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A Balanced Approach: Advocating for Middle School Improvement that Levels the Playing Field

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A BALANCED APPROACH: ADVOCATING FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT THAT LEVELS THE
PLAYING FIELD

Derrick Craun

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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ABSTRACT

With a large disparity in the rate of suspension incidents received between African American and White students, it is evident why there still exists a gap in academic achievement. Too often we rely heavily on out of school suspensions as a consequence for student misbehavior. This approach leads to students falling behind academically and feeling less connected to their learning environment. My study takes a close look into establishing district policy to help each middle school offer a balanced approach to addressing student discipline in order to improve behavior and increase the amount of instructional time that African American middle school students receive.

PREFACE

After my third year as an assistant principal of Lincoln Middle School, I realized the need to implement new initiatives in order to help reduce the disparity demonstrated by the discipline data between African American and White students in my school and district. After analyzing the additional lost instructional time accrued for African American middle school students in our district, it is no wonder why there continues to be a gap in achievement data as well. Considering that 20% of the student population is African American in the county middle schools, it is urgent that we develop and implement a policy for prioritizing an increase of instructional time for African American students. Alternative consequences must be provided for addressing inappropriate behavior; alternatives that do not penalize students by taking away instructional time. Alternatives that prioritize staying in school and instructional time while also reinforcing positive behavior would allow students an opportunity to reflect on their behavior and analyze how their actions affect others.

Being an assistant principal at Lincoln Middle School, I was able to implement a variety of initiatives that focused on reducing the amount of lost instructional time due to disciplinary actions imposed on students for both minor and major behavior incidents. I also found the need for all schools to implement a balanced approach to discipline where we provide opportunities for students who often misbehave. Opportunities for them to develop a sense of pride and connectedness to their school rather than to feel even further alienated and disconnected from the school community as the result of suspensions. I feel that if we can develop policy that prioritizes such values, we can make significant

improvement in reducing the disparity between African American and White students in disciplinary actions demonstrated by school district middle school discipline data.

Throughout the development of my policy advocacy document, I learned that in order for a policy to become effective, it must allow each unique school site to take ownership of the implementation process. Flexibility in implementation is necessary due to the varying dynamics and challenges at work from one school site to the next. Each school site, no matter how similar in demographics, has their distinctive school culture and particular student need priorities. Each school may need to shape the policy in a site-specific manner; however, the intended outcome remains the primary objective, decreasing the amount of lost instructional time resulting from disciplinary actions. The careful consideration involved in the development of such a complex policy and the challenges that I encountered along the way have helped me expand my perspective as not only a school leader, but also as a district leader.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>ABSTRACT</u>	i
<u>PREFACE</u>	ii
<u>SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT</u>	1
<u>Introduction to the Problem</u>	1
<u>Critical Issues</u>	2
<u>Recommended Policy and Envisional Effect</u>	3
<u>SECTION TWO: NEEDS ANALYSIS</u>	7
<u>Moral/Ethical Analysis</u>	7
<u>Educational Analysis</u>	8
<u>Social Analysis</u>	9
<u>Political Analysis</u>	10
<u>Economical Analysis</u>	12
<u>SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT</u>	14
<u>Goals and Objectives of the Policy</u>	15
<u>Stakeholders Related to the Policy</u>	16
<u>Rationale for the Validity of the Policy</u>	19
<u>SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT</u>	22
<u>SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN</u>	25
<u>Needed Educational Activities</u>	25
<u>Program Budgets</u>	26
<u>Staff Development Plan</u>	28
<u>SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN</u>	32
<u>Monitor Progress</u>	32
<u>Evaluate Outcomes and Results</u>	33
<u>Accountability</u>	34
<u>SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT</u> ... Error! Bookmark not defined.	
<u>References</u>	41

SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

With the continued academic achievement and behavioral performance disparity between White and African American middle school students demonstrated by school district data, I feel that each middle school in the district needs to implement a balanced approach to out of school disciplinary actions and embrace a renewed prioritization to protecting instructional time in order to address the disparity. Relying on status quo disciplinary consequences, positive reinforcement, or interventions given out in isolation has not proved effective. In order to promote reform in this area, I will be utilizing a policy advocacy approach to help other middle schools in the district to reflect on ways to help level the playing field for African American middle school students in the school district. This reform will look at implementing a wide range of strategies that take a balanced approach for effectively serving the needs and challenges faced by African American middle school students.

Introduction to the Problem

As an assistant principal in a middle school where nearly 63% of students are minorities, I am compelled to address persisting academic and behavior performance gaps between student populations, especially between African American and White students. The gap must be addressed in order for our school to attain significant improvement. Middle schools in the district mimic an achievement gap consistent with middle schools across the United States. The Bradley Memoranda of Understanding (Bradley v. Pinellas County School Board, et. al., 1999) was approved by the school board on July 28, 2009, with the intention of providing quality education for African American students in the hope that a reduction in the achievement gap between White

and African American students would be seen. The requirements of the Memoranda documents include that schools in Pinellas County set goals in school improvement and discipline plans that address these gaps; however, no specific plan has been recommended or shared from school to school until just recently.

In September 2013, Pinellas Superintendent, Mike Grego presented a new plan to address the achievement gap which outlined five goals aligned with those outlined in the Bradley MOU. In spite of this action, the list of goals seems to be general in nature and the actions recommended are not specific to individual schools needs and priorities. Despite implementation of the Bradley MOU, Fitzpatrick (2013) mentions, “An analysis by the *Times* in 2010 found that black students in Pinellas were even further behind than other black students in Florida” (para. 9). Without specific strategies or processes that address the unique challenges of African American students in each school, I believe there will be no significant progress in closing the gaps in both achievement and disciplinary actions.

Critical Issues

Setting goals for reducing the behavior and achievement gaps between White and African American students is not enough to attain results. More specifically, in a district where seven of its 22 middle schools have greater than a 25% African American population, we must implement a more specific policy based on research that will help all schools succeed in narrowing the gap. One of the most critical issues contributing to the disparity between African American and White students in the academic and behavior actions is lost instructional time. Instructional time can be compromised in many different ways: lack of attendance, being sent to the office for exhibiting negative

behavior, time out of class due to discipline referrals, or being suspended as a result of discipline issues.

The 2012-2013 Bradley Mediation Report (Pinellas County Schools, 2014) indicates that 4,288 out-of-school suspensions were issued for African American middle school students during the 2013-14 school year with an African American middle school student enrollment of only 4,031. This means that approximately 106 out-of-school suspensions were issued for every 100 African American middle school students. When compared to Non-African American students, approximately 21 out-of-school suspensions were given per 100 students, as 3,501 suspensions were given to the 16,593 non-African American middle school students in the district. Looking at these statistics, the suspension rate is over 5 times greater for African American middle school students, which shows a great disparity in the amount of instructional time available to our middle school students.

Recommended Policy and Envisioned Effect

In order to help increase parity in student achievement and behavior data for African American and White middle school students, I recommend a multifaceted approach that prioritizes increased instructional time for African American students. The first aspect addresses the terms and practices of behavior management. This speaks to a focus in middle school discipline plans on utilizing discipline interventions that reduce lost instruction time for African American students. These interventions include student-facilitated Restorative Justice Conferences to address discipline incidents, a school-wide infraction point system in order for students to monitor and track their progress, the implementation of after school Community Enrichment programs, and a positive

behavior support program to provide acknowledgements and rewards for positive behavior. These strategies are all designed to reduce the number of discipline referrals and in/out of school suspensions for African American students.

Restorative Justice is an initiative that helps students take responsibility for their actions and repair the harm that is caused by their poor decisions, as opposed to simply being issued consequences, such as suspension, that do not get to the root of the behavior problem and typically lead to a loss of instructional time for that student. As Holtham (2009) states:

Restorative justice brings the offender together with his or her victim in a face-to-face gathering that is generally called a restorative justice conference ... The dialogue encourages each person to talk honestly about what happened, who it affected, and together find a way to repair the harm to the greatest extent possible. (pp. 9-10)

By implementing a school wide initiative such as Restorative Justice, student led conferences could be used to resolve discipline issues which typically would have resulted in suspension from school. The policy I am recommending is meant to help students realize the consequences of their poor choices and the affect their poor choices have on others. Furthermore, the practice of Restorative Justice Conferences helps students examine the reasons that caused the student to act inappropriately and explore alternative solutions.

In correspondence with a Restorative Justice approach, implementing a school wide infraction system would benefit students by providing a means for students to track and monitor their own behavior. Such a system leads to a reduction of discipline referrals

for minor incidents such as tardiness, forgetting materials, and not following classroom rules. As an alternative to the traditional referral, teachers track points earned in a school wide data base where consequences will be issued such as lunch detention, loss of privileges, parent conferences, or taking part in an after school detention-like program. This strategy does not use a traditional detention program that typically does not create opportunities for student learning, but rather provides engaging learning contexts for students. A after school program such as “Community Enrichment,” provides a reflective and academic approach to the traditional detention concept. Created and named by our school leadership team, Community Enrichment allows students to reflect on the behavior that earned them each session, and examine how better making could lead to academic success. After-school Community Enrichment would be an opportunity for students to help clean up and enrich the campus, which will also instill a sense of pride and connection, as opposed to suspension which only leads to a greater disconnect to school by providing a sense of belonging, teamwork, and connection.

To encourage and reinforce positive behavior, a student led Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program may work hand in hand with an infraction system to acknowledge and reward positive choices providing student motivation for following school wide expectations. Rewards such as celebrations, tokens, positive referrals and parent calls or prizes are typically given for students who earn little or no infraction points each cycle. For my proposed policy, student ownership and leadership for such positive incentive programs is a necessary requirement.

A key aspect of my new policy focuses on access to after school instruction for African American students. School discipline plans that are created to set goals to

narrow the disparity in discipline results should work to offer transportation for students who require transportation in order to attend after school curricular programs. Too often, after school extended learning opportunities and enrichment clubs experience low attendance rates due to the lack of transportation. By providing transportation for students to stay after school and participate in clubs, sports, activities, and tutoring. These opportunities afford students with a more positive connection to school. With after school offerings and transportation availability, extra-curricular activities can create greater student engagement and there will be a diminished need to provide such programs during school resulting in missed instructional time during the school day.

SECTION TWO: NEEDS ANALYSIS

As the need to address the disparity between White and African American middle school students in academic and behavior data continues to remain prevalent, I will analyze the importance of implementing a balanced approach to the problem in order to help close the gaps. In analyzing the need for such a policy, I will explore five perspectives (moral/ethical, education, social, political, and economic) in order to establish a foundation for my policy recommendation.

Moral/Ethical Analysis

Ethically, it may come into question why only African American students may be targeted to take part in interventions to avoid suspension as a consequence for negative behavior. However, initiatives such as Restorative Justice, Community Enrichment, and a school wide infraction processes can be implemented for all students. Implementing such initiatives in our middle schools will increase instructional time for all students which will still level the playing field for academic achievement and help establish equality of opportunity for educational opportunities. Schools with a high percentage of students of poverty will be strongly encouraged to provide transportation for after school activities in order to increase participation of low income and working-class backgrounds.

However, by implementing such initiatives, many of which are tied into the disciplinary actions for students, we run into the ethical dilemma of assigning consistent consequences for all students. Typically, most middle schools create and implement a discipline matrix that spells out specific consequences for each violation of the student code of conduct. Discipline matrices along with zero-tolerance incidents can be strongly

supported by teachers, whereas any deviation from such policies may result in teachers feeling of a lack of support by administration in terms of immediate and severe consequences for student discipline referrals.

In addition to leveling the playing field by increasing instructional time for African American students, my proposed policy will help students be able to effectively function in the broader society. By teaching and encouraging students to take responsibility for their actions and respectful to others, this will also better prepare students to participate effectively in the workforce. Restorative Justice and Community Enrichment both facilitate student pride and ownership, as opposed to a creating a disconnect between students and their school and community that often results from high suspension rates.

Education Analysis

This policy will help increase the lower reading and math proficiency level scores for African American students, which are nearly 3 times higher for White middle school students. Taking time to teach and reflect on behavior through the infraction data process and the after school Community Enrichment program will also help African American students become more successful academically. Community Enrichment, Restorative Justice, and infraction system conferences will all require students to write reflective essays and develop plans of action and behavior with the purpose of setting positive expectations for themselves. These expectations involve the anticipated experience of more positive results. As students engage in reflection and goal setting, they will be guided into the development of problem-solving skills and practices relevant to the needs of the individual student. “Different children have different needs and addressing those

different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 33). In addition, increased access to after school learning opportunities for remediation and enrichment will help African American students focus on learning and raise academic standards.

In 2013, Pinellas County Superintendent Mike Grego implemented an action, “to eliminate the gap in proficiency rates between black student and other students, the district will ensure all black students have access to extended learning programs to prepare for end-of-course exams and the FCAT” (Fitzpatrick, 2013, para. 5). In addition, “Summer Bridge...a six-week invitation-only program aims to prevent students from slipping during summer vacation, and it still will target struggling students who performed below grade level” (Dawson, 2014, para. 3). Despite these actions, especially for my school where a majority of our African American students ride the bus to and from school, a major barrier for student participation is the lack of transportation. Finding a way to provide transportation and working with the parents to encourage involvement is critical for extended learning interventions to help the students who need the additional support.

Social Analysis

Socially, this policy would emphasize increased parent and community involvement through Restorative Justice and infraction system parent conferences. In addition, the emphasis on teachers establishing positive relationships with students through after school enrichment activities such as Chess, 5000 Role Models, Girlfriends, Science Technology and Engineering in Math (S.T.E.M.), Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT), Cooking, and sports clubs would help reduce the social disadvantage

for many African American students. These initiatives are empowering for students, as they have an active role in the outcomes of the interventions while also helping students learn to solve real life social problems without resorting to fighting and other forms of violence which ultimately lead to out of school suspensions and lost instructional time.

Reoccurring after school enrichment programs will also allow African American students to acquire an increased sense of belonging and expose them to different cultural experiences. The amount of peer-to-peer social interactions that takes place in such programs will provide opportunities for personal growth. Ladson-Billings (2004) eludes, “when schools support their culture as an integral part of the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students” (p. 11). As an alternative to issuing consequences to students that result in lost instructional time, my proposed policy works to facilitate small group discussion and set the stage for building schools’ culture as one where productive dialogue is used to resolve situations as opposed to threatening consequences.

Political Analysis

Politically, the disparity between African American and White student achievement has been an ongoing topic of discussion for decades. Although the quality of education for African American students may have improved, there is still a large discrepancy in behavior and proficiency data. The Bradley MOU highlights the importance for Pinellas County Schools to recognize and set goals for closing the gap, but does not provide framework for school to follow in order to make progress on meeting or exceeding the goals. Mandating that schools make this a priority may be difficult due to the over-extension of administrators’ job duties as it is currently.

As a result, out of school suspensions students' political freedoms are lost by temporarily losing their right to an education. Zero tolerance policies and discipline matrixes also lead to the range of student choice being limited or taken away.

Throughout the implementation of the Bradley MOU, our district did not achieve what the memorandum set out to accomplish. As mentioned earlier, the out-of-school suspension rate is over 5 times greater for African American middle school students than white middle school students. Furthermore, according to the Florida Department of Education (2014), when comparing the 2012-13 FCAT 2.0 grades 6-8 Reading results for Pinellas County students, only 28% of African American students achieved proficiency (Level 3 or above) compared to 68% of White student proficiency. Grades 7 and 8 had similar results where the comparisons in Reading proficiency for 7th grade resulted in 28% for African American to 65% White and again where 28% of African American students to 63% of White eighth graders scored at a proficient level. Overall in Reading, the proficiency rate for White middle school students in Pinellas County is more than 2.3 times greater than that of African American middle school students. My policy helps to reduce the "domino effect" that results from the current discipline system that exists in our district's middle schools. It accomplishes this by working to increase instructional time, facilitate student self-reflection on behavior, and essentially allow for the autonomy of African American middle school students in our district.

Economic Analysis

Economically, many of the interventions that will need to be implemented will not be at additional cost for schools, especially schools that are in Title 1 status and receive additional funds from the state due to a high percentage of low socio-economic student population. Schools who do not receive Title 1 funding could engage in writing grant applications, elicit partnerships, use district allotted ELP funds, or utilize site level discretionary funds in order to fund necessary initiatives in their school.

Providing transportation for after school programs could be costly to schools; however, should be a priority for the district since in many cases is the only way to gain participation for many African American students. In cases where funding may be an issue, programs could be planned on a more limited basis, such as twice a week as opposed to daily, or offer only a select number of centrally located satellite bus stops to save on costs.

The cost associated with teacher pay for after school programs may prove prohibitive for policy implementation. In light of this cost, each school will have flexibility to design their own plan based on their available funding and the needs of the African American students in their school. Some suggestions for schools without means for paying teachers for after school hours would be to offer compensatory time for participating teachers to use during times of non-student contact such as planning periods or teacher in-service days which would not require schools to provide substitutes.

In order to provide African American student with after school tutoring, mentoring, remediation or other enrichment clubs, it may be necessary to seek community volunteers and business partners. From my experience, I have found many

community members and organizations who would like to get involved to assist schools, but school leaders do not know how to organize a way to involve them. Tapping into outside resources is important in order to provide, “activities that should occur outside of the traditional classroom” (Kafele, 2009, p. 72) in order to empower African American students, especially males.

SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

Despite the on-going efforts to narrow the achievement and behavior gaps set forth by Bradley Memorandum of Understanding, there is a need for a school district policy that takes a balanced approach in addressing discipline issues. This policy needs to be specific and focus on the root of the problem; problems, which contribute to the gap in achievement between White and African American middle, school students. No longer can we continue issuing disciplinary actions such suspensions and sending students to the office during class time on referrals that result in students losing an extensive amount of learning time. For decades, we have looked to zero tolerance policies and out of school suspensions as ways to curb negative and undesired behavior without weighing the impact these decisions have on learning, student engagement, and our society as a whole.

The idea of a balanced approach to discipline is heavily dependent on the underlying concept of the benefits associated with intentional instruction and acknowledgement of positive student behaviors. The policy presented provides a structure for implementation of this type of balanced approach while also allowing for each school latitude to shape the structure to meet their student and site needs. Key to the implementation of my policy is the content of each school's plan of opportunities for students to reflect on and track their behavior, to repair the harm caused by their actions, and to be rewarded for positive behavior. These practices are opposed to isolated disciplinary actions. The intention of my policy guidelines is to move away from the reliance on out-of-school and in-school suspensions as the only, or the primary, means of addressing negative student behavior incidents. These suspension practices are severely effecting the equitable provision of instructional time leading to diminished academic

achievement and compounding the experience of disconnection from school and community, especially for our African American middle school students.

Goals and Objectives of the Policy

In order to work toward decreasing the disparity in White and African American students' disciplinary actions and achievement results, we must begin to focus our efforts on both protecting and increasing instructional time for our African American middle school students. By closely monitoring instructional time lost due to disciplinary actions given to African American students, we can begin to see the problem clearly. Defining the problem clearly is the first step to the work of leveling the playing field for an equal educational opportunity. As found in my prior study, "Response to Intervention for African American Middle School Students in Pinellas County Schools: A Look into Successful Interventions in Order to Close the Achievement Gap" (Craun, 2014), educators agreed that the reliance on severe and punishing consequences, suspensions, and student retentions are not effectively supporting middle school success for our African American students.

The Bradley MOU requires all schools to set goals in relation to decreasing the suspension rate for African American students. However, it does not provide schools with guidance or strategies related to the goals; this may be one reason why improvement remains stagnant. Zero tolerance policies and disciplinary action matrixes continue to be a way of work for most schools; these policies are contrary to an environment in which disparity of suspensions might be reduced. In summary, there is a great need for our district to implement a policy incorporating balanced and proven strategies in support of middle school implementation of alternative methods for addressing negative behavior.

Methods implemented so that behavioral issues are addressed, but the actions do not significantly result in the loss of instructional time, especially for African American students.

Stakeholders Related to the Policy

If it were put into action, many different types of stakeholders would be affected by my recommended policy. The obvious stakeholder at the center of the policy change is the student body as a whole. A policy that focuses on keeping students in the classroom and providing them with additional learning opportunities will be a huge shift to their school experience. School personnel and parents will be required to be engaged in the process, a commitment that will be increasingly appealing to them as they see the benefits gained as a result of the policy. In terms of the larger picture, the society as a whole will experience several advantages in both the short and long term. Student attendance in school increased; student engagement in school increased; learning gains; decrease in dropouts; increase in a prepared workforce; and a greater overall efficiency of our economy.

Educators

A policy of balanced approaches to the handling of student discipline would begin with the responsibility of the implementation falling squarely on the shoulders of the teachers and administrators who carry out the plan on a daily basis. In the end, as the push for “pay for performance” initiatives grows, teachers are more accountable than ever before for the academic achievement of all students to whom they serve. In further evaluating the teacher perspective, self-interest may come into play. From the exterior, the policy may appear to be giving power to the students while taking it away from the

teacher. Writing less disciplinary referrals may cause teachers to feel as if their power has been diminished. However, from my experiences as both a teacher and administrator, I found the opposite case to be true. The message sent to students by teachers when they write a discipline referral often is “I cannot handle the situation and have to turn it over to someone who can.” This message transfers the power back to the student.

In addition, I feel administrators when issuing a suspension are sending the same message. Often times, the student walks away with the upper hand in a potential power struggle because they still did not repair the harm their actions caused on the victim and they get out of having to perform academic tasks. This can also send the message that the adult is not equipped to provide a meaningful solution to the undesired behavior.

Parents

The parents remain a critical piece to the success of the students. As stakeholders, their buy-in will influence the success of this policy as parent support influences any policy that affects student success. The parents’ needs are met in many ways by this policy. Parents’ expectations for student success hinge upon their child being in class, learning the required skills needed to be successful academically and fulfilling their promise as productive members of society. From my experiences handling discipline issues for several years, I find that often what first appears to be a lack of parent support is usually the case of a school staff member misinterpreting the parent’s lack of ability to provide the educational support their child needs as opposition. Creating a policy that facilitates on-going communication through parent-teacher meetings and positive behavior referrals will enhance the partnership between school and home. By including parents in Restorative Justice Conferences, the parents will feel much more satisfied that

the best interest of their child's education is being met by the school culture. This would be a great improvement from the usual occurrence of the parents getting a phone call from the administrator informing them that their child cannot attend school for the next several days.

Community Members

The success of our youth is critical in relation to the success of our society as a whole. In addition to the potential impact on the efficiency of our economy as mentioned earlier, our community values would be addressed by this policy in several ways. First off, communities around the nation are beginning to become more and more familiar with the dire and costly "school-to-prison pipeline" which involves African American students several times more than it does White students. The school-to-prison pipeline is described as:

. . . An epidemic that is plaguing schools across the nation. Far too often, students are suspended, expelled or even arrested for minor offenses that leave visits to the principal's office a thing of the past. Statistics reflect that these policies disproportionately target students of color and those with a history of abuse, neglect, poverty or learning disabilities. (Amurao, 2013, para. 2)

Amurao continues to recognize the impact of students who are removed from educational settings due to discipline issues on our communities by explaining, "those who are unnecessarily forced out of school become stigmatized and fall behind in their studies; many eventually decide to drop out of school altogether, and many others commit crimes in their communities" (para. 3). This leads to the subsequent need for our school's community to implement policy that focuses efforts on keeping students in

school and growing productive citizens who help construct an efficient economy and exhibit the value of respectful behavior.

Students

In the end, the main impact from my proposed policy is the impact on student learning. Not only does the policy influence the students who are misbehaving, but also promises to influence positively the students who are continuously following school expectations. My balanced approach to discipline involves recognizing, celebrating, and rewarding positive behavior, all while teaching and reinforcing students to act responsibly and respectfully in specific situations. The after school Community Enrichment program and Restorative Justice Initiative both serve as a viable response to misbehavior, and at the same time, serve to provide a learning experience for the students involved. The practice not only helps students by increasing instructional time, but also benefits students by creating an all-around culture of learning, respect, and pride within the school.

Rationale for the Validity of the Policy

Fowler (2004) highlights the importance of “determining whether a policy is appropriate for a specific context” (p. 279). The first question that Fowler poses asks, “Is the proposed policy consistent with the school’s, or district’s, vision statement or philosophy?” (Table 10.1, p. 279). The district’s website (www.pcsb.org) states its vision of “100% student success” along with the mission to “Educate and prepare each student for college, career and life.” The focus of this proposed policy is strongly aligned with both. Here we are looking to implement a policy that holds all schools accountable to implement an approach to handling discipline matters that focuses on learning from the

experience, growing more responsible as a young person, and protecting instructional time. As the data presented earlier shows, African American middle school students in the district receive out of school suspensions at a rate 5 times greater than do White students. This policy will help to address the apparent inequity in the incidence of suspensions and decrease the resulting gap in school achievement, hence better working toward the district's vision of "100% Student Success" in fulfillment of the district's mission.

In addition to the policy's alignment to the district philosophy, to the policy is also responsive to the demographics of the school district. For the 2012-13 school year, the county school district has had an enrollment rate of 20% African American middle school students overall. Three of the district's middle schools hold an African American student enrollment rate that is greater than 50% (PCS, 2014). These schools are all located in the southern area of the district where many community initiatives have formed, over the last several years, due to concerns in the disparity between African American and White student achievement results. This community response additionally demonstrates that the values held by the community align with the intentions of my proposed policy as well.

In relation the role of school administrators, several of the standards of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards (Florida Department of Education, 2014) support the appropriateness of this policy to current best practices. Leadership Standard 2, sub-category (d) states school leaders must, "engage(s) faculty and staff in efforts to close learning performance gaps among student subgroups within the school" (FLDOE, 2014, para. 4). This standard for all principals to follow is often a monitored indicator of

principal performance, but the practical implementation of this objective is not effectively addressed, which even further implies a need for guidance through policy.

In addition to Standard 2, Standard 5 also addresses the need for a policy that addresses the need to increase instructional time for African American students through sub-standard “F”, stating that a school leader “engages faculty in recognizing and understanding cultural and developmental issues related to student learning by identifying and addressing strategies to minimize and/or eliminate achievement gaps.” These strategies were recommended in my previous two studies to which I referred to earlier. Because of these studies I conducted, I concluded:

Parents must be engaged in their child’s education, school administrators must work to establish trusting, supportive relationships with parents, community members must volunteer to assist in mentoring and supporting our students, teachers must establish positive relationships and provide engaging lessons that make learning meaningful, and students must take responsibility for self-directed learners in order for real change to take place. Missing only one of those factors makes it difficult for any student to experience positive results, so imagine those who are missing nearly all. We cannot continue to operate in isolation and expect results any different. (Craun, 2013, p. 34)

SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT

As previously discussed, there are many potential benefits for the district for a wide range of stakeholders associated with the adoption of this policy. This policy is not a mandated “one fits all” solution to a very complex problem. Instead, the policy simply provides a framework of promising practices through which all middle schools may construct an avenue of processes and procedures focusing on increasing instructional time for African American students and moving away from the era of pushing kids out on the streets, as suspensions often do. The benefits a balanced approach for addressing discipline issues will appeal to educators, parents, community members, and middle school students.

In order for any policy to be effective and sustainable in reaching its desired size effect, there must be a degree of flexibility in implementation. This flexibility of implementation includes offering all stakeholders an opportunity to offer input into how the policy is to be practiced in order to create buy-in by allowing them to experience empowerment and to take ownership of the challenge and the solution. As researchers have found, “You cannot simply issue mandates from on high and get real change in institutions as complex as schools. You issue mandates, you get compliance, and that’s on a good day” (Payne, 2011, p. 193). Change requires more than compliance; change demands buy-in at all levels.

Again referring to the Florida Principal Leadership Standards, school leaders are held accountable to address the issue of the disparity in academic achievement and inequity demonstrated by discipline data. Leadership Standard 10, sub-category (c) subcategory C. of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards requires that the leader,

“Demonstrates a commitment to the success of all students, identifying barriers and their impact on the well-being of the school, families, and local community”

(<http://www.fldoe.org/profdev/fpls.asp>). As in any change initiative or reform, there are a certain number of “cons” associated with its implementation. In advocating this policy, I have considered many possible barriers and/or deterrents concerning the creation of a balanced approach to handling discipline issues.

The most notable “con” that one may argue about my policy is the elevated amount of collaboration time that it will take to sustain positive results, which the coordination of such conferences and meetings would require. In order for our middle schools to implement an approach to behavior that focuses on increasing instructional time for African American students and sustain positive results, all stakeholders must buy into the importance of working collectively. Too often, school reforms fail to produce results when leaders, “find right away a small group of teachers open to trying whatever the innovation is, but two or three years later, they are still working with the same little group. Other teachers don’t come on board as anticipated” (Payne, p. 29). Creating culture wide change is a challenging proposition.

Based on my experiences as an educator, most educators react negatively when given more “top down” mandates. This is typically due to a new initiative creating even more responsibility and accountability for teachers; this poses a challenge for policy advocacy. Ultimately, “People have to be convinced that there is some value in what you’re asking them to do” (Payne, p. 193). In the case of advocating this policy, I feel all stakeholders will see the benefit to the school culture, their classrooms, and their ability to perform as classroom instructors that the policy will afford. The change to a more

collaborative work environment in order to support the desired effect must be clearly tied to the benefits to be enjoyed in the long run by the stakeholders. The end result, narrowing the gap between African American and White student achievement, is a further incentive to ensure that the time necessary for collaboration is set as a school site priority.

This policy is not a “quick fix” but rather a framework of understanding to guide the construction of school wide discipline plans that specifically target and practically implement promising practice strategies. Carl Cohen states, “There are no quick fixes or perfect educational theories. School reform is a slow, steady labor-intensive process” (as cited in Ravitch, 2010, p. 66). Cohen also adds, “ground level solution, such as high-quality leadership, staff collaboration, committed teachers, and clean and safe environments, have the best chance of success,” all of which are elements of my proposed policy.

SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

In order to implement my policy, I have created a detailed plan that covers varying scenarios for the diverse dynamics and needs of the 20 middle schools in the district. Plans for a balanced approach to discipline may look different from school to school, but all offer specific alternatives to the reduction of instructional time for African American students due to discipline issues. The implementation plan for this policy consists of addressing multiple components. In order to address the problem, the components of plans include educational activities, budgets, staff development, and progress monitoring.

Needed Educational Activities

In order to implement this policy, each middle school will have a slightly different plan based on the needs of its students. In general, every school's plan should entail a balance of the following four initiatives:

1. School wide behavior infraction system
2. Positive Behavior Support program
3. Before or after school enrichment program for further teaching behavior.
4. Restorative Justice initiative plan

The first initiative, although the most punitive piece to the policy, is perhaps the driving force of the other initiatives. The level of support for the other initiatives in terms of frequency and personnel required will be based on the infraction process results. The target of the school wide behavior infraction system is to establish a means for teachers to record, and students to track their own behavior, based on points being assigned for infractions. The infractions include, but not limited to, the following: tardy to class,

forgetting class materials, disrupting class, breaking classroom rules, being out of compliance with the dress code, defiance, skipping class, and earning a major disciplinary action by exhibiting a major behavior infraction which requires immediate attention such as fighting or being aggressively defiant. The points earned are compiled and reviewed by student's teacher teams regularly (I suggest every 2 weeks). Because of the data meetings, interventions such as parent teacher conferences, mentoring programs, and behavior contracts are assigned to the student on an as needed basis.

The next step in the balanced approach to behavior is creating a link between the infraction system and the school's Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program, which should also be an initiative operated with student input and leadership. One example of connecting the two initiatives is to implement a student committee that provides suggestions for incentives and helps to operate the school store and operation of events that award students for positive behavior results from the behavior infraction system. By creating strong incentives for students who consistently follow expectations, a more respectful and responsible culture will be fostered that will help to reduce discipline incidents and to increase learning time for all students.

Next, a school's plan should include an after or before school Community Enrichment program. Community Enrichment serves as a form of consequence, which requires students to reflect on their behavior, create a plan for moving forward, and avoid making the same poor decision in the future. Based on my experiences, this is far more effective than issuing in or out of school suspension where students often times end up violating the same infraction in the future due to the lack of reflection on making alternative decisions. Community Enrichment should be aligned with the behavior

infraction process through use as a consequence to the total number of infraction points earned after each cycle. In addition to the Community Enrichment program, there is also a need to address and repair the harm that is caused by more serious discipline incidents. These incidents tend to be situations where the consequences traditionally involve an excessive amount of lost instructional time. The Restorative Justice initiative, as described previously, is focused on the idea that when an undesirable altercation takes place, there are many individuals who are negatively affected by the situation.

Restorative Justice Conferences can be organized to take place during school (the student facilitators can be utilized and trained as an elective course) or before or after school. This activity would require one or more adult facilitators in order to train students in the procedures and also to facilitate the student-led conferences making sure the recommendations are fair and appropriate. The Restorative Justice initiative could also be spread school wide as a Tier 1 strategy in order to establish, “a way to build the school community and help students, school personnel, and parents cope with violence in the community beyond the school” (Summer, Silverman, and Frampton, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, committees can develop as a part of an elective curriculum in a course such as “Principal’s Multicultural Advisory Committee” (PMAC).

Program Budgets

In our school district, the available funds and resources that are granted to schools are based on the demographics and challenges of each school. These are decided by district leadership. My policy proposal will give flexibility and recommendations for ways to accommodate the policy implementation within the constraints of the availability of funds that are currently allotted to middle schools in the district. Breaking the middle school options into three scenarios, I feel that the district middle schools will be able to identify a plan that will be easy to implement and carry out resulting in positive results in reducing the disparity in achievement between African American and White students.

The first option plan would be for schools that are identified as Title 1 status with a high rate of students earning free or reduced lunch. Looking at the district demographics, these qualifying schools typically also have minority enrollment rates over 25%. With the requirement that all Title 1 dollars be spent in relation to increasing student achievement, after school extended learning opportunities would be an appropriate expenditure and would provide a means for funding teacher pay and transportation for late busses. Typically, schools with high poverty and high minority rates struggle to maintain after school program participation due to transportation barriers. This barrier must be eliminated in order for the success of any initiative that depends on providing equal opportunity for all students. Additionally, the schools that are included under this option also receive an additional “priority” rating by the district, which appropriates additional funds for the extended learning school budget. These funds may also be used to ensure transportation is provided, as these schools may need to

organize transportation and program frequency up to four days per week due to their challenging student populations.

The second option is for schools that do not qualify for Title 1 funding, but do have a somewhat challenging student population in terms of discipline referral rates. These schools may need to use Extended Learning Program (ELP) funds to provide transportation and program instructors at a more reduced level. Offering the Community Enrichment and Restorative Justice programs twice per week and arranging transportation once per week would be a manageable cost in order to maintain the initiatives throughout the school year.

The third option would be appropriate for schools that have a general high level of academic student engagement, low discipline rates, low minority rates, and increased parent support such as “Fundamental Schools.” The policy recommended for these schools is scaled back much more since many of the systems may not need to be fully implemented through the entire school. For instance, by using the processes that are already in place, the school can monitor to ensure they are benefiting African American students enrolled. The initiatives recommended are still necessary; however, schools with significantly lower African American student enrollment may be able to focus on reducing the disparity in suspension with a less intensive school wide approach. This can be done by holding programs that are an alternative to suspension on a bi-weekly basis in order to require significantly less funding to implement.

Staff Development Plans

In order to implement this policy, many different forms of staff development are necessary. However, most can easily take place through grade level, staff, and common planning meetings. There will be a need for limited professional development opportunities provided on a district level to support the training of adult facilitators for Restorative Justice, Community Enrichment, the infraction system, and PBS in order to offer the balanced approach to discipline for middle schools. This can be done through the district's Prevention Department that currently facilitates similar alternatives for zero-tolerance incidents, such as a tobacco clinic and drug and alcohol clinic. From this point, the newly trained staff members (at least one per school) can train other staff members as needed.

Progress Monitoring Activities

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach for each school, many forms of progress monitoring must take place. Many monitoring processes are already designed and easily accessible through the infraction process and discipline data. Already utilized data collection sources such as File Maker Pro can be used for teacher input and collection of infraction incidents and points. Throughout the year, point levels can be monitored through a basic spreadsheet to monitor any trends or themes that might come about. This process will be useful to analyze through schools' Site-Based Leadership Teams (SBLT) as they do with discipline referral results. Data can be collected by student, incident, or by the teacher giving the infraction. The data possibilities of a school wide infraction process would be far more sophisticated and

consistent than discipline referral data, and in addition, would significantly reduce the amount of time students miss instruction.

Overall, in order to determine if the policy is effective after implementation, schools can monitor the progress of school wide discipline plans throughout the year that are aimed to reducing the referral and suspension rates for African American students. The Bradley MOU requires this to be a priority in being able to help close the achievement gap in PCS. However, no such policy exists which could possibly offer a specific plan to achieve such results.

SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

In order to assess the overall effectiveness of the policy, it is necessary to consider three important elements. Immediately after implementation, progress monitoring must begin and continue throughout the school year. The data should be analyzed and processed to continue the problem solving process in order to identify areas for improvement for the newly implemented discipline initiatives. Along with progress monitoring, evaluation of the outcomes and results should be on going in order to assess the overall implementation of the policy. If the implementation of the policy requires modification, we then need to re-visit the accountability aspect and work to ensure the plan is being implemented with fidelity.

Monitor Progress

In addition to individual schools monitoring the progress of African American students, the district as a whole must review data periodically in order to communicate what is working in particular schools and celebrate successes the initiative brings about. The district wide data to consider would be slightly different from school based reviews. Similar to the current Bradley MOU reports that are published periodically by the district, the data to monitor should include referrals, suspensions, and formative assessment comparisons between African American and White middle school students. Assessment results can be examined in order to determine if increasing instructional time for African American students is narrowing the achievement gap. The reports should include results for each middle school and the overall district, and include a summary of each school's approach to addressing the policy.

Evaluate Outcomes and Results

After review monitoring of the progress of the plan, we must utilize a problem-solving process that takes into account the quantitative data used to determine progress and qualitative data that needs to be collected to evaluate the system. As indicated by research, “A systematic problem-solving process uses the skills of professionals from multiple disciplines to develop and evaluate intervention plans to improve the academic and behavioral performance of all students” (Problem Solving and Response to Intervention, 2011). This policy, which requires schools to implement a balanced approach to discipline, is considered a response to intervention based on the disparity in discipline data between African American and White middle school students throughout the district and will be on on-going process.

By using qualitative and quantitative data to monitor the amount and impact of increased instructional time for African American students, the Problem Solving and Response to Intervention process can be continuously utilized to identify and implement new interventions and processes. The Problem Solving and Response to Intervention collaborative project (PS/RTI project) between the Florida Department of Education and the University of South Florida (http://floridarti.usf.edu/resources/topic/overview_of_rti/about_ps_rti/index.html#multitierdapproach/) indicates the following for steps for continuous evaluation:

1. Problem Identification entails accurately identifying the problem and the desired behavior for the student(s) experiencing academic or behavioral difficulty.

2. Problem Analysis, involves analyzing why the problem is occurring by collecting data to determine possible causes of the identified problem.
3. During Intervention Design & Implementation, evidence-based interventions based upon data collected previously are selected or developed, then implemented.
4. Lastly, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions utilized is paramount in a problem-solving process. This fourth step is termed Response-to-Intervention. It is in this fourth step that a student's or group of students' response to our implemented intervention is measured so that we may evaluate the effectiveness of our instructional efforts.

In addition, the PS/RTI project adds, “the problem-solving process is self-correcting, and, if necessary, recycles in order to achieve the best outcomes for all students. This process is strongly supported by both IDEA and NCLB” (para. 4). Following this approach for evaluating the impact of a balanced approach to discipline will also help provide schools with the indication that other interventions are needed in order to meet the needs of those students not positively responding to the processes in place.

Accountability

The accountability aspect of the change plan lies with both teachers and school leaders. As recommended in the research, “Accountability deepens and becomes a more meaningful guide to individual and collective action as individual educators take on new classroom practices and collaborate in new ways” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 155). The accountability levels will be determined by the ability of all staff to work together in the

effort to create and implement new strategies in order to educate all students. This must be accomplished by all, despite the temptation to revert to our default procedures and methods that were not effective for all students in the first place.

As we are all essentially accountable for the success of all students, there is no reform capable of producing positive results unless there is fidelity of its implementation. As referenced in my previous study, “A Proposed Change Leadership Plan for the Disparity in Behavior and Achievement Data between African American and White Students in Pinellas County Middle Schools,” I referred to Reeves’ (2009) view on implementation that suggests:

When 90 percent or more of a faculty was actively engaged in the change initiative, student achievement results in reading, science, and math were dramatically higher than when the same initiative was introduced with only 10 percent of the faculty actively engaged. Therefore, the variable is not simply the program, the label, the guru, or the conference. The variable is the implementation. (p. 86)

Overall, without proper implementation, the policy will not experience the most positive intended results. In terms of accountability, it will be up to school leaders to ensure faculty engagement, to ensure that teachers follow through with new practices, and to monitor progress toward meeting the needs of our African American middle school students. In order to ensure accountability for each school, every middle school will be required to report on their site’s initial suspension and referral data comparisons for African American and White students from the previous school year and set goals toward mitigating inequities to reach by the end of the current school year. The next step

of the policy implementation is to develop a plan to implement at least four initiatives for offering a balanced approach to discipline where a focus of increasing instructional time for African American students remains the focus. Once each school submits their plan to the area superintendent for review, the plan is approved or returned for further development. Throughout the school year, both the schools and district leaders should monitor the progress of each initiative and work to problem solve for ways to increase the effectiveness of the initiatives as needed.

SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

Evident in an analysis of behavior data and academic results, the disparity in equal access to education for our middle school students compels us to implement a promising policy for action that is specific, yet adaptable and places student needs at the forefront. The district vision of “100% student success” can only be attained if we take an approach that allows for creativity and “outside the box” thinking in order to attract buy-in and momentum in practices that have the potential to meet our challenges effectively. We must take into consideration multiple forms of input in order to minimize stakeholder resistance, as opposed to mandating specific programs where political agendas are often the driving force. As mentioned earlier, the research opposes arbitrary unsupported mandates devoid of school level input and buy-in, “You cannot simply issue mandates from on high and get real change in institutions as complex as schools” (Payne, 2011, p. 193).

There is an acknowledgement of the achievement gap between African American and White students, yet our education system has failed to find a single policy that answers to this complex situation effectively, nor will there ever be a single policy that will be an end all solution.

What we should have learned by now is that much of the energy which goes into finding the One Best Model is misplaced. What matters is that too many schools haven’t the capacity to implement any of them with reasonable fidelity to the intent of the reform (Payne, pp. 156-157)

What makes this the proposed policy appropriate for addressing the disparity in discipline and gap in academic achievement between African American and White students is that

this approach is specific and incorporates best practices, yet it is reasonably adaptable. When addressing such a complex issue and attempting to formulate solutions, it is important to not force a “cookie cutter” approach on school sites. The best solution is one that allows for creativity and flexibility at the school site level, as every school has a unique demographic and set of circumstances. By recommending a balanced approach to the dilemma, this policy facilitates schools to reflect, involve input from multiple stakeholders, and facilitating a shift toward a culture where all students’ best interests are at the forefront, especially in terms of addressing the behavior of middle school students.

In addition to facilitating the development of students’ values, it is important to lead a shift in the values of our teachers. Our schools must work to establish a culture where teachers understand the true meaning of the term “discipline.” A shift in the mindset of our teachers toward teaching appropriate behavior as opposed to relying on consequences to do so is necessary in order to significantly reduce the disparity in demonstrated by the behavior data. Teachers too must buy into the focus of increasing instructional time for African American middle school students. As an administrator, I too often find that teachers rely on suspensions as a way to teach students a lesson and deter others from misbehaving, and if anything different is an outcome for misconduct, that teacher feels unsupported by administration. It is time for school leaders to put a stop to this ongoing culture, and establish policy, which gives students opportunities to reflect and learn from mistakes as opposed to being removed and further disconnected to their learning environment.

In summary, the approach we are currently taking toward closing the achievement gap and discipline disparity between African American and White middle school students

is not effective. In order to achieve universal and sustainable results, we must get away from quick-fix solutions and instead work toward a complete mind shift in how we educate all students. With improving education, any significant progress begins with instruction. I feel the transition that many states in the country are taking toward adopting Common Core standards is a step in the right direction. I believe this will help eliminate the working class structure that our nation's schools are currently operating under which sets many students up for failure. Common Core standards help to create a learning environment where students are able to develop critical thinking, rigor, and communication skills, and move away from memorization and ritual compliance as the formula for student success that typically exists in what Anyon (1980) calls, "working-class schools" where, "work is following the steps of a procedure. The procedure is usually mechanical, involving rote behavior and very little decision making or choice" (para. 9). This traditional structure, where the teacher is an instructor versus a facilitator, is often detrimental to success for many African American students leading to misbehavior. "Almanza and Mosley (1980) reported that Caucasian students exhibit passive behaviors (e.g., standing still) 60 percent of the time, while African-American students exhibit these behaviors 26 percent of the time" (Hosp & Hosp, 2001, para. 11). With a shift towards a teaching style where students are using physical movement as a norm, discipline referrals will significantly decrease and help reduce the disparity in lost instructional time because of misconduct for African American students.

In order to decrease the disparity in behavior data in our district, we must create an environment where teachers form positive relationships with students, provide

engaging lessons, teach students how to behave, and provide an educational environment where students feel connected, even more so in our middle schools.

After analyzing which math teachers are more successful than others with black males are, the reason for their success becomes obvious: they build solid relationships and are committed to making learning fun. Their classroom environments and lessons are student-centered, and boredom is nowhere to be found. (Kafele, 2009, p. 10)

By implementing a policy in our district that requires middle schools to prioritize the increase of instructional time for African American students as a response to discipline incidents, we can accomplish positive results for our African American students. A balanced approach in handling student behavior not only teaches students how to behave, but also helps to hold students accountable for their actions without creating more of a disconnect between the student and school environment. By allowing each school design their own balanced approach as a site discipline model, schools will be able to develop a clear individually responsive path for effectively moving the district toward the vision of 100% student success.

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