to the principal. This leaves the teacher to carry on in the classroom without

disruption from the removed child. No additional support for training for the principals or other school

staff members was included in the bill. Child advocates warned that the law would increase the amount

of lost instructional time beyond what had been reported in the state's 2018 study of the issue.

**Controlling What Is Taught.** Lee led Tennessee to become one of the first states in the nation to

revisit how race and gender were discussed in classrooms. Included were discussions of systemic racism.

On May 25, 2021, Lee signed SB0623, which established new parameters for the teaching of certain

concepts related to race and sex (Allison, 2021; Tennessee General Assembly, 2021b). It explicitly forbids

instruction that purports that individuals can be consciously or subconsciously privileged, racist,

oppressive, or sexist because of their own race or sex. Violations would block access to state funding.

See Appendix C for the excerpt from SB063 relevant to this study. The law can be interpreted as directly

conflicting with the 2018 *Playbook's* discipline recommendation to "train educators on mindsets, and

implicit and explicit bias" (p. 9, see also Appendix C & D) as well as its definition of a "Leader for Equity"

(TDoE, 2018c, p. 21).

**Age-Appropriate Materials Act of 2022.** Lee proposed the Age-Appropriate Materials Act of

2022 (Aldrich, 2022a). The version signed into law later that year dictates the process books and

materials are allowed in school libraries (Aldrich, 2022b) and teachers' classrooms. Any material

considered objectional under that process shall be removed (Aldrich, 2023). In other words, Tennessee

educators are protected by law if they use force to correct students or force them out of their

classrooms (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021a), and no one is allowed to teach about the implicit or

systemic bias (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021b) that may contribute to the perceptions of the need

for correction. Nor are books that may suggest an alternative point of view likely to be allowed in school

libraries or individual classrooms (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021b).

**Considering a Different Approach**

Despite the numerous calls to eliminate the use of exclusionary school discipline practices given

the well-documented harm to children, as Rodriguez and Welsh (2022) point out, little is likely to change

unless educators change how they approach the use of discipline in schools and related measurements.

Recent literature on the subject recommends applying innovative approaches to solve this old problem

(Eggleston et al., 2021; Nese et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022). While the suggested interventions

differ, a consensus is forming that suggests no single alternative to exclusionary discipline will work in all

environments. Instead, efforts are growing to match multi-component intervention packages to specific

settings by identifying unique elements and interconnections of the system in which it will be used. For

example, Kalvesmaki and Tulman (2017) describe the school-to-prison pipeline as connecting the

education and delinquency systems via interdependent feedback loops that depend on exclusionary

discipline practices as a gateway. They advocate using a systems theory perspective to identify key

leverage points to activate disruptors until the pipeline breaks apart. The current study applies a similar

premise in the search for leverage points that may disrupt use rampant use of exclusionary discipline in

Tennessee.

**Summary**

This literature review documented the rapid expansion in recent years of empirical research that

provides evidence of the widespread, long-lasting harm caused by using exclusionary discipline practices

such as suspension and expulsions in schools. Of particular concern is the disproportionate use of these

methods of punishment on children who are not White and those who live with an ability or economic

challenge. The literature frames the disparity as a civil rights issue that hinders educational equity. The

federal government attempted to change the trajectory of use through monitoring and reporting

mandates but left it up to each state to execute. The research indicated that the variables maintaining

the widespread use of exclusionary discipline practices despite the concerns are varied and complex, as

has been the states' response. While many schools have implemented effective alternatives and

successfully transitioned away from exclusionary discipline while maintaining a safe and supportive

learning environment, the literature did not reveal a singular intervention or process that works in all

environments and scenarios. This has contributed to the disparate approach states have taken to

comply with federal mandates while maintaining autonomy. The literature identified Tennessee as a

state caught between competing factions on school discipline, with no clear resolution on the horizon.

As a result, the state provides a relevant system within which to search for possible leverage points that

have the potential to reduce exclusionary discipline and other equity concerns in the presence of

competing contingencies. The literature provided the context needed to focus this study on the

dynamics between school performance designations and the use of exclusionary discipline practices in

Tennessee's K-12 schools as a precursor to determining whether a leverage point exists where those

variables connect.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

Research draws a direct connection between receiving exclusionary school discipline, potential problems with the justice system, and numerous other negative outcomes that can impact generations (Anyon et al., 2016; Jacobsen, 2019; Losen & Martinez; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014a; Vinson & Waldman, 2020). Of particular concern is the disproportionate use of methods such as expulsion and suspension with vulnerable populations. Of most concern are those who are Black, or experience challenges related to abilities, economics, or other socially mediated differences (Caldera, 2018; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014a).

Federal mandates, including IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015), attempt to address these and related issues by requiring all states to develop and report plans to make it easier for the public to monitor student learning and achievement. The state responses vary dramatically (Council of State Governments, Justice Center, 2014; Education Commission of the States, 2023; Kelley et al., 2021; Nishioka et al., 2017; USDoE/OESE, 2018). Some states embrace the call to find effective alternatives to the historical practices of expulsion and suspension. Other states maintain the bare minimum for federal compliance. Others make a highly visible pledge of commitment, but as time passes, it can become difficult to determine if reducing exclusionary discipline rates remains a priority.

Tennessee falls into the latter category. In 2018, the TDoE declared seven equity commitments, including reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices. The report outlined 22 actions that needed to be taken by schools, districts, school boards, and communities across the state. The commitment was sandwiched between two laws controlling how exclusionary discipline could be used in Tennessee schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to compare differences in the use of exclusionary discipline between Tennessee's public schools that received the 2018 accountability designation of *Reward*, which

meant high-performing, and those designated as *Priority*, which indicated low-performing. Specifically, this research sought to identify differences between those performance accountability designations related to discipline types and certain subgroups.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study into whether differences exist in the use of exclusionary discipline between Tennessee's public schools designated as high-performing (Reward) and those designated as low-performing (Priority).

*Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension?

*Research Question 2*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension?

*Research Question 3*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion?

*Research Question 4*

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools?

*Research Question 5*

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools?

**Variables and Statistical Methods**

*Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension?

Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools were the independent variables, and use of in-school suspension was the dependent variable. An independent samples *t* test was used to determine the difference, if any, between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).

*Research Question 2*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension?

Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools were the independent variables and use of out-of-school suspension was the dependent variable. An independent samples *t* test was used to determine the difference, if any, between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school school suspension. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).

***Research Question 3***

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion?

Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools were the independent variables, and expulsion was the dependent variable. An independent samples *t* test was used to determine the difference, if any, between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).

***Research Question 4***

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]) predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools?

Certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA reporting (BHN, ED, EL, and SWD) in schools that received the Reward accountability designation in 2018 were the independent variables, and the combined rates of exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion) for each subgroup was the dependent variable. A multiple regression model was used to determine to what extent do select characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (BHN, ED, EL, and SWD) predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).

***Research Question 5***

To what extent do certain demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and Students with Disabilities [SWD]) predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools?

Select demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups or ESSA reporting (BHN, ED, EL, and SWD) in schools that received the Priority accountability designation in 2018 were the independent variables, and the combined rates of exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion) for each subgroup was the dependent variable. A multiple regression model was used to determine to what extent the select characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (BHN, ED, EL, and SWD) predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28).

**Evaluation Components**

TDoE's public repository for information is its state-sponsored website (2023). Relevant data that were examined included but were not limited to: School and district identifiers; subgroup classifications (specifically BHN, ED, EL, and SWD); enrollment numbers; discipline numbers in aggregate, by discipline type (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion), and subgroup application; and accountability designations (Reward, Priority). Table 3 lists the data I extracted from the TDoE site and reviewed for inclusion in this study. Not all data examined were needed for the statistical analysis, but much of it informed the literature review, provided enhanced visibility into the system that supports the use of exclusionary discipline practices in Tennessee schools, and influenced recommendations discussed in Chapter 5.

**Table 3.**

*TDoE Data Examined for This Study*

| Data By District Yrs. 2017-2022 | Data By School Yrs. 2017-2022 | Other |
|---|---|---|
| District Number | School Number | 2018 List of Reward Schools |
| District Name | School Name | 2018 List of Priority Schools |
| Total Enrollment | Total Enrollment | 2022 List of Reward Schools |
| Subgroups By District: | Subgroups By School: | 2022 List of Priority Schools |
| Black/Hispanic/Native (BHN) | Black/Hispanic/Native (BHN) | *Every student succeeds act: Building on success in Tennessee* |
| Economically Disadvantaged (ED) | Economically Disadvantaged (ED) | *Tennessee leaders for equity playbook* *Special education framework* |
| English Learners (EL) | English Learners (EL) | *Tennessee educator survey reports* (2018-2021) |
| Recorded Gender | Recorded Gender | *School leadership for Special Education: An administrator's companion guide to the special education framework* |
| Students with disabilities (SWD) | Students with disabilities (SWD) | News articles & press releases published on the department's website since Feb. 2015 |
| Enrollment by subgroup | Enrollment by subgroup | |
| Discipline By Type: | Discipline By Type: | Data, reports, and policy statements |
| In-school Suspension | In-school Suspension | regarding *Special Populations and* |
| Out-of-school Suspension | Out-of-school Suspension | *Student Support*, including Special |
| Expulsion | Expulsion | Education, English learners, trauma-informed care, etc.) |
| Discipline Occurrences: | | |
| Total | | |
| Per Discipline Type | | |
| Per Subgroup | | |
| Per Discipline Type & Subgroup | | |

*Note:* All data included in this table was available and reviewed from the Tennessee Department of Education's website during consideration of potential leverage points (TDoE, n.d.)
Not all data was selected for use in the causal-comparative analysis.

**Research Design**

Causal-comparative designs explore differences between pre-existing or derived populations on

dependent variables or outcomes (Schenker & Rumrill, 2004). This study compared differences between

Tennessee's public schools designated as high-performing (Reward) and those designated as low-

performing (Priority) in the use of exclusionary discipline. Specifically, this research sought to identify

differences in accountability designations in the areas of discipline types and certain subgroups

monitored by ESSA. As the study was retrospective using previously identified groups and the

independent variables could not be manipulated, the causal-comparative design was appropriate.

Before the start of the study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Southern Indiana

granted exempt approval, allowing this study to proceed. See Appendix E.

**Research Procedures**

The following steps were used for all five research questions:

1. School performance accountability designation lists for 2018 through 2022 are available on

    the TDoE website. These are text lists that name public schools the TDoE has labeled as

    Reward (high-performing) or Priority (low-performing). Covid 19 impacted accountability

    reporting for the years after 2018, so the study was constrained to the 2018 accountability

    designation lists. These lists were downloaded to the lead researcher's password-protected

    computer, to which she has sole access. The accountability designations of *Reward* and

    *Priority* were assigned separate numbers as the code (also referred to as *value* in SPSS) and

    appropriately labeled for the statistical software. The 2018 list set the independent variables

    for Research Questions 1-5.

2. As part of ESSA-compliance requirements, Tennessee schools provide numerous reports to

    the state. TDoE makes that raw data available on its public website. The lead researcher

    downloaded a 2018 Excel workbook made up of numerous spreadsheets that contained the

    raw numerical data collected for all Tennessee public schools involving the categories

    specific to Research Questions 1-5 to my password-protected computer, to which she has

    sole access. The relevant categories included school identifiers, enrollment, subgroups, and

    discipline data.

3. The lead researcher isolated the data of the 2018 Reward schools from the comprehensive Tennessee school data to create a new relevant dataset.

4. The lead researcher isolated the data of the 2018 Priority schools from the comprehensive Tennessee School data to create a new relevant dataset.

5. Statistical tests were run on the resulting datasets as detailed below.

**Limitations**

*Tennessee-Specific*

While numerous states wrestle with the challenges associated with achieving equity across school districts and the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with marginalized populations, the results of this study should be interpreted as a snapshot in time specific to Tennessee. Many differences exist between states, including legislation, funding available for training, record keeping and reporting, personnel, cultures, licensing requirements, and many other relevant variables. As a result, findings of this study can not be generalized to other states without additional research specific to the state(s) of interest.

*Data Availability*

The data extracted from the TDoE website and used in this analysis were purposefully selected, based on the lead researcher's interpretation of relevance to the research questions. Note that the discipline numbers depend on self-reporting by each school. Such reports are subject to site-specific interpretation and may be subject to underreporting, data manipulation, and other errors (Ball, 2021; Lyon-Ballay, 2019; Schimke & Asmar, 2016).

*Reflective Constraints*

This study serves as a snapshot in time based on the publicly available data extracted from the TDoE's data repository. School discipline data for 2019-2022 was constrained and influenced nationwide

by the Covid-19 pandemic that occurred during that period. As such, this study reflects what has already

occurred. It may or may not reflect current and future practices or results.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to compare differences in the use of exclusionary discipline

between Tennessee's public schools that received the 2018 accountability designation of Reward, which

meant high-performing, and those designated as Priority, which indicated low-performing. Specifically,

this research sought to identify differences between those performance accountability designations

related to discipline types and certain subgroups.

**Study Components**

Table 4 details the information, including sample size, selected for statistical analysis for this

study from the TDoE data reviewed per the table above.

**Table 4.**

*Statistical Evaluation Components*

| Name | Subgroups | $N*$ | $n*$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2018 *Reward* accountability list | Combined | 317 | |
| 2018 *Priority* accountability list | Combined | 79 | |
| Exclusionary discipline rates: | Combined | 317 | |
| | BHN | | 310 |
| 2018 *Reward* | ED | | 309 |
| schools | EL | | 147 |
| | SWD | | 31 |
| Exclusionary | Combined | 79 | |
| discipline rates: | BHN | | 78 |
| 2018 *Priority* | ED | | 79 |
| schools | EL | | 41 |
| | SWD | | 76 |

*Note:* * TDOE suppresses certain values to protect student identities. (TDOE 2019a. BHN = Black/Hispanic/Native American; SWD = Students with disabilities; ED = Economically disadvantaged; EL = English learners

**Statistical Results**

In addition to descriptive statistics, two statistical techniques were used to analyze these data – independent-samples *t* tests and multiple regressions. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances evaluates the assumption that the population variances for the two groups are equal. The sample sizes for the 2018 Reward schools (*N* = 317) and Priority schools (*N* = 79), the dataset on which most of the following statistics were run, were different. In addition, the means between the two accountability designations for the various discipline types relevant to Research Questions 1-3 also were different. The probability value for Levene's Test ran on most of the subgroups was less than .05. The only exception was for the subgroup, EL, which had some probability values that exceeded .05. It should be noted that the sample size for the EL subgroup was lower when compared to the other subgroups tested because of reporting values that fell below the cutoff for inclusion in the TDoE's reports. Given supporting statistical factors and the desire for consistency in reporting, the *t* value that does not assume equal variances was reported for Research Questions 1-3 to avoid the assumption of homogeneity of variances. All *t*-tests were considered two-tailed. The effect sizes were reported as per Cohen (1988) and Heroux (2017). The statistical analyses of the data associated with each research question are summarized below following reporting and style protocols per Bhandari (2022), and Glen (n.d.).

*Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate differences between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension. Priority schools (*M* = 6.66, *SD* = 10.62) reported significantly higher usage rates of in-school suspension than Reward schools (*M* = 3.15, *SD* = 5.11), *t* (87.182) = -2.854*, p* = .005, *d* = -0.53, 95% CI [-7.82, -2.84]. The null hypothesis was rejected, and the effect size is medium.

While not included in the original research question, analysis of available data also revealed that in-school suspension rates were higher in the target subgroups of Priority schools than in Reward schools. The difference in the means between the two accountability designations for SWD and BHN subgroups was significant. The ED and EL subgroups also showed differences in the means, but not at a statistical level.

In addition, in-school school suspension rates for the Priority schools for SWD subgroup ($n = 76$, $m = 9.15$, $sd = 13.33$) were statistically higher with a moderate effect size than for the same group in Reward schools ($n = 311$, $m = 5.37$, $sd = 8.25$), $t (89.51) = -2.36$, $p < .05$, $d = -0.40$, 95% CI [-.652, -.147]. In-school school suspension rates for the Priority schools for the ED subgroup ($n = 79$, $m = 7.61$, $sd = 12.22$) were higher, but not significantly different with a low effect size than for the same group in Reward schools ($n = 309$, $m = 5.09$, $sd = 8.11$), $t (96.25) = -1.74$, $p = .08$, $d = -0.28$, 95% CI [-.526, -.030]. In-school school suspension rates for the Priority schools for the BHN subgroup ($n = 78$, $m = 6.76$, $sd = 10.80$) were higher and statistically different with a low effect size compared to the same subgroup in Reward schools ($n = 310$, $m = 4.25$, $sd = 7.29$), $t (95.38) = -1.94$, $p = .05$, $d = -0.31$, 95% CI [-.558, -.060]. In-school school suspension rates for the Priority schools for the EL subgroup ($n = 41$, $m = 2.25$, $sd = 4.83$) were higher than for the same group in Reward schools ($n= 147$, $m = 1.86$, $sd = 4.18$), $t (57.83) = -.460$, $p = .65$, $d = -0.08$, 95% CI [-.434, -.258], but not statistically different.

### Research Question 2

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school school suspension?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate differences between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension. The mean for Priority schools' rates of out-of-school suspension ($n = 79$, $m = 15.19$, $sd = 11.90$) is significantly higher than the mean for Reward schools' rates of the same discipline

type (*n* = 317, *m* = 2.73, *sd* = 3.73, *t* (81.85) = -9.196, *p* < .001, *d* = -1.99, 95% CI [-2.27, -1.70]. The null

hypothesis was rejected and the effect size very large.

While not included in the original research question, analysis of data also revealed out-of-school

school suspension rates were higher in target subgroups of Priority schools compared to Reward

schools. All differences were significant at the .001 level with very large effect sizes, except for the EL

subgroup. The difference for that subgroup was significant at the .05 level with a moderate effect size.

In addition, out-of-school school suspension rates for the Priority schools for the SWD subgroup

(*n* = 76, *m* = 21.45, *sd* = 13.52) were much higher with a large effect size than for the same group in

Reward schools (n = 311, *m* = 5.33, *sd* = 6.34), *t* (83.23) = -10.12, *p* < .001, *d* = -1.95, 95% CI [-2.24, -1.67].

Out-of-school school suspension rates for the ED subgroup in Priority schools (*n* = 79, *m* = 17.53, *sd* =

13.53) were significantly higher with a large effect size than for the same subgroup in Reward schools (*n*

= 309, *m* = 4.50, *sd* = 5.39), *t* (84.43) = -8.40, *p* < .001, d = -1.68, 95% CI [-1.95, -1.41].

Out-of-school school suspension rates for the Black/Hispanic/Native Americans subgroup in *Priority*

schools (*n* = 78, *m* = 15.63, *sd* = 12.11) were significantly higher with a large effect size than for the same

group in *Reward* schools (*n* = 310, *m* = 3.51, *sd* = 4.75), *t* (83.03) = -8.67, *p* < .001, *d* = -1.76, 95% CI [-

2.04, -1.48]. Out-of-school school suspension rates for the English Learners subgroup in Priority schools

(*n* = 41, *m* = 4.17, *sd* = 4.97) were higher with a large effect size than for the same group in Reward

schools

(*n* = 147, *m* = 2.02, *sd* = 4.22), *t* (57.11) = -2.51, *p* = .015, *d* = -0.48, 95% CI [-.84, -.14].

### *Research Question 3*

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward

schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate differences between Tennessee

schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of

expulsion. Priority schools (*N* = 79, *M* = 0.73, *SD* = 1.73) reported significantly higher usage rates of expulsion with a large effect size compared to Reward schools (*N* = 317, *M* = 0.05, *SD* = 0.19), *t* (78.47) = -3.52*, p* < .001, *d* = -0.87, 95% CI [-1.12, -.62]. The null hypothesis was rejected.

While not included in the original research question, the question of whether differences also were evident at the subgroup level was relevant to the larger equity commitment. Data analysis revealed that while expulsion is used less frequently than the other discipline practices reviewed, Priority schools used it significantly more than Reward schools across all subgroups studied except for the EL subgroup. All differences were significant at the .001 level with high effect sizes, except for the EL subgroup.

In addition, SWD subgroup in Priority schools (n = 76, *m* = 1.01, *sd* = 2.28) was higher with a large effect size than the same group in Reward schools (*n* = 311, *m* = 0.02, *sd* = 0.21), *t* (75.32) = -3.78*, p* < .001, d = -0.98, 95% CI [-1.23, -.71]. Expulsion rates for the ED subgroup in Priority schools (n = 79, *m* = 0.86, *sd* = 1.91) were higher with a large effect size than for the same group in Reward schools (n = 309, *m* = 0.07, *sd* = 0.29), *t* (78.92) = -3.66*, p* < .001, *d* = -0.88, 95% CI [-1.13, -.62]. Expulsion rates for the BHN subgroup in Priority schools (*n* = 78, *m* = 0.75, *sd* = 1.77) were higher with a large effect size than for the same group in Reward schools (*n* = 310, *m* = 0.26, *sd* = 0.22), *t* (77.61) = -3.48*, p* < .001, *d* = -0.858, 95% CI [-1.11, -.60]. Expulsion rates for the EL subgroup (*n* = 41, *m* = 0.08, *sd* = 0.29) in Priority schools were slightly higher with a low effect size than for the same group in Reward schools (*n* = 147, *m* = 0.01, *sd* = 0.17), *t* (48.27) = -1.40*, p* = .16, *d* = -0.32, 95% CI [-.67, -.02]. The difference was not significant.

Table 5 summarizes the differences and effect sizes of Research Questions 1-3.

**Table 5.**

*Summary of Differences and Effect Sizes by Discipline Type*

| Discipline Usage by Type | Statistically Significant Differences[a] | Effect Size | Differences, but not Statistically Significant |
|---|---|---|---|
| In-school suspension | 2018 Priority schools & Reward schools | Moderate | 2018 ED Priority & Reward subgroups |
| | 2018 SWD Priority & Reward subgroups | Moderate | 2018 EL Priority & Reward subgroups |
| | 2018 BHN Priority Reward subgroups | Low | |
| Out-of-school suspension | 2018 Priority schools & Reward schools | Very large | |
| | 2018 SWD Priority & Reward subgroups | Very large | |
| | 2018 BHN Priority & Reward subgroups | Very large | |
| | 2018 ED Priority & Reward subgroups | Very large | |
| | 2018 EL Priority & Reward subgroups | Moderate | |
| Expulsion | 2018 Priority & Reward schools | Large | 2018 EL Priority & Reward subgroups |
| | 2018 SWD Priority & Reward subgroups | Large | |
| | 2018 BHN Priority & Reward subgroups | Large | |
| | 2018 ED Priority & Reward subgroups | Large | |

*Note:* [a]Priority schools reported higher rates than Reward schools in all categories. BHN = Black/Hispanic/Native American subgroup. SWD = Students with disabilities subgroup. ED = Economically disadvantaged subgroup. EL = English learners' subgroup

***Research Question 4***

To what extent do select demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA [ (Black/Hispanic/Native American (BHN), economically disadvantaged (ED), English learners (EL), and students with disabilities (SWD)], predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools?

The BHN, ED, EL, and SWD subgroups were used in a stepwise multiple regression analysis to predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools. Involvement with exclusionary discipline practices primarily was predicted by the subgroups of ED, standardized coefficient ($\beta$ = .396), BHN, standardized coefficient ($\beta$ = .323), and to a lesser extent, SWD, standardized coefficient ($\beta$ = .273). The model was statistically significant, $F$ (3,313) = 1071.66, $p$ < .001, and accounted for approximately 99.7% of the variance of involvement in exclusionary discipline practices ($R$ = .955, $R^2$ = .911, adjusted $R^2$ = .910). The ED predictor variable made the largest unique prediction with a partial correlation of .423, accounting for about 87% of the variance. Correlations for the ESSA subgroups related to involvement in exclusionary discipline practices are shown in Table 6. The ED, BHN, and SWD variables show a strong correlation with involvement with exclusionary discipline practices in Reward schools, and correlations between each other. The relationship was strongest between the ED and BHN subgroups (.903). All correlations for the EL subgroup were less than .50, indicating that a relationship exists, but is weak.

**Table 6.**

*Correlations [a] of Characteristics with Exclusionary Discipline in 2018 Reward Schools\**

| | Combined | Black/Hispanic/ Native American | Economically disadvantaged | English learners | Students with disabilities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Combined | ___ | | | | |
| Black/Hispanic/Native American | .913 | ___ | | | |
| Economically disadvantaged | .933 | .903 | ___ | | |
| English learners | .401 | .388 | .460 | ___ | |
| Students with disabilities | .904 | .851 | .899 | .423 | ___ |

*Note. N* = 317. [a] Listwise. \* all *p* ≤/=.001

### Research Question 5

To what extent do select demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools?

The BHN, ED, EL, and SWD subgroups were used in a stepwise multiple regression analysis to predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools. Involvement with exclusionary discipline practices primarily was predicted by the BHN subgroup, standardized coefficient ($\beta$ = .784), and to a much lesser extent, the ED subgroup, standardized coefficient ($\beta$ = .215). The model was statistically significant, $F_{(2,76)}$ = 15,328.99, $p < .001$, and accounted for approximately 99% of the variance of involvement in exclusionary discipline practices ($R$ = .999, $R^2$ = .998, adjusted $R^2$ = .997). The BHN predictor variable made the largest unique prediction with a partial correlation of .875, accounting for about 99% of the variance. Correlations for the ESSA subgroups in 2018 Priority schools related to

the involvement in exclusionary discipline practices are shown in Table 7. The BHN, ED, and SWD

variables show a strong correlation with involvement with exclusionary discipline practices in Priority

schools, and correlations between each other. The relationship was strongest between the BHN and ED

subgroups (.993). All correlations for the EL subgroup were less than .25, indicating no relationship exists

with involvement in exclusionary discipline practices or with other subgroups.

**Table 7.**

*Correlations [a] of Characteristics with Exclusionary Discipline in 2018 Priority Schools\**

|  | Combined | Black/Hispanic/ Native American | Economically disadvantaged | English learners | Students with disabilities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Combined | ___ | | | | |
| Black/Hispanic/Native American | .998 | ___ | . | | |
| Economically disadvantaged | .995 | .993 | ___ | | |
| English learners | .094 | .099 | .122 | ___ | |
| Students with disabilities | .903 | .903 | .903 | .236 | ___ |

*Note. N* = 79. [a] Listwise. * All *p </=*.001

Chapter 5 reviews these results and offers conclusions based on these findings.

Recommendations, inferences, and suggestions for future research also are included in the closing

chapter.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions**

The problem of practice at the foundation of this study was the need to identify leverage

point(s) that already exist in Tennessee's current educational system that can be reimagined in ways

that can reliably disrupt the use of exclusionary school discipline practices despite pressure to continue

using them. If a leverage point could also improve related school performance measures that are

negatively impacted by the discipline practices of concern, even better. If a leverage point could be

found inside the existing system, it would reduce the effort and resources needed to affect change and

increase the likelihood of adoption and sustainability. To support that goal, the purpose of this study

was to compare differences in the use of exclusionary discipline between Tennessee's public schools

that received the 2018 accountability designation of Reward, which meant high-performing, and those

designated as Priority, which indicated low-performing. Specifically, this research sought to identify

differences between those performance accountability designations related to discipline types and

certain subgroups to determine if the intersection of those factors provided leverage for change. This

chapter will present the results relevant to each research question, then discuss the identification of a

potential leverage point, as well as related educational measures that may benefit. A discussion of the

implications and recommendations that evolved from this study follows, along with opportunities for

future research.

**Conclusions**

***Research Question 1***

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward

schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-school suspension?

The results for Research Question 1 indicated a significant difference between Tennessee

schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of in-

school suspension. Priority schools reported significantly higher usage rates of in-school suspension than

Reward schools. Further analysis of in-school suspension data revealed significant differences between the two accountability designations for SWD and BHN subgroups. The usage means for these subgroups in 2018 were significantly higher for Priority schools than Reward schools. In the 2018 *Playbook*, the TDoE reminded educators that schools with lower suspension rates tend to retain fewer students and have higher graduation rates - two reasons for committing to moving away from exclusionary discipline. This analysis indicated that the Tennessee schools identified as the lowest-performing in 2018 used in-school suspension much more than the highest-performing schools that year. That said, Reward schools favored the use of in-school suspension more frequently than out-of-school suspension or expulsion. This was particularly true with the SWD and BHN subgroups – the two specifically targeted in the *Playbook* for improvement. This analysis concludes that in 2018, these at-risk students who attended Priority schools were more likely to be removed from their regular classroom while remaining on school grounds than students who attended Reward schools. These results spotlight the need for TDoE to intentionally channel additional funding for training on alternatives to in-school suspension to Priority schools.

### Research Question 2

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension?

The results for Research Question 2 indicated a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of out-of-school suspension. The mean for Priority schools' out-of-school suspension rates in 2018 is significantly higher than for Reward schools' rates of the same discipline type that year. Further analysis of out-of-school suspension data for 2018 revealed significant differences between the two accountability designations for the SWD, ED, and BHN subgroups, and to a lesser, but still significant extent, the EL subgroup. While it was known that overall at-risk students in Tennessee schools in 2018

received out-of-school suspension at disproportionate rates, those who attended Priority schools were even more likely to be banned from coming to school for at least a portion of the year compared to those who attended Reward schools. The data demonstrated that out-of-school suspension was the most used exclusionary discipline practice used in the 2018 Priority schools in Tennessee.

### Research Question 3

Is there a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion?

The results for Research Question 3 indicated a significant difference between Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools and those designated as Priority schools in the use of expulsion. Priority schools reported a significantly higher mean of usage rates of expulsion compared to Reward schools. While expulsion is used less frequently than the other discipline practices reviewed, Priority schools used it significantly more than Reward schools with all subgroups studied except for English learners.

### Research Question 4

To what extent do select demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Reward schools?

In the 2018 Reward schools, the ED, BHN, and SWD variables showed a strong correlation with involvement with exclusionary discipline practices and correlations between each other. The relationship was strongest between the ED and BHN subgroups. The EL subgroup was not related. Like the above, this study concludes that economic and racial characteristics over which children have no control increase the likelihood they will be excluded from educational opportunities provided to their

peers. The correlations between the subgroups also point back to the warnings found in the literature of the increased risk of poor outcomes experienced by children who live at the intersection of race, ability, and economic inequities.

### Research Question 5

To what extent do select demographic characteristics tracked by TDoE as subgroups for ESSA (Black/Hispanic/Native American [BHN], economically disadvantaged [ED], English learners [EL], and students with disabilities [SWD]), predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion) in Tennessee schools designated in 2018 as Priority schools?

When considering the extent selected demographic characteristics in 2018 Priority schools predict involvement with exclusionary discipline practices in Tennessee schools, the BHN, ED, and SWD subgroups showed a strong correlation with all three exclusionary discipline practices, as well as between each other. Correlations were not found with the EL subgroup and exclusionary discipline practices, or with the other subgroups. This also supports this study's conclusion that factors outside of the children's control influence whether they will be subject to exclusionary discipline practices.

### Discussion

### Seeking A Leverage Point

In the process of searching for a leverage point or leading indicator in the system that supports the continued use of exclusionary discipline practices despite widespread evidence of associated harm, this study revealed that the ESSA State Report Card elements related to the State Accountability System (USDoE/OESE, 2018, 2019) might be useful. These elements provide a way to differentiate between schools identified as high-performing, low-performing, and needing targeted support and improvement. In addition, these measures identify specific areas of concern. The ESSA State Report Card metrics also require public dissemination of the names of districts and schools that receive funds for school

improvement, the amounts, and the types of strategies implemented in each school. Considering

relationships among some of these variables allowed a conclusion to be drawn from this study -

reducing the use of exclusionary discipline rates in schools, particularly those with the accountability

designation of low-performing, may act as a leverage point for improvement for several other important

metrics tracked by the ESSA (see Appendix B for a correspondence map). The findings from this study

support additional research to test that possibility.

***Linking ESSA Elements***

Based on the literature, it was unsurprising that vulnerable populations attending Tennessee

schools designated in 2018 as low-performing schools experienced increased rates of exclusionary

discipline than those attending schools designated as high-performing. Nor was it surprising to see the

discipline practices of concern used more frequently in low-performing schools than higher-performing

ones. As noted in Appendix B, exclusionary discipline has been linked in numerous individual studies as

negatively impacting all but two of the metrics ESSA requires schools to make public on the annual State

Report Card. However, no study identified relationships between school performance accountability

designations and the use of exclusionary discipline practices. This study established that link using

statistical analysis. In the process, it set Tennessee's baseline for related future research to further

understand the value of this linkage.

***An Alternative Path Forward***

While the ESSA State Report Card and the accountability designations are intended to make it

easier for the public to track progress on specific metrics related to student performance and learning,

this study revealed a disconnect between that intention and reality. While the mandated data was

available on the TDoE's website, using it to determine the status of exclusionary discipline practices in

Tennessee required digital literacy and specialized knowledge of databases, spreadsheets, and statistics.

The state recently launched a new web-based data analysis tool that offers graphical displays of the

most current year available, which made accessing and understanding the available data much easier.

However, pre-pandemic discipline data such as that used in this study remained housed within various

spreadsheets with different reporting protocols and formatting. Because of the pandemic, data

appropriate for comparison with the 2018 baseline will not be available until the release of the ESSA

Report Card that contains 2022-2023 data. This study suggests progress on the state-wide metrics may

be gained by concentrating exclusionary discipline reduction efforts and resources on schools

designated as low performing.

### *Becoming Responsive to System Changes*

This study also highlighted the challenges faced by states like Tennessee, where a change in the

political climate or other variables may impact efforts to implement practices that have proven helpful

in other states for reducing discipline practices of concern. Systems theory considers dynamic changes

within contributing elements and adjusts accordingly. That is made possible by identifying levers and

other tools that support dynamic analysis.

Tennessee provides an example of how an initiative can advance or stall subject to changes in a

system when leverage points and leading indicators are not in place. In 2017, Tennessee's previous

administration passed a law that banned expulsion and suspension in public pre-schools and initiated a

state-wide analysis of such practices (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017). The next year, the same

administration made a very public commitment to reduce the disproportionate use of exclusionary

discipline practices in all schools across the state (TDoE, 2018c) and gave instructions for all school,

districts, school boards and communities to take toward that goal. That same year, the state's response

to the new federal ESSA mandates was heralded as a robust model for other states to follow (TDoE,

2018d).

Then a new administration took office the following January. Since then, little public reference

has been made to the 2018 equity commitment related to discipline. However, several laws have been

passed that seem counter to the 22 recommendations the state advocated in its 2018 *Playbook*. For

example, the *Playbook* instructs school leaders to "Train educators on mindsets, and implicit and explicit

bias to reduce disparities in the issuance of punitive discipline" (TDoE, 2018c, p. 9). On May 4, 2021, the

state passed Tennessee SB0623, which prohibits educators from teaching that "An individual, by virtue

of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously

or subconsciously" (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021b).

The findings of this study may help address this quandary. The literature review indicated that

the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices with vulnerable populations is the most

serious and challenging concern tied to this problem. At the root is the use of exclusionary discipline

against any student. Considering the results of this study through a systems lens suggests a benefit to

concentrating resources on helping schools that are designated as low-performing schools implement

alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices - not just reducing the disproportionate use of them.

While this approach would not allow Tennessee to implement all the recommendations prescribed in

the *Playbook*, it adjusts for the variables introduced into the system since 2018 and may allow progress

on the root problem, regardless of the political administration in charge.

**Recommendations**

The need to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices is well-documented. So too are

the challenges of implementing some of the interventions that have been most successful in other

states. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, recommendations for directed funding, improved

public reporting, and strategic communication around equity issues are offered to narrow the gap

between what is needed and what is happening.

***Direct Funds to Schools in Most Need of Change***

This study revealed that potential benefits may follow if TDoE should direct funds and activities

toward helping the lowest-performing schools implement proven alternatives to exclusionary discipline,

rather than rely on a competitive grant process. Research revealed that the TDoE did push some

discretionary funding that became available from pandemic allocations toward Priority schools (TDoE,

2021b). Priority schools also receive funding specifically because of their low-performance

accountability designation (TDoE, 2018g). But no evidence was found of funds being directed to Priority

schools specifically to lower discipline practices of concerns. This study identified multiple accountability

metrics that would be positively affected if exclusionary discipline went down significantly in Priority

schools.

### *Equity Strategic Communication Plan*

Given the unique restart opportunity provided by the pandemic recovery period, TDoE should

implement a measurable strategic communication plan to update and clarify its current position on the

2018 equity commitment and strategies to address the use of exclusionary discipline. It should be

published on its website yearly, detailing steps taken on the seven equity commitments or their

evolution. Although recognized as a critical cornerstone for business success, the value of a detailed

strategic communication plan is not widely discussed in education outside of some of the larger school

districts (Moore et al., 2020). When they exist, such plans rarely address specific topics or initiatives,

such as equity. While complimentary news releases and reports heralding transparency and progress on

other initiatives are available on its website, the TDoE has not explicitly revisited the *Playbook* since its

launch in the Spring of 2018. It is unknown whether the change in state administration, the pandemic,

or other factors contributed to this silence. However, the current pandemic recovery period provides a

unique, though brief, moment in history during which leaders at all levels can establish new processes

and protocols to maximize impact and return focus to priority targets (Liu et al., 2022).

### *Make Public Monitoring of Discipline Data Easier*

This study demonstrated that the TDoE has many opportunities to improve the accessibility of

data needed for the public to determine the trajectory of discipline disparities across the state

USDoE/PTAC, 2014). To do so, TDoE must resolve data discrepancies, continue its progress on making

relevant data easier to interpret, and use reporting methods commonly used for that measure. The

literature notes that accurate monitoring of disparate discipline rates within schools' benefits from the

calculation of composite indices and/or risk ratios – the two most used methods found in the literature

for assessing discipline disparities (Bollmer et al., 2014; Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Washington Office

of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020). Transparency would be improved by including user

guides such as those provided by the USDoE's OCR to demonstrate how to use and interpret data

generated by its Outcome Rate Calculator (USDoE/OCR, 2022b). That tool also illustrates the current

difficulty when trying to compare data provided by the TDoE with data provided by oversight, advocacy,

and funding organizations that utilize the more common reporting protocols for the same measure. (i.e.,

USDoE/OCR, 2014; USDoE/OCR, 2018; Losen & Martinez, 2020). Not using the common protocols

effectively camouflages when disparities exist unless a user knows how to use the calculation methods

and takes the time to do it.

**Implications**

When considering the context of the problem of practice, the related literature, and the

research findings, several issues emerge that have implications for policy and practice in equity,

discipline practices, prioritization of funding, transparency, and monitoring of educational decisions. The

results of this study revealed a difference in the use of exclusionary discipline practices between

Tennessee schools designated as high-performing and those designated as low-performing in 2018, with

the latter tracking with more use in all categories analyzed. Children in the BHN subgroup and those

with known disabilities who attended schools designated as low performing had the highest

involvement with exclusionary discipline. Attending school while Black, Hispanic, Native American, with

a disability or economically challenged, predicted higher involvement levels than students not identified

in those categories. This finding aligns with many prior studies that found the same, while documenting

the trend in Tennessee. Using the school performance accountability designations (TDoE, 2022a) to identify where to invest resources to implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline instead of depending on the more commonly used competitive grant application process (TDoE, 2021c) could have far-reaching consequences, as indicated by the potential impact on student metrics tracked by ESSA. In addition, it could help schools, districts, and Tennessee improve compliance with federal mandates and state initiatives while having a positive impact on generations to come.

This study establishes a baseline for using accountability designations in Tennessee to indicate whether exclusionary discipline practices can positively impact other ESSA metrics. It confirmed previous assessments that low-performing schools often relied on exclusionary discipline practices. This suggests that a specific focus each year on schools identified as low-performing could have a significant impact on resolving the discipline dilemma. It also presents the theory that intentional investment in schools designated as low-performing and implementing effective alternatives to reduce exclusionary disciple practices may have an exponentially positive impact on other critically important measures in education.

Finally, while the discipline trends reported were specific to Tennessee, this study adds to the growing body of research that advocates using a systems theory approach when considering education policies, decision-making, and issue resolution. This approach allows for the complexities and intersectionality of the variables involved. The use of information that is required to be reported annually by all states makes replication of this study feasible across the nation.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study provide a 2018 baseline specific to Tennessee. As post-pandemic school operations resume, Report Card data reflecting on the 2022-2023 school year will provide the next opportunity to assess how often schools use exclusionary discipline and whether it continues to be used disproportionally with vulnerable populations. Once that data is available, it would be useful to replicate this study using the 2022-2023 data and compare those results to the baseline established in

this study. At that time, it would be possible to assess the theory that reducing exclusionary discipline rates in schools designated as low performing may positively impact other student performance measures tracked by ESSA. Because of the complexities of the issues associated with using exclusionary discipline practices, such research cannot assign causality but may offer predictive value. This study represents a novel effort toward that goal.

The findings do not explain why some schools continue to use discipline methods of concern while others adopt alternatives. Nor does it attempt to resolve the delicate balance required to meet the diverse needs of all students or adults in a classroom – those at risk of being excluded from educational opportunities as well as the adults who are trying to keep students safe and teach those who comply with expectations. Additional systems and factorial analysis, as well as surveys and interviews, could further illuminate factors that support and undermine efforts to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline in Tennessee public schools, as well as the lived experiences of those involved at all levels of the existing system that feeds this ongoing problem.

This study established baseline data for using a systems approach when comparing differences in exclusionary discipline practices between Tennessee schools that received the Reward and Priority accountability designations for 2018. Building on this research in future years could provide the public, school personnel, and TDoE additional insight beyond the pandemic era.  More challenging is the identification and implementation of alternative methods of discipline that effectively meet the needs of all students, are feasible to implement in the dynamic and historically cost-strapped world of public schools, while ensuring the safety and learning opportunities for everyone.

In summary, the problem of practice at the foundation of this study was that no leverage points had yet been identified within an educational system that could be used to proactively reduce the use of exclusionary school discipline practices without a significant investment of resources. The literature review indicated that annual school performance accountability designations might be an existing – yet

relatively invisible - leverage point. By injecting funding, training, and other resources needed to successfully implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices specifically into schools identified as the lowest-performing, improvements also may be triggered in areas such as improved academic performance, dropout rates, attendance, and other key ESSA metrics. While identifying a single leverage point does not eliminate the problem, it may help on several measures while encouraging consideration of other potential leverage points within the system.

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## Appendix A: Places to Intervene in a System

*Listed in decreasing order of effectiveness.*

1. Where there is power to transcend paradigms

2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, structures, rules, delays, parameters – arises.

3. The goals of the system

4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.

5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishment, constraints)

6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information).

7. Improving positive feedback loops

8. Aligning negative feedback loops relative to the targeted correction

9. Delay reduction, relative to the targeted change

10. The structure and flow of tangible goods and services (such as supply chains, human resource structures, etc.)

11. The size of buffers and safety nets, relative to the material and workflow

12. Constants, parameters, numbers

(Adapted from Meadows, 1999)

**Appendix B: Correspondence Map for ESSA State Report Card Elements and Exclusionary Discipline**

**Practices**

The table below lists the State Report Card elements and the subgroup detail required by ESSA (adapted from USDoE, OESE, 2018, 2019). The column on the right lists in what way exclusionary discipline practices have been documented to negatively impact that ESSA element. Representative citations are provided, but do not include all supporting literature at the time of publication.

| Requirement | Disaggregation or Reporting Level Required | Impacted Negatively by Exclusionary Discipline (representative citations) |
|---|---|---|
| Student achievement data | ALL, MREG, SWD, SWOD, EL, ED, Non-ED, GEN, MIG, HOM, FOS, AFD | Direct impact (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| Percentages of students assessed and not assessed in each subject (i.e., participation rates) | ALL, MREG, SWD, SWOD, EL, ED, Non-ED, GEN, MIG | Impacted through increased absenteeism. (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; TDOE, 2018a; U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division & USDoE, OCR, 2014 |
| Performance on the NAEP – mathematics and reading, grades 4 and 8 (by state & district) | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, ED (district) All Statewide | Direct impact (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| High school graduation rates | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, ED, HOM, FOS | Direct impact (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| Performance on the School Quality or Student Success indicator(s) used in the State accountability system. | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, ED | Direct impact (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| Extent of use of AA-AAAS for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities | Requirement defines | Impacted through increased absenteeism, academic impact. (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| English language proficiency of English learners | Requirement defines | Impacted through increased absenteeism. (Arcia, 2006; Baker, 2012, 2019; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2004, 2014; Warmbold-Brann, 2017) |
| Number and percentage of recently arrived English learners exempted from one administration of the reading/language arts assessments or whose results are excluded from certain State accountability system indicators. | Requirement defines | Not applicable |

| Requirement | Disaggregation or Reporting Level Required | Impacted Negatively by Exclusionary Discipline (representative citations) |
|---|---|---|
| Postsecondary enrollment rates for each high school | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, ED | Impacted through increased absenteeism |
| School-related arrests (school-level only) | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, GEN | School-to-prison pipeline link (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014; TDOE, 2018a; Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996) |
| Referral to law enforcement (school-level only) | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, GEN | School-to-prison pipeline link (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014; TDOE, 2018a; Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996) |
| Chronic absenteeism (excused and unexcused) (school-level only) | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, GEN | School-to-prison pipeline link (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014; TDOE, 2018a; Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996) |
| Incidents of violence (including bullying and harassment) (school-level only) | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, GEN | School-to-prison pipeline link (Allen, 2010) |
| Number of students enrolled in preschool programs. | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, GEN | Expulsions push students out of these programs. (TDoE, 2017) |
| Number and percentage of students enrolled in accelerated coursework | ALL, MREG, SWD, EL, ED | Discipline records reduce participation opportunities. (Losen & Martinez, 2020) |
| Educator qualifications | High- and low-poverty schools | Cultural matching impacts exclusionary discipline rates, as does training. (Iris, 2012, 2021; Owens, 2022) |

Notes: Adapted from USDoE/OESE, 2018, 2019

Acronyms: Student subgroup abbreviations: AA-AAAs = alternate academic achievement standards; ALL = All students. MREG = each major racial and ethnic group; SWD = students with disabilities; SWOD = students without disabilities; EL = English learners; ED = economically disadvantaged students; NON-ED = economically disadvantaged students; GEN = gender; MIG = migrant students; HOM = Homeless children and youth; FOS = Children in foster care; AFD = Students with a parent who is a member of the Armed Forces on active duty, which includes a parent on full-time National Guard duty

**Appendix C: Discipline-Focused Excerpt From 2018 Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook**

**Opening statement from the Playbook (TDoE, 2018c, p. 1)**

The Tennessee Department of Education, in partnership with its 147 districts and 38 educator preparation providers, recognizes the importance of making and supporting significant shifts in mindset and practice to provide and sustain equitable outcomes for all students. This focus on equitable outcomes for all students is reflected in the Tennessee Succeeds and ESSA strategic plans and impact all Tennessee's districts and schools.

If school, district, and community leaders believe in and take action to create equitable outcomes for all students, then all districts and schools will experience significant, positive shifts for students related to the equity commitments:

1. Decrease Chronic Absenteeism
2. Reduce Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates 3. Increase Early Postsecondary Opportunities
3. Provide Equitable Access to Effective Teachers
4. Recruit and Retain a Diverse Teaching Force
5. Embed Cultural Competence in School Practices
6. Partner with Community Allies

**Playbook Equity Commitment #2 (TDoE, 2018c, p. 8)**

Leaders take action to minimize exclusionary and inconsistent disciplinary methods to maximize learning time for all students.

Justification Provided: In Tennessee, Black or African American students were suspended at more than double the state average in the 2016-17 school year.

**Recommended Actions for reducing disproportionate out of school suspension and expulsion rates**

**(TDoE, 2018c, p. 9)**

**School Leader Actions**

- Train educators on restorative practices and align school policies to improve climate and culture.

- Utilize School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

- Apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations capably.

- Utilize the department's toolkit and resource guide for integrating social and personal supports into the classroom and school building.

- Train educators on mindsets, and implicit and explicit bias to reduce disparities in the issuance of punitive discipline.

- Develop a communication plan for addressing ways in which families and the community receive information about school and district policies, ensuring information is available to families in multiple languages and formats.

- Maximize TEAM to ensure teachers understand the Environment rubric indicators and their relationship to student engagement (refer to rubric indicator Managing Student Behaviors)

District Leader Actions

- Integrate recommendations from the district-wide task force into school improvement plans.

- Review suspensions with school leaders as part of annual principal evaluations

- Develop district strategy on evidence-based methods of positive school discipline and

- train school leaders on implementing new practices.

- Provide district-wide training on culturally responsive pedagogical practices to address disproportionate suspension rates and focus on strategies, such as home visits or increasing family-school staff connections and relationships, which have been shown to reduce disparities in the issuance of punitive discipline.

- Review district curricula to assess the integration of social and personal learning strategies and culturally relevant instruction as tools for students and staff to promote safe and positive learning communities.

- Foster collaboration among district administrative teams to calibrate around discipline for consistency.

- Hold alternative schools accountable for academic outcomes.

- Provide additional staffing allocations for schools with historical data suggesting long term discipline issues that focus on behavior support, mental health services, and parent engagement.

**School Board Actions**

- Establish a clear vision of behavior expectations for all schools.

- Use disaggregated data on suspensions to review district policies and consider how it should influence the district strategic plan.

- Convene a district-wide task force to examine district- and school-wide data and develop recommendations for improving district disciplinary practices and policies.

- Ensure the superintendent implements discipline policies fairly and consistently (e.g., by providing training for educators and families)

**Community Actions**

- Work with community organizations to provide services and supports for students aligned with positive school learning goals.

- Engage community organizations to conduct family training on how to teach and reinforce positive behavior.

- Develop Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for local media outlets to encourage compliance with behavior and academic expectations.

**Appendix D: Race & Gender Excerpt from Tennessee SB0623**

"ON MAY 4, 2021, THE HOUSE SUBSTITUTED SENATE BILL 623 FOR HOUSE BILL 580, ADOPTED

AMENDMENT #2, AND PASSED SENATE BILL 623, AS AMENDED.

AMENDMENT #2 incorporates the changes made by Senate Amendment #1 and adds that a public-

school teacher is not required to take an assessment to reactivate a license from this state that has

expired if at the time of application to reactivate the license, the public-school teacher possesses an

active professional license in a state that has a reciprocal agreement with the state board of education.

This amendment also prohibits any LEA or public charter school from including or promoting the

following concepts as part of a course of instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program, or

allowing teachers or other employees of the LEA or public charter school to use supplemental

instructional materials that include or promote the following concepts:

(1) One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;

(2) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or

oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously;

(3) An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the

individual's race or sex;

(4) An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex;

(5) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in

the past by other members of the same race or sex;

(6) An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely

because of the individual's race or sex;

(7) A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress

members of another race or sex;

(8) This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist;

(9) Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government;

(10) Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political

affiliation, social class, or class of people; or

(11) Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to

an individual because of the individual's race or sex.

This amendment does not prohibit an LEA or public charter school from including, as part of a course of

instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program, or from allowing teachers or other employees of

the LEA or public charter school to use supplemental instructional materials that include:

(1) The history of an ethnic group, as described in textbooks and instructional materials adopted in

accordance with present law concerning textbooks and instructional materials;

(2) The impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history;

(3) The impartial instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race,

ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or geographic region; or

(4) Historical documents that are permitted under present law, such as the national motto, the national

anthem, the state and federal constitutions, state and federal laws, and supreme court decisions.


If the commissioner of education finds that an LEA or public charter school knowingly violates the

prohibitions described in (1)-(11), then this amendment requires the commissioner to withhold state

funds, in an amount determined by the commissioner, from the LEA or public charter school until the

LEA or public charter school provides evidence to the commissioner that the LEA or public charter school

is no longer in violation."

The amended bill was signed into law by Gov. Bill Lee, May 5, 2021

(Tennessee General Assembly, 2021b).

## Appendix E: Permissions

**IRB Letter of Exemption**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA**

**Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration**
8600 University Boulevard * Evansville, Indiana 47712 * 812-465-1126
www.usi.edu/ospra - rcr@usi.edu

DATE: November 21, 2022

TO: Kimberly Derk
FROM: USI Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration

PROJECT TITLE: [1985463-1] Evaluating the Equity Commitment to Reduce Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates in Tennessee Public Schools Through A Public Lens
REFERENCE #: 2023-045-SEE
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
IRB APPROVAL DATE: November 21, 2022
EXPIRATION DATE: April 30, 2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: TYPE 1 RESEARCH - Exempt Category #4

The above project has been approved by USI's IRB under the provision of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46.

This approval is based on the following conditions:

1. The materials you submitted to the IRB (through IRBNet) provide a complete and accurate account of how human subjects are involved in your project.
2. You will carry on your research strictly according to the procedures described in the materials presented to the IRB.
3. If any changes are made, you will submit the Amendment Form through IRBNet.
4. You will immediately report to the Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration any problems or adverse events encountered while using human subjects.
5. Prior to expiration, you will submit a Continuing Review Form through IRBNet.

This project requires continuing IRB review on an annual basis. Please use the Continuing Review Form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of April 30, 2023.

**To renew this project or make a modification, please see the IRBNet User Manual on our website at usi.edu/ospra for step-by-step instructions on submitting the Continuing Review Form or the Amendment Form.**

If you have any questions, please contact us at 812-465-7000 or rcr@usi.edu.

*Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.*

- 1 -                                                           Generated on IRBNet

**Dr. Amy Chan Hilton**
**Interim Authorizing Official - OSPRA**

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within The Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration's records.

**Permission for Use of Figure #1 Graphic**

Re: Permission to use a graphic from your blog?

C. Milton Dixon <milton@permacultureproductions.com>
Sun 4/2/2023 4:02 PM
To: Derk, Kimberly A <kaderk@usi.edu>

*** This message was sent from a non-USI address. Please exercise caution when responding, clicking on links or opening attachments. ***

I made it. You may use it.

On Sun, Apr 2, 2023 at 2:28 PM Derk, Kimberly A <kaderk@usi.edu> wrote:
Hello:

I'm completing my EdD dissertation at the University of Southern Indiana in May. I would like to include a graphic you used in your Dec. 16, 2015 post on Leverage Points, which I found very effective. I have not found another source for that particular image, so I thought perhaps you or your co-author may have generated it. If so, may I have permission to include it in my dissertation in a section that explains the value of finding leverage points within a system?

Here is the link.
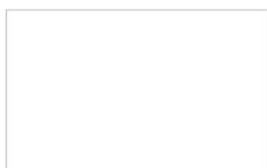
**Leverage Points - Permaculture Productions LLC**

Anyone seeking to make change in the world would do well to take a look at Donella Meadows' list of leverage points, 12 places to intervene in a system.

permacultureproductions.com

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Kimberly Derk, MA, BCBA

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