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**THE QUESTION**

# What proactive school and district policies/practices can best promote a positive school climate and reduce the need for student disciplinary referrals?

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Educational leaders are seeking ways to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices like out-of-school suspensions (OSS) and expulsions. These practices are associated with negative academic and life outcomes, are ineffective at reducing misbehavior, and are disproportionately applied to students of color and special education students.

Finding better approaches to discipline is part of a broader goal of improving school climate. School climate is a concept that includes the quality of teaching and learning, community relationships, and organizational features of a school environment. Preventing misbehavior would likely improve school climate more than changing the school's response after misbehavior occurs.



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## THE EVIDENCE

### Evidence on alternatives to exclusionary discipline

A variety of alternatives to suspensions have been evaluated, including restorative practices (RP), peer-mediation and conflict resolution, and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). RP, conflict resolution, and peer mediation have common elements (using misbehavior as an opportunity to teach pro-social behaviors, and focusing on repairing harm done), but they may not address minor disruptions and tardiness that affect school climate. Recent experimental evidence indicates that RP – while improving some outcomes – can lead to worse academic outcomes for some students, so more research is needed to determine the overall impact of these types of approaches.

Evidence and theory suggest that PBIS would be more effective at broadly improving school climate. A growing body of experimental literature indicates that PBIS, also known as School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) can reduce misbehavior, office discipline referrals (ODRs), suspensions, and bullying and improve school safety and reading achievement. PBIS has also been linked – in nonexperimental studies – to increases in attendance, a common proxy measurement for student engagement with school. While this brief focuses on PBIS, you can read more about other alternative approaches in the US Department of Education’s “Guiding Principles” document and elsewhere.

### What is PBIS?

PBIS is a set of systems aimed at improving school climate. PBIS is rooted in the behaviorist concept of positive reinforcement as well as social learning theory, which posits that people learn behaviors through observation and imitation of behaviors that result in desired outcomes. Key components of PBIS include (for more information, see [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)):

- Clear, fair, and positively-stated school-wide rules and behavioral expectations, such as: “Be Safe, Be Responsible, Be Respectful, Be Caring”
- Procedures for teaching expectations to students
- Procedures for rewarding positive behavior and discouraging rule-violating behavior
- Use of data for decision-making and evaluation
- Tiered supports for students with additional needs

### Key factors for effective PBIS implementation

Successful program implementation requires collaboration, buy-in, and stakeholder support as well as alignment to existing goals and routines. Schools must commit substantial

time and resources to plan for, implement, monitor, and sustain these systems, including through continuous, integrated professional development. Some commonly under-implemented components of PBIS (e.g. managing high quality reward and violation systems and teaching expectations as opposed to simply setting them) are also important for reducing ODRs, indicating the importance of supporting implementation of key components.

### Limitations and contextual considerations

There are limitations and concerns about PBIS studies. First, in some cases, even when ODRs and suspensions are reduced overall, PBIS does not eliminate racial disproportionalities. There is a growing call for PBIS systems and discipline more broadly to incorporate culturally responsive practices. Similarly, districts and schools should work to address implicit biases.

Secondly, context matters. Experimental evidence on PBIS is primarily from elementary schools, whose systems may not apply perfectly to high schools. However, correlational evidence indicates the benefits of PBIS in a variety of settings including high schools and juvenile correction facilities. Thus, while the body of evidence supports the use of PBIS, context and developmental appropriateness should be considered when designing a particular approach.

### Other important contextual considerations for implementing PBIS systems:

- Identification of schools that need extra support may improve the effectiveness of these types of discipline and climate reforms.
- PBIS policies need time to work. Improving school climate is not quick and easy, as programs often require multiple years of implementation to achieve their goals.
- When exclusionary discipline is required by law, schools can augment these responses with learning opportunities (e.g., conflict resolution for students fighting at school).



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## THE RECOMMENDATION

School and district leaders face many challenges in supporting positive school climate and reducing ODRs. A small but growing research base indicates that schools can support these efforts through a proactive approach such as PBIS. These efforts require time, resources, and buy-in, but once we recognize that behavior is an important life skill that needs to be explicitly taught, schools can begin the hard work of developing a disciplinary approach that encourages pro-social behavior, responds to student needs and improves school climate.