THE IMPACT OF STUDENT DISCIPLINE POLICY REFORM ON ILLINOIS EDUCATORS

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Illinois passed Senate Bill 100 (i.e., Illinois Public Act 99-0456), a landmark piece of legislation that signaled the state's commitment to endiz g discriminatory student discipline policies. This bill amended Illinois' School Code to prohibit the use of zero tolerance policies, limit the use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., out-of-school suspensions and expulsions), prohibit the use of disciplinary fines and fees, and clearly define the role of law enforcement in schools. The impetus for this bill was a U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights report that indicated Illinois had a higher gap than the nation between the suspension rates of Black students and White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Typically, when landmark pieces of legislation like this are passed, state resources are appropriated to develop model policies and to provide school districts with implementation support. Unfortunately, in this case, no such policies were developed, and no resources were appropriated. Illinois' 852 school districts were tasked with independently amending their student discipline policies and practices from punitive and exclusionary to restorative and inclusionary within a single school year. This study explores the results of these student discipline policy reforms on Illinois' educators.

PRIOR LITERATURE

Research shows that exclusionary discipline contributes to significant educational inequities for students of color including lower levels of academic achievement, an increased risk of school dropout, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system (e.g., Arcia, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Fabelo et al., 2011). In addition, there is no empirical research justifying the use of exclusionary discipline for non-violent student misconduct, and research demonstrates that exclusionary discipline does not result in safer schools, and it does not deter future student misbehavior (e.g., Losen, 2015).

However, attacks on school personnel have almost doubled according to data collected by Illinois' Student Incident Report System (ISBE, 2024). In addition, a national study conducted by McMahon and colleagues (2022) found that almost half of teachers and over 30% of other school personnel (i.e., administrators, school-based clinicians, paraprofessionals) indicated their desire or intention to quit or transfer schools due to concerns about school safety. We also know that there are other factors that contribute to perceptions about school safety and the use of exclusionary discipline such as inequitable resource allocation and ineffective school leadership (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Owens & Candipan, 2019). In addition, poorly implemented student discipline reform efforts and poorly implemented alternatives to exclusion discipline may also be to blame (Losen & Martinez, 2020). This study examines the impact of Illinois' student discipline reform efforts using data collected from Illinois' educators.

METHODS

In the fall of 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 Illinois public school teachers were sent an email invitation to participate in this study. Prior to completing the survey, all participants were presented with an electronic consent form and agreed to informed consent before entering the survey. The consent form stated the purpose of the study, the requirements for participating, and that personally identifiable information would not be collected.

The survey included a question about educators' perceptions of their school's ability to address student discipline and behavior problems (i.e., my school effectively handles student discipline and behavior problems) which used a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In addition, the survey included an open-ended question about the climate and culture of their school, as well as school district and personal demographic questions. Open-ended responses were coded for themes related to student discipline.

RESULTS

A total of 5,678 teachers completed the survey across all three years. See Table 1 for participation by year. At least one teacher responded to the survey from each of Illinois' 102 counties. The majority of respondents were working in Cook (1,387; 24.1%), DuPage (571; 10.1%), Will (522; 9.2%), Kane (333; 5.9%), Lake (319; 5.6%), Winnebago (266; 4.7%), Sangamon (211; 3.7%), Madison (150; 2.6%), McHenry (142; 2.5%), McLean (133; 2.3%), and Rock Island (112; 2.0%) counties.

TABLE 1

Participation By Years

YEAR	*n*	Percent
2019	1431	25.2
2020	1471	25.9
2021	1981	34.9
2022	795	14.0
Total	5678	100.0

Approximately 48% of participants classified their school district as a unit district (i.e., PK-12; 2,743). Approximately 34% of participants classified their school district as an elementary district (i.e., PK-8; 1,925); and approximately 14% classified their school district as a high school district (e.g., 9-12; 768). Approximately 4% of participants classified their school district as "other" and specified special education cooperatives, early childhood centers, career and technical education schools, and centers serving students in grades K-4 or 6-8.

Approximately 84% of participants reported their gender as female ($n = 4,444$), approximately 16% of participants reported their gender as male ($n = 825$), and less than one percent of participants reported their gender as non-binary ($n = 34$). Approximately 93% of participants were White ($n = 4,840$). See Table 2 for additional information about the race and ethnicity of participants.

TABLE 2

Participants' Race and Ethnicity

RACE & ETHNICITY	*n*	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	15	0.3
Asian	38	0.7
Black or African American	145	2.6
Hispanic or Latino	186	3.3
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	5	0.1
White	4840	85.2
Chose Not to Respond	449	7.8
Total	5678	100.0

On average, participants perceived that their schools were not effectively handling student discipline and behavior problems (*M* = 2.78; *SD* = 0.88). Qualitative responses indicate that student discipline is a significant problem and participants feel that they do not have the resources, training, or support to address students' increasing behavioral health needs. On average, 25 percent of participants' qualitative responses each school year (i.e., 2019 2021, 2022) were about student discipline and behavior issues with the exception being 2020 when many teachers were teaching remote or hybrid classes due to the pandemic. During 2020, approximately five percent of qualitative responses were about student discipline and behavior issues. Most of the qualitative responses in 2020 concerned issues related to the health and safety of students and teachers.

Many teachers voiced concerns about the impact Senate Bill 100 had on their school's ability to effectively handle student discipline and behavior issues.

> *I am a former student of the school I teach at, and the culture has completely changed in the decade and a half since I graduated. While it was intended to help disadvantaged and minority students in [district name], SB100 has impacted our school negatively by limiting the behavior issues we can discipline.*

> *The new senate bill about student discipline is a nightmare!*

> *My school used to be much more effective at dealing with discipline and behavior problems, school safety. This was before the state of Illinois changed laws a couple of years ago, effectively tying the schools' hands regarding consequences to the students for their behaviors.*

> *New state laws have made it more difficult to teach, because there is no discipline in schools anymore. Students can throw tantrums, physically assault their teachers and classmates, destroy the resources that we pay for with our own money, and nothing happens. They come back to school day after day and do it all over again.*

> *Senate Bill 100 is a mess! I understand the 'spirit' behind it, but it is not working! Students are running the building, and we have good leaders and teachers. Teachers do not feel safe, building leadership is in tears, majority of the student body does not feel safe and cannot focus on learning. SB100 needs to be retracted and come up with a bill that is NOT one size fits all...*

In addition, many teachers noted an increase in student discipline and behavior issues over time, as well as an increase in aggressive and violent behavior.

Since the passing of Senate Bill 100 discipline problems are on the rise.

Student behavior has been an increasing problem in the last couple of years that completely changes the climate and culture of schools from a positive setting to a stressful negative one.

With the new state laws regarding discipline, we have seen a major increase in aggressive and abusive student behaviors and these behaviors continue to escalate.

K, 1, [and] 2 students are seeing teachers getting hit, students throwing items, and students swearing and screaming on a daily/weekly basis without consequences.

I do not feel safe at my school. Students with extreme behaviors are sending staff to the ER on a regular basis. We are not equipped to handle some of the students who attend our school.

Aggressive and violent behavior amongst students towards each other has increased.

Student behaviors are unlike anything that I have seen in 29 years in my school. Far more students are struggling with defiance, avoidance, and physical aggression than I have ever seen.

There is so much violence. The number of fights we have had is wild—even violence toward teachers has increased.

Teachers were also concerned about a lack of available training, resources, and on-site clinicians (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors) to support students' behavioral health.

Our dean's office is overwhelmed by the amount of work that they have to do. We are short staffed and hamstrung by current Illinois discipline policies and restrictions. This causes a very negative climate in relation to discipline because it appears that our school administrators have no authority...

Our district has jumped right in with Trauma Informed [Practices] but we were never given adequate training on it, how to handle situations, consequences for students, etc. Many teachers are VERY frustrated with the lack of discipline and follow through in our schools.

...Our students have multiple Childhood ACE's [Adverse Childhood Experiences] and our staff does their best, but we could use so much more. We don't even have a school psychologist in our building...I work in a 3-5 grade classroom and get kicked, punched, head butted almost on a daily basis, and my situation is not unique...

It has become the norm for staff to consistently be hit, punched, kicked, and bit by students and nothing be done about it. We have students whose needs can't be met at our school, but we have programs in the district that can meet those needs and it's like pulling teeth to get it for students. Often takes years.

Teachers are getting burnt out with all the students' behaviors. There aren't enough school social workers and psychologists to deal with exploding behaviors. We are hit, spit on, cussed at, and objects are thrown at us. Something needs to be done because what we are implementing now is not working.

Classroom management is treated like it's 'my problem,' and I see little to no training opportunities for area teachers to solve this problem. Behaviors get worse every year...I feel like a failure most days and my morale has fallen. The stress and defeat I feel at my job is beginning to affect my physical and mental health to the point I feel like resigning.

Our staff continues to struggle with student behavior in the classroom, to the point that some teachers may quit mid-school year. We have the backing of our administration, but the behaviors far outweigh the resources.

These findings are concerning and should alert policymakers to the unintended consequences of significant education reform efforts when appropriate implementation support is not provided.

It is clear from the collected data that teachers need more support and schools need additional resources to ensure that students' behavioral health needs are being met without the use of ineffective exclusionary discipline practices. The following are eight suggested policy strategies for effectively reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and improving school climate in Illinois.

1. **Appropriate state resources for educator professional development.** Significant education policy changes must be accompanied by the appropriation of resources for educator training. The state, informed by behavioral health experts, should provide educators with high-quality, ongoing professional development on evidence-based classroom management and behavioral health strategies and interventions. Professional development should be accessible online and on-demand to meet the needs of educators across the state.

2. **Provide technical support for student discipline data collection and analysis**. The state should provide schools with technical support and guidance on the collection and analysis of student discipline data to identify and replace discriminatory and ineffective student discipline policies and practices. Educators should also be trained in functional behavioral assessment to ensure that their responses to repeated student misbehavior are situationally appropriate and effective.

3. **Expand access to school-based and school-linked health centers.** Illinois currently funds 38 school-based health and school-linked centers that provide students with a range of primary care services as well as behavioral health care. State appropriations should be made to expand these services as well as the development of new school-based and school-linked health centers across the state. Research shows that school-based health centers improve access and use of services and have the potential to reduce income-based disparities in children's healthcare (Boudreaux, Chu, & Lipton, 2023).

4. **Implement comprehensive school mental health systems.** Comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHS) provide tiered mental health services that include universal prevention and promotion activities as well as early intervention services for at-risk students, and treatment for those who have existing mental health concerns. CSMHS integrates a school's multi-tiered system of behavioral health supports with clinical mental health services and should be implemented alongside school-based and school-linked health centers.

5. **Set caseload limits for school-based clinicians.** To ensure school-based clinicians (e.g., school social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, and school nurses) can provide appropriate behavioral health services to students, caseload limits should be set in state law or regulation based on the recommendations of national professional organizations representing these groups. Educators participating in this study pointed to increasing workloads of school-based clinicians and their inability to provide appropriate services to all the students who need them. In addition, the state should amend the evidence-based funding formula to ensure appropriate ratios of school-based clinicians to students.

6. **Expand incentives for school-based clinicians.** In Illinois there is a shortage of all school-based staff including clinicians. Currently, Illinois funds a variety of scholarships, provides rigorous alternative licensure paths (e.g., residencies and apprenticeships), and loan repayment programs for educators. These opportunities should be expanded to school-based clinicians to strengthen preparation and retention efforts.

7. **Improve school administrator preparation and training programs.** Research demonstrates that perceived administrator support is one of the most important factors contributing to teacher retention. One of the primary themes found in this study was perceived lack of administrator support related to student discipline and behavior issues. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that perceived lack of administrator support doubled the rate of teacher attrition compared to teachers who felt that their administrators were supportive. Rigorous alternative licensure pathways such as residencies for principal training should be developed, and state-funded professional development opportunities that coordinate mentoring and professional learning should be expanded that emphasize the inclusion of educator voice in decision-making.

8. **Amend Illinois Public Act 99-0456 to ensure schools can respond appropriately when serious violent student behavior occurs.** Another primary theme found in this study was a perceived increase in aggressive and violent student behavior. Educators have a right to a safe workplace, and when serious violent student behavior occurs (e.g., assault or battery of another person or possessing a firearm or other weapon) a school must have the ability to respond in a manner that considers the safety of school staff as well as the needs of the student.

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