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# Effective School Discipline Policy and Practice: Supporting Student Learning Through Restorative Practices and Social Emotional Learning Skills

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Effective School Discipline Policy and Practice: Supporting Student Learning Through  
Restorative Practices and Social Emotional Learning Skills

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By: Jennifer Camilleri

National Louis University

September 2016

## Dissertation Organization Statement for Binding

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This document is organized to meet 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 with 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

School discipline is an ongoing area of concern, as keeping children in school and engaged in learning is required not only for their well-being, but also for that of society. In response to the failure of zero-tolerance policies and to the passing of Illinois Senate Bill 100, which restricts disciplinary action that remove students from school, XYZ Middle School is adopting a restorative justice model of school discipline. This model, based on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), is projected to reduce suspensions and address the racial disparity existing in disciplinary practices at the school. Combining SEL and restorative justice practices will change the culture of the school through staff training, family involvement, and the creation of a new restorative justice coordinator position.

## PREFACE

This dissertation project was undertaken in response to ongoing discipline and educational concerns at XYZ Middle School, an actual but unnamed school in Illinois. Within the past two years, the school has seen student suspension rates skyrocket, which in turn has caused a large amount of students to miss school. The school climate has also become more negative as students become more reactive than proactive.

Additionally, significant racial disparity in discipline, particularly in the most stringent practices, and the effects of repeatedly removing students from the classroom on these young people, their families, the school, and the community, prompted research into the best practices for changing school policy. In addition to the information presented here, a number of different disciplinary policy options and school safety programs were examined by the researcher. The current culture and safety policies and practices at the school, the community culture, and an examination of discipline at the school led to the choice of SEL/restorative justice model for further investigation. This research unpacks this model and its theoretical foundations and presents a plan for its implementation at XYZ Middle School.

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## FORWARD

An increasing number of youth are being denied educational opportunity under zero-tolerance student discipline policies. In the school context, zero-tolerance policies are intended to send a strong message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated. Punishment under these policies most often takes the form of exclusion from school through suspension and expulsion.

In recent years, the negative consequences of zero tolerance and its unproven effectiveness in promoting school order and safety have been studied and written about by researchers and policy analysts (Skiba, 2006). At the same time, a growing body of research indicates that schools with a comprehensive approach to school safety, one that encompasses all points on the prevention-intervention continuum, can effectively prevent and address school violence and disorder, without excluding students from school. School districts all over the country are now reforming their zero-tolerance discipline policy to incorporate prevention/remediation strategies to better serve the needs of our students.

## SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

In August 2015, the House of Representatives signed Senate Bill 100 (SB 100) into law, which is a piece of Illinois legislation that addresses school discipline. This new law will lead to sweeping changes in the use of punitive school discipline practices across the state. By September 2016, school boards must adopt new discipline policies that address the new changes in SB 100.

The bill was designed to keep students in school and reduce racial disparity in school discipline numbers by forcing school districts to utilize proactive discipline strategies before turning to exclusionary measures such as suspensions. It encourages administrators to take a different approach to student discipline. Starting in September 2016, students can only be suspended or expelled when all other appropriate or available disciplinary interventions have been exhausted.

In response to Senate Bill 100, new school policy will need to be aligned with a restorative philosophy to improve school climate (Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). Therefore, offender accountability will be defined in terms of assuming responsibility and taking action to repair the harm done to victims, schools, and the community. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions will become a last resort.

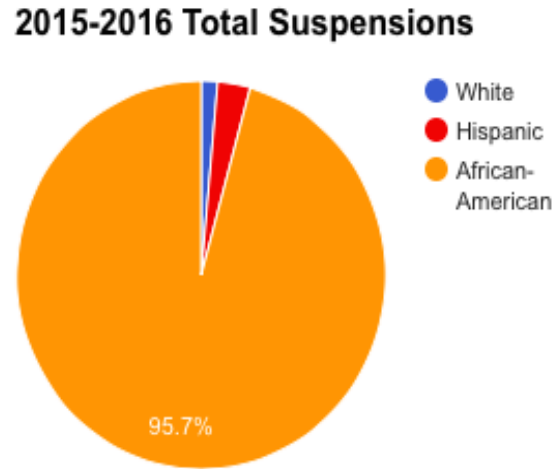
The purpose of this section is to explain how we became aware of the need to advocate for our current discipline policy to be reformed in School District XYZ. There are many critical issues that make this a policy problem in need of a response. Currently, I am the dean of the only middle school in our district. I deal with student discipline on a daily basis; thus, the current shift in state law related to student discipline is particularly relevant to my work.

Our current policy in District XYZ addresses zero tolerance and uses suspensions/expulsions as our most common disciplinary measure. Additionally, behavior interventions are not addressed in the policy. These will need to be added and disciplinary measures will need to be changed to make our policy more aligned with the philosophy of SB 100.

Additionally, after reviewing our school discipline data, I became aware of some racial disparities in the reports. The current demographics for our school currently are as follows: 66.1% Black, 19.2% White, 10.4% Hispanic, and 4.3% Asian. However, out of 350 occurrences of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, 95.7% of those students contributing to that number were Black. This means that students of color, particularly African American students, have been most disproportionately impacted by the out-of-school suspensions or expulsions at our school and in our district (see Figure 1). Ultimately, this could be negatively affecting our students in general, because they tend to easily fall into the “school-to-prison pipeline” when they are constantly taken out of school as a punishment for bad behavior (Rudd, 2014). We are well aware of the fact that more and more of our students are becoming “school-dependent,” meaning that the only support they receive is from the school. Therefore, putting some of these students out of the structured school environment only leads to more issues such as low academic achievement. Finally, by implementing a school-wide discipline policy that keeps kids in school, we can improve the academic performance of all students.

Figure 1. Suspensions and expulsions.

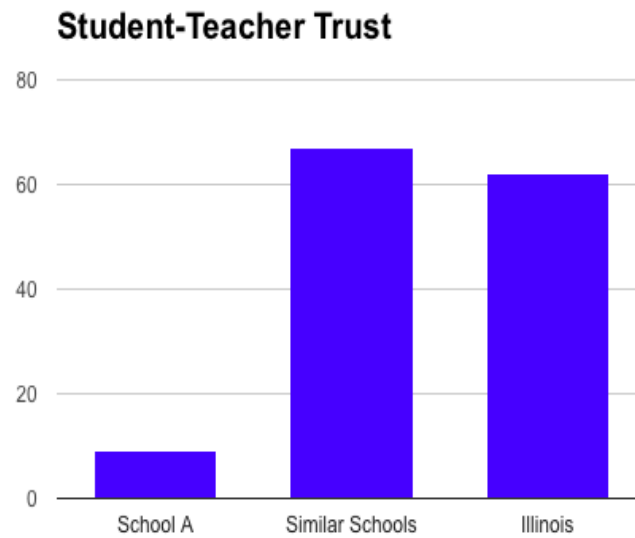
**School District XYZ**



Starting in 2013, every public school in the state of Illinois was required to have its students, staff, and parents complete the 5Essentials survey. The state implemented this survey because leaders were not getting a complete picture of every school by only looking at assessment data. The 5Essentials is an evidence-based system designed to drive school improvement. It provides school districts with detailed data on school culture and climate (Illinois Education Research Council, 2014).

Moreover, the 2015 5Essentials survey information for our school showed that our school needs improvement specifically in the area of climate. We are well aware of the fact that the climate of the school affects whether students feel (and are) safe, connected, supported, and challenged. However, there has been a decline in how many students feel safe at school, and we are below the Illinois average. Student-teacher trust is considerably below the Illinois average (see Figure 2) and a large number of students do not feel safe and comfortable with their teachers (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Student-teacher trust.



The following questions, which begin below, were included in the data shown in Figure 2 for student-teacher trust. The state of Illinois then averaged the data to give us an overall ranking in the area of student-teacher trust, which is represented in Figure 1. The numbers on the left represent a percentage, which is a summary of the participants' answers to the survey questions as they relate to the 5Essentials. Eight hundred eighty students responded to the survey questions highlighted below.

Figure 2A. My teachers always keep their promises.

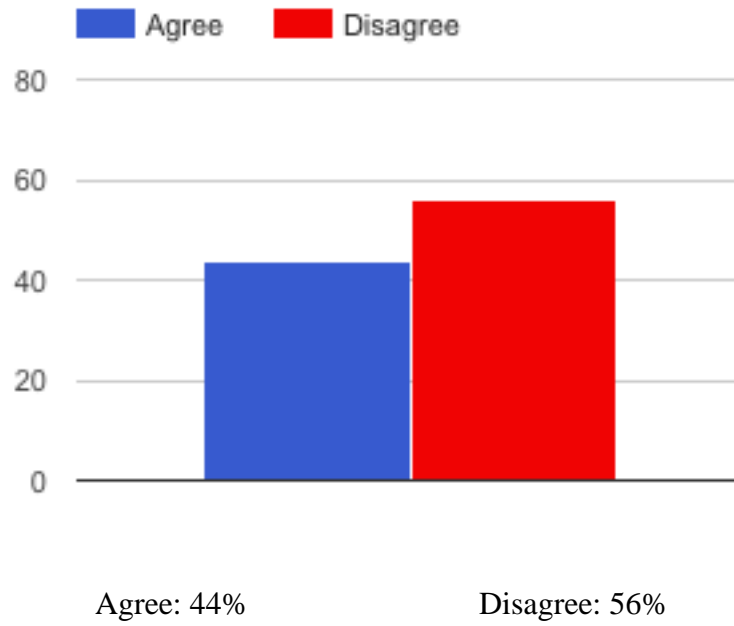


Figure 2B. I feel safe and comfortable with my teachers at this school.

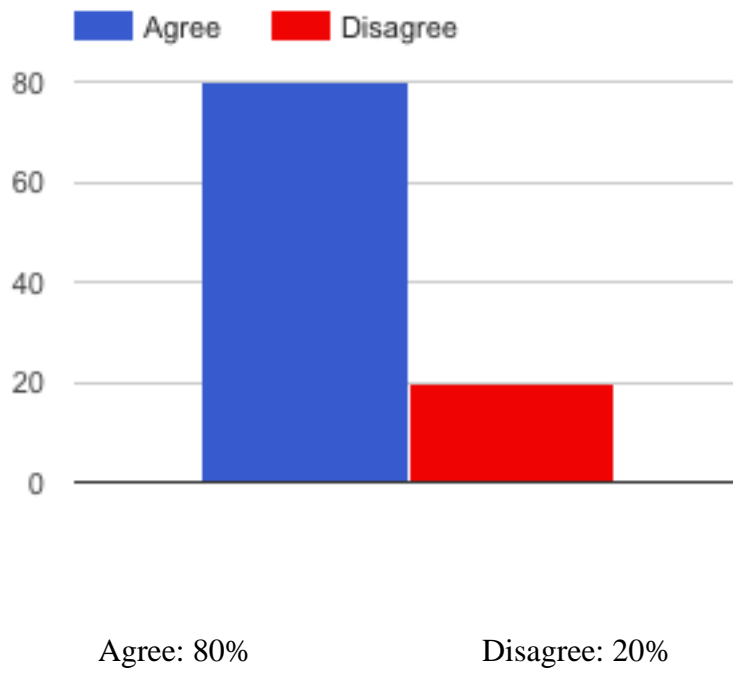


Figure 2C. My teachers will always listen to students' ideas.

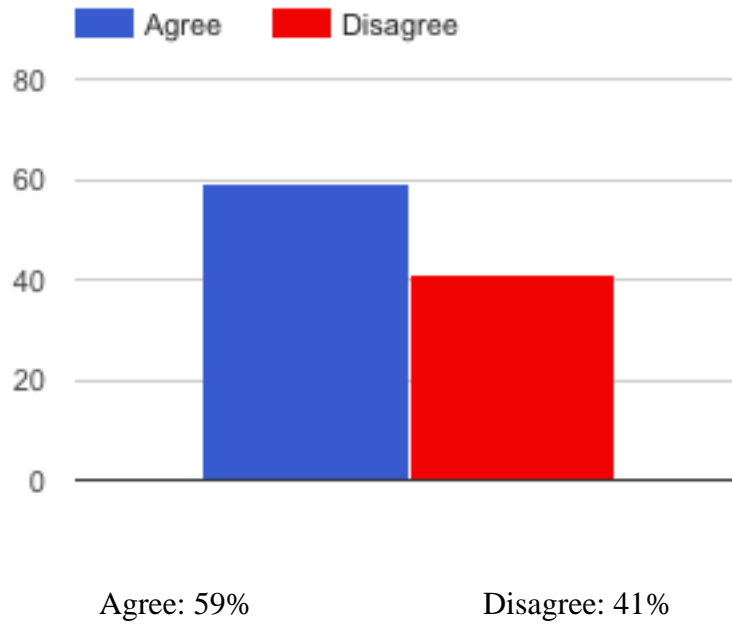


Figure 2D. My teachers treat me with respect.

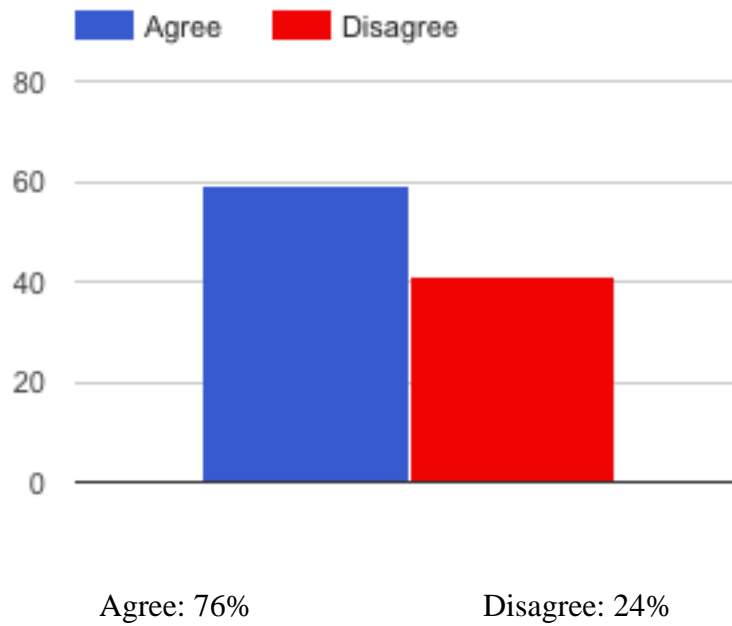
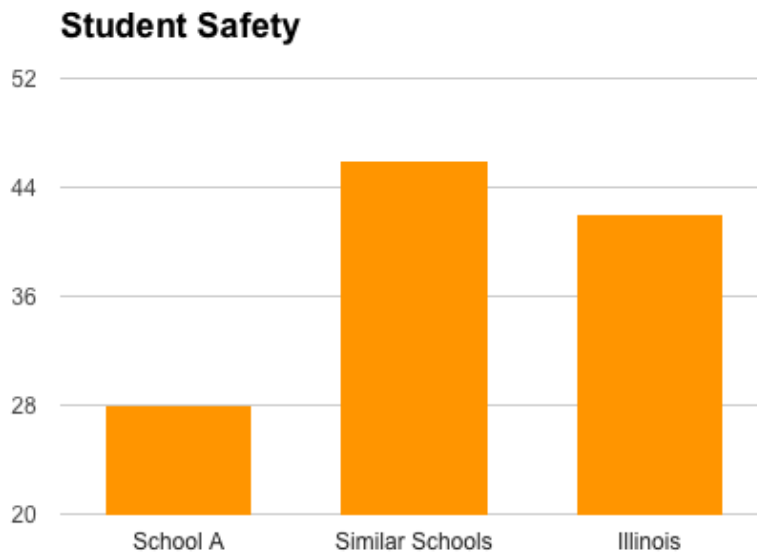


Figure 3. Students do not feel safe and comfortable with their teachers.



The following questions, which begin below, were included in the data shown in Figure 3 for student safety. The state of Illinois then averaged the data to give us an overall ranking in the area of student safety. The numbers on the left represent a percentage, which is a summary of the participants' answers to the survey questions as they relate to the 5Essentials.



Figure 3A. Students report feeling safe outside and around the school.

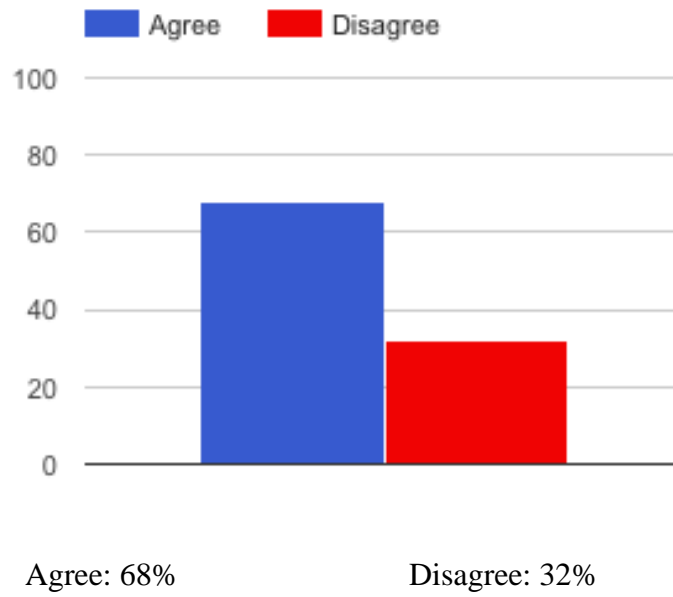
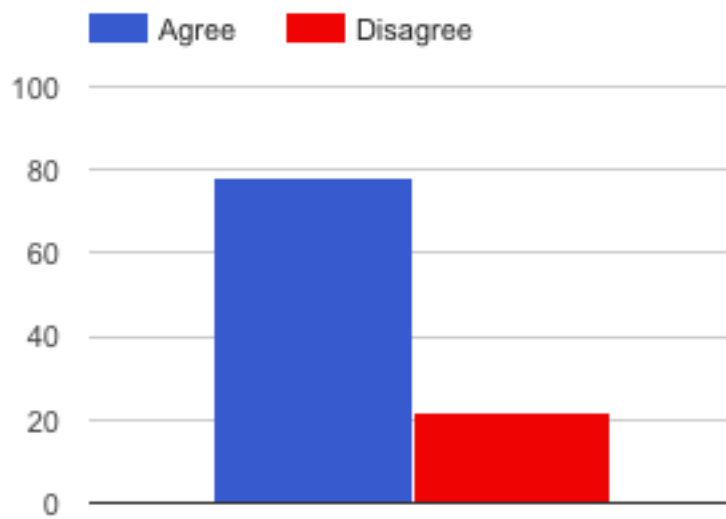


Figure 3B. Students report feeling safe traveling between home and school.



Agree: 78%

Disagree: 22%

Figure 3C. Students report feeling safe in the bathrooms of the school.

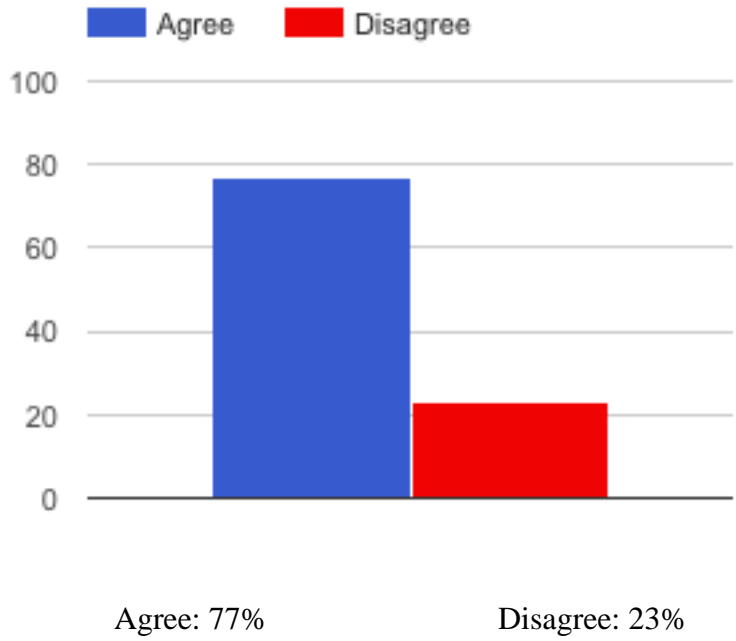


Figure 3D. Students report feeling safe in the hallways of the school.

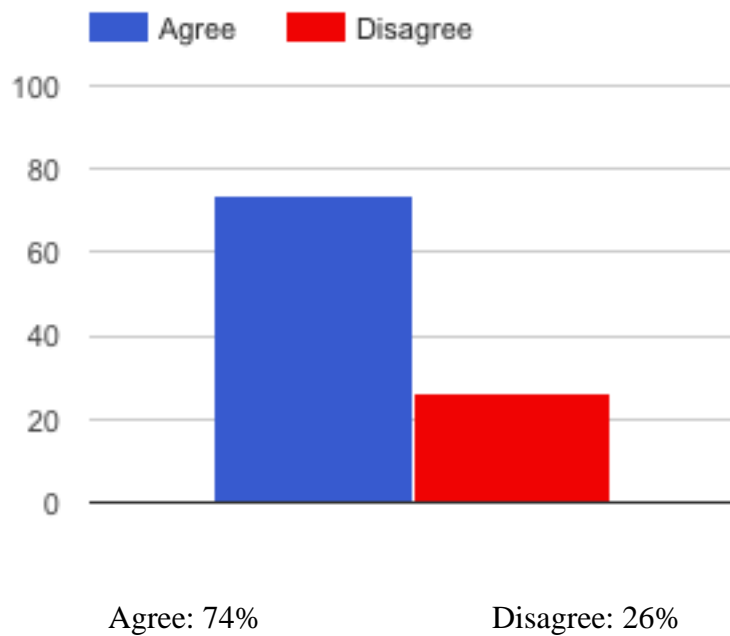
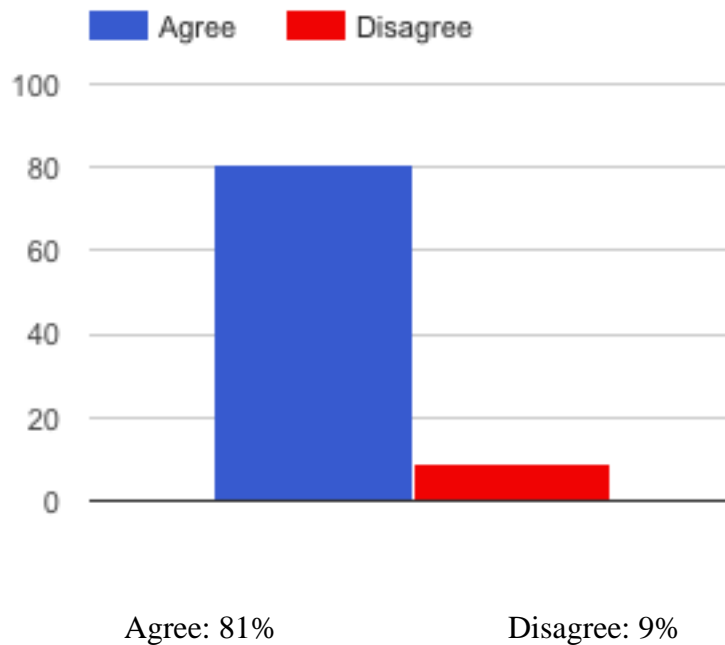


Figure 3E. Students report feeling safe in their classes.



As can be seen from the above graphs, there is room for significant improvement when it comes to students' feelings of safety and security in School A. Student-teacher trust similarly needs to be enhanced. Therefore, by analyzing the data in the graphs above, we can establish our priorities when it comes to improving the climate and culture of our school. We need to work on building relationships and improving student safety, which begins by modifying our current discipline policy.

As we move forward with this shift in discipline policy, we need to ensure equal opportunity for all students. School discipline should be equitable and effective (Bangs & Davis, 2014). Schools should remove students from the classroom as a last resort, and only for appropriately serious infractions, like endangering the safety of other students, teachers, and themselves. Therefore, I am recommending that we amend our current

discipline policy 7:190 to be less punitive and more restorative. This new policy would incorporate the changes set forth to school discipline by SB 100 and address the disproportionate representation of Black students in our yearly school discipline report.

I am recommending that our new policy incorporate social emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems. Restorative practices are processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing (Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). SEL skills and competencies are integral to meeting the needs of the whole child, engaging in high-quality education, and preparing all students for college, career, and the community in the 21st century (Vega, 2012).

Many years ago, the state of Illinois developed standards for student social and emotional learning. Each public school district in Illinois was required to develop a policy for incorporating the SEL standards into their educational program.

The SEL standards describe the content and skills for students in grades K–12 for social and emotional learning. Each standard includes five benchmark levels that describe what students should know and be able to do in early elementary (grades K–3), late elementary (grades 4–5), middle/junior high (grades 6–8), early high school (grades 9–10), and late high school (Gordon, Ji, Mulhall, Shaw, & Weissberg, 2011).

Four years ago, our district adopted the research-based Second Steps program to help us deliver the content of the SEL standards. It is a Tier 1, universal, classroom-based curriculum that teaches foundational social-emotional and self-regulation skills to all students. The program itself is set up with classroom lessons (50 minutes each) that need to be taught once a week. In fact, the Second Steps curriculum has been shown to

reduce physical aggression by 42% in a middle school study involving schools that had not previously implemented the Second Steps program. However, these type of results cannot be obtained without using the program with fidelity. That means delivering a specific classroom lesson every week (Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2013).

We are very fortunate to have the Second Steps program at our school. However, we cannot achieve the results mentioned above unless we use the program as it was designed to be used. Today's schools are increasingly multicultural and multilingual, with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a foundation for safe and positive learning and enhances students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life. That means that we need to develop a consistent approach for positive, pro-social behavior management in order to reduce loss of instructional time due to disciplinary sanctions. Missing too much school for any reason has a direct impact on academic achievement—both short-term and long-term (Hogan, 2014).

Therefore, we need to create an infrastructure that establishes and maintains the conditions to intentionally support the consistent growth and development of SEL skills and competencies for both students and adults across the organization (Richardson, Tolson, Huang, & Lee, 2009). To ensure this occurs, we must adhere to the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for behavior and social-emotional needs. Additionally, we need to communicate and establish accountability measures that SEL skills and competencies are foundational to both creating learning conditions for students and adults and shifting organizational culture (Zins, 2004). In previous years, the Second Steps program has been informal and haphazard. It has been disconnected from the daily

academic schedule. Teachers need to understand that SEL skills are just as important as academics and take the time to integrate the Second Steps program into the daily schedule on a weekly basis.

Teachers have worked hard to alter their teaching practices to meet the needs of 21st century learners while focusing on the Common Core. We need to also adjust our discipline practices to meet the needs of these students. The principles of 21st century discipline involve an ongoing, proactive set of behaviors to create a positive, caring, emotionally safe and cooperative environment. This environment will help to minimize the likelihood of negative disruptive behavior (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013). By focusing on the connections between choices and outcomes, we will begin to help students take responsibility for their actions and behaviors. We will work to establish a win-win authority relationship that defuses conflict and opposition, while building a positive, caring, emotionally safe environment (Bluestein, 2008).

The Board of Education is responsible for fostering conditions that enable every school in School District XYZ to create safe, nurturing learning environments that provide excellent instruction. Modifying our current discipline policy will benefit the district in several ways. First, this will show that the board, school employees, and community are dedicated to improving our systems of discipline support and strategies. In addition, our district will be meeting the requirements of SB 100, which was signed into law in August 2015. By addressing the SEL standards and restorative practices in our new discipline policy, the expectation will be that every staff member begin teaching and using these skills on a daily basis. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a critical component of the educational experience. In order for students to reach their full

potential in school and in life, schools must provide instruction on academics and social and emotional skills (Zins, 2004). SEL is a universal approach for all students. The goal of SEL is to acknowledge the social and emotional needs of all students to ensure their success in school and in life.

Second Step lessons help to build self-esteem, self-discipline, and self-respect in students. They help foster and encourage positive relationships with other students, teachers, and the school. Additionally, they teach others to recognize students' cultural backgrounds, home environments, and the impact of student experiences on teaching and learning. Developing SEL skills improves student capacity to engage in academic learning and prepares them to meet college and career readiness standards. In order to meet rigorous standards, students need to, collaborate with their peers, communicate their ideas, take the perspective of others, and be able to regulate their emotions when they become frustrated (Yoder, 2013).

Furthermore, relationship and community building conversations need to occur on a daily basis, and time must be allocated for this to occur. The current discipline policy does not address this behavior support. We need to begin checking in with every one of our students in the morning and assessing their readiness to learn. If they are having a tough time, they should be referred to one of our support staff for a 1:1 restorative conversation. Some students will come into our school very upset over something that occurred at home the night before. As a school, we cannot control their home life, but we can do a better job at addressing it and supporting the student so the problem does not continue to fester throughout the school day.

As a district, we will provide professional development and other support necessary to ensure that all Second Step lessons are delivered as intended. We will also communicate and establish accountability measures to which the district will adhere as it reviews the effect of this new policy. Therefore, if these skills and strategies are implemented with fidelity school-wide, we should see an improvement in school climate and culture. In addition, there is a direct correlation between SEL and improved academic programs. We will be working to proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing. Out-of-school suspensions will be reduced, as will office referrals. The Black/White discipline gap will begin to decrease. School discipline and consequences will be more meaningful to students. When you use restorative practices and SEL standards in the classroom, less time will be wasted on discipline, meaning that more time will be available for classroom teaching and interaction. Students will develop an enhanced ability to understand peers, manage emotions, have greater empathy, and develop sustainable conflict management skills.



## SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF NEED

In this section, we seek to examine our new policy's alignment with a restorative philosophy to improve the school's climate, which can be accomplished by analyzing the need to advocate for reform in School District XYZ's current discipline policy (Morrison & Ahmed, 2006). Five disciplinary areas—educational, economic, social, political, and well as moral and ethical—are addressed and analyzed to provide further insight into the district's problems. Upon analysis, the policymaker seeks to make choices and trace implications accordingly.

### Educational Analysis

Educationally, students require safety as a first priority for learning. Repeated studies have confirmed that students who do not feel safe do not learn (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010; Glass, 2014). A safe environment is a prerequisite for learning. Students who feel unsafe at school are more likely to engage in health-risk behaviors such as carrying a gun or knife, getting into fights, missing school, and receiving poor grades. Safety, in this sense, means feeling safe from harm, but also refers to the safety to make mistakes without fear of punitive disciplinary measures. In schools today, restorative justice practices and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have been shown to create a school climate that improves learning (Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013).

To begin with, school-based restorative justice programs offer a more sustainable, equitable, and respectful alternative to dealing with misbehavior, from minor infractions to violence. It can also be used as a proactive strategy to create a culture of connectivity and care in which all members of the school community can thrive. Students also begin

to form relationships with their teachers and students, which is the foundation of a safe, respectful school climate (Devine & Cohen, 2007). Ineffective zero-tolerance policies only offer a short-term fix for the problem. They focus on the rule that was broken and the punishment deserved. Instead of trying to make things right, these policies respond to the original harm with an additional harm.

Next, by addressing SEL skills within the classroom, we can promote students' experiences of feeling socially and emotionally safe. Our SEL program will focus on non-cognitive skills such as problem solving, responsibility, resiliency, bullying, and tolerance through weekly Second Step lessons. Embedded in this program are tiered supports that provide interventions to students in need of extra assistance. Therefore, staff members intervene quickly with students who are at-risk of exhibiting behavior problems. Glass (2014) reported that students labeled as troublemakers often lack the cultural capital and emotional-social skill set required by the school environment. When they are unable to perform in the expected manner, at least in part because they have not been equipped to do so, they are punished, creating emotional barriers that prevent them from obtaining the needed skills and actually reinforcing the troublemaker label (Glass, 2014). However, as students develop communication and relationship skills such as negotiation and conflict resolution strategies within the SEL framework, they become able to advocate for their own needs in a positive and productive way (Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013). This not only benefits the individual student, but also increases the learning opportunities for the entire student body, as teachers are no longer required to stop classroom activities to deal with behavioral issues, and students are surrounded by engaged (rather than disruptive) peers. Teachers can then focus their attention on

preventive rather than reactive practices, which are typically disruptive to the learning of all students (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010).

Teacher and staff trainings likewise equip teachers and administrators to focus on preventive practices and seek to equip students with behavioral concerns, rather than punish them. We are well aware of the fact that different communities and cultural groups can have vastly different ideas of proper behavior, both from those of another cultural group and from the norms expected in the school environment, and will therefore equip their children differently. Irby (2013) noted that the diversification of U.S. schools has led to a shift in societal perceptions concerning appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and unless teachers and students are equipped to meet the expectations of the school environment, discipline issues will occur. Teachers must not only be trained in positive discipline techniques, as these are often neglected in teacher-training programs, but also made aware of the cultural factors that may influence students' actions in their classrooms (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014; Irby, 2013).

#### Economic Analysis

Exclusionary disciplinary practices are costly, as students fall behind and require intervention services to catch up (Butler, Lewis, Moore, & Scott, 2012). Administrative time dedicated to handling behavioral issues, particularly on students with repeated discipline situations, prevents leadership from focusing on improving instruction and school climate. Further, students who are regularly suspended have a substantially greater likelihood of dropping out when reaching high school (Gosine & Islam, 2014). Many then require government support, such as food stamps and welfare, and have greater odds of becoming incarcerated (Gosine & Islam, 2014). Skiba (2014) noted that

disciplinary policies that regularly remove students from school, such as zero-tolerance policies, have actually created a school-to-prison pipeline. She contended that “widespread discipline practices of suspension, expulsion, and arrest for school behavior problems are turning kids in conflict into criminal offenders” (Skiba, 2014, p. 29). Finally, less educated workers are generally less productive, costing society both in lower tax revenues from their income and in lost production value as they are employed below their potential (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). In addition to these indirect costs, direct costs for alternative placing total \$37,000 (\$35,000 for tuition and \$2,000 for transportation), funds that could be better spent elsewhere.

Therefore, the funding needed to staff a restorative disciplinary system presents great savings to the school district and to taxpayers. Costs for the program include professional development for teachers and funding of one full-time position: a restorative justice coordinator. This position is proposed at an hourly rate of \$18.00 based on a 184-day school year, for an annual expense of \$22,000. This salary grade is based on the position requiring a high school diploma, Bachelor’s degree preferred, and a minimum of three years’ experience in counseling, positive school discipline management, or related instructional improvement. The position would provide behavior intervention support to any students in need in the building, including facilitating restorative justice interventions and responding to student behavioral concerns.

The coordinator will additionally train teachers and staff in behavior management techniques, reducing the need for expensive outside professional development consultants. The program has modest material requirements, most notably a SEL binder for every classroom teacher, at a cost of \$65 each. Rubin (2012) contended that while

school districts often balk at behavioral training costs, they are far less than the costs incurred through staff time and resources allocated to behavioral management after the fact. He encouraged schools to instead focus on creating positive environments in which students can flourish, and where students therefore have fewer behavioral issues to manage (Rubin, 2012). Feuerborn and Tyre (2012) similarly found that employing a positive behavioral program in place of a punitive disciplinary policy showed positive changes in the number of school discipline interventions, staff time devoted to discipline management, and costs related to disciplinary issues after only one year. Therefore, the modest costs of this program and position will be recouped by the school by reducing discipline-related expenses, likely in a very short time.

#### Social Analysis

Social factors are contributing to the behavioral issues at School A. School District XYZ has experienced a demographic shift over the past decade as the socioeconomic demographic of our community has become lower-income, with a greater number of single-parent families and less parent involvement at school. This causes behavioral issues at both ends of the spectrum (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2013). In cases where parents have little time or skill in positive discipline, they may simply order children, telling them what to do rather than encouraging them to develop self-regulation and self-management skills (Glass, 2014). When these children come to school, they therefore require constant boundary-reinforcement, which detracts from teachers' instruction and focus on the entire class (Glass, 2014). On the other hand, students may also experience lack of rules due to parents being absent due to work, and therefore develop self-management based on their own limited understanding of social

and environmental appropriateness, which can have a similarly disruptive effect. These children then view school as a place for “others,” not for representatives of their lives and communities (Gosine & Islam, 2014).

This requires that students first be clearly aware of school behavioral expectations and then equipped in the skill sets required to meet those expectations. This will be done in a combination of classroom instruction and modeling, with the restorative justice coordinator working one-on-one or with small groups of students as needed. Feuerborn and Tyre (2012) reported that equipping students with self-management and communication tools allows them to have ownership of their own behavior and decisions. In turn, when discipline is required, it becomes more effective. In addition, improving students’ skills in these areas also benefits the community, as students begin to model and use effective communication, negotiation, and conflict management in their families and communities (Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013).

Also, this will help to address racial inequalities in our school discipline, which is also a nationwide problem. Research has shown that African American students are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (Skiba et al., 2011). We are aware of the fact that the intent of school disciplinary interventions is to preserve order and safety in the school by removing the students who disrupt the school environment. Unfortunately, schools rely heavily on exclusionary practices as their primary disciplinary strategy. We can work to counteract this by using exclusionary practices as a last resort. Through our SEL program we can focus on student learning and self-regulation. Additionally, it will help increase student-problem solving. Through our restorative justice program, we will begin to focus on developing a sense of school-

connectedness. The students will build trusting and caring relationships with each other and the staff members at the school. Students will learn to work through their issues and really get to the root of the behavior problem (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2012).

### Political Analysis

There is a great deal of political influence on education, and unfortunately, not all of it operates in the best interests of students or schools. This includes politics in the broader community and within the school environment. As Labaree (2008) explained, because it takes time to implement and realize gains from programs and reforms implemented in public schools, a political official can begin a change, but leave after four or eight years of service and not be responsible for that change. Similarly, his or her successor can blame any failings on the former politician. Politicians need not be effective in addressing social problems; if implementing their solutions through the schools, no one needs to take responsibility (Labaree, 2008). Therefore, legislatures and political leaders often make decisions about school operations without much input from teachers or school administrators, leaving little buy-in from staff for new measures. While the new disciplinary structure that will be implemented at our school is positive and beneficial for the school, it follows SB 100, which legislates strong boundaries and changes in school discipline. There is understandably some resistance from staff regarding the government deciding how the classroom teacher or school should operate. There is also pressure on school leaders to implement these changes quickly and effectively, and for schools to produce positive results from these new measures.

In addition, ongoing political pressures to close the achievement and racial gap between higher and lower socioeconomic groups, and between White and minority

students, call on schools to optimize instructional time and increase measurable outcomes, such as test scores. We are aware that school suspensions are widespread and that discipline disparities exist between race and gender. Unfortunately, Black students are suspended more frequently than any other race. Additionally, boys receive more than two out of three suspensions. Suspensions have detrimental effects. Frequent suspensions appear to significantly increase the risk of academic underperformance (Howard, 2015). During the 2015–2016 school year, students in my building served 409 days of suspensions. Out of that number, 28 of those students were suspended three or more times, making up for more than half of the total suspension days. When reviewing the names of these specific students, I noticed that 26 out of the 28 students had a grade point average of 2.0 or lower. Many of these students had attendance issues as well. On the flip side of this argument, the teachers would state that these were the most disruptive students in the school and deserved to be put out. However, each day these students were suspended from school, they would fall further and further behind academically. Thus, the political climate surrounding the new disciplinary program has its challenges.

The students with the greatest disciplinary issues are typically those with the greatest needs outside of school. They are often unsupervised and have little parental support. They may be lacking in basic needs, such as appropriate clothing, hygiene supplies, or food. These students typically experience high levels of stress from their situations outside the classroom, which contributes to their behavioral issues (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010). While it is politically convenient to expect schools to deal with this vast array of social problems, these issues are often beyond the resources of the school or its staff. This requires the school to have clear



boundaries on what it can and cannot accomplish, and procedures for involving outside agencies when required (Labaree, 2008). Establishing partnerships with parents, other organizations, and the community is a more effective way to address a student's complex social issues (Labaree, 2008). This does require staff time, but creating procedures for handling common social issues, such as lack of appropriate clean clothing, can reduce student stress and assist them in more effective behavior and actions (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010).

### Moral and Ethical Analysis

School administrators have a moral obligation to keep students in school as much as possible. If students are not attending class, they are missing learning opportunities, and may fall so far behind that their knowledge and skill gaps negatively impact future learning outcomes. The idea that strict enforcement of punitive discipline measures, such as zero-tolerance policies, provides a deterrent for other students' potential behavior infractions has long been disproved (Skiba, 2014). Such measures only condition students to fear and not trust authority, setting up potentially disastrous consequences as they become adults and interact with other authority figures, such as the police, in their communities.

In addition, school leaders must convey respect for the cultural and community diversity students bring to the school, and work in partnership with families and the greater community to ensure students are prepared to learn when they come to school. Teachers and leaders must create an environment in which students feel safe and are free to develop and grow. This comes through clear and restorative policies, coupled with adequate staff training and support. It also requires school staff to act purposefully and

become aware of the diversity and cultural groups in the community and how best to work with children from these communities. This also means advocating for needed resources so that already underpaid teachers do not have to use their personal funds to purchase pencils or other basic supplies for their students. Society has a moral and ethical obligation to provide teachers and students with the resources they need to achieve the goals this same society has created for the school system.

Finally, District XYZ in particular has a moral and ethical obligation to address the racial discipline gap that exists in its schools. Any racism in the school system is not acceptable. If one group of students has a proportionally higher instance of behavioral issues, then the school needs to determine the causes of these issues and address them effectively, not punish the child for something that for the most part may be beyond his or her control. When we treat all our students with dignity and respect, we will create an environment that truly encourages their learning and affords them the opportunity to develop and grow.

### SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

To begin with, the new policy would represent a multi-faceted approach to behavior management, one that prioritizes student safety and relationship building with staff and students. These interventions include a restorative justice initiative to help address discipline incidents and a school-wide infraction step system for students to monitor and track their progress. Additionally, we would implement an SEL curriculum that ensures students are being taught the skills they need to manage their behavior, 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 our students.

#### Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this section is to provide a rationale for developing a positive, proactive, tiered discipline program to service all the needs of the students in the school. The program's overall goal is to improve the behavior of our students by teaching and reinforcing self-regulation and self-management skills. Additionally, we aim to improve the cultural competence and behavior management style of all staff members. The development of District XYZ's discipline program policy includes the following elements:

- Clearly defining the discipline program
- Establishing expectations for students and staff
- Building relationships and connections with students through restorative practices and SEL lessons

- Developing classroom plans that incorporate restorative practices to address misbehavior
- Creating the restorative justice coordinator position, which will be used to facilitate restorative justice interventions
- Providing professional learning opportunities in restorative justice practices, SEL standards, and culture proficiency for the staff
- Planning the curriculum, including weekly SEL lessons, for the students and staff
- Partnering with families and the community through outreach activities

Restorative justice is not a new classroom management plan. It just requires the teacher to be more restorative in the classroom, rather than punitive (Van Ness & Strong, 2013). That means that they give up some of their power in the classroom and they empower their students to make good choices. They work with their students to create the classroom rules. Also, when students do misbehave, the teacher works with the student to find a solution. This sends a strong message to students who the teacher is not against them, but rather here to work with them and help them succeed. This is a very effective strategy in building trust between the teacher and the student. Our district is committed to providing ongoing training for our teachers in these strategies to ensure a smooth implementation. Additionally, teachers will receive support as they incorporate restorative practices and the SEL curriculum into their classrooms. This assistance will occur through our restorative justice coordinator, school social workers, deans and weekly PLC meetings. When these strategies are using in the classroom on a consistent basis, they strengthen classroom communities, prevent bullying, and reduce student conflicts. In fact, students are happier and they feel safer (Van Ness & Strong, 2013).

## Needs, Values, and Preferences Represented by the Policy Advocated

We first begin by looking at Piaget's concept of egocentrism, which states that students are unable to see how their behaviors affect those around them (Piaget, 1959). When students are encouraged to reflect on how their negative behaviors affect the classroom environment and find a way to fix the problem, this greatly reduces the reoccurrence of the same behavior.

Previous research has shown that self-monitoring/self-regulation interventions improve a student's ability to monitor themselves and become aware of the thought process behind what they are doing (Rafferty, 2010). It has also been emphasized that when students become aware of their own thinking, there can be an improvement in on-task behavior and classroom environments (Bilmes, 2012).

By supporting students in the classroom and providing them with weekly SEL skill lessons, we are helping them develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. We are specifically teaching and modeling the skills that students need to handle themselves and their relationships, and to work effectively and ethically.

As discussed earlier, many of the students who struggle behaviorally have trouble with academics as well. Unfortunately, these students do not receive the support they need at home to make the right decisions. That is why it is up to the school to teach these students the skills they need to lead a successful life. Relationships and emotional processes greatly affect how and what we learn. Therefore, by incorporating positive behavioral strategies in the classroom, time spent on classroom management would be reduced and there would be more time for learning. Safe and orderly environments that encourage and reinforce positive classroom behavior have been identified by research as

one of the necessary conditions for academic achievement (Marzano, 2003). Every student's overall commitment to school and learning would be increased.

The new policy would also address and support the parents' needs as well. Parents have high expectations for schools. They pay taxes so that their children will receive a good education. The job of the student is to learn, not misbehave. Parents expect that any disruptions in the classroom will be dealt with immediately and effectively so that the classroom instruction is not interrupted. A large number of our students have working parents who may not have the time to address misbehavior with their student at home after a long workday. Therefore, it is up to the school to teach students how to manage their own behavior. Parents are always concerned about the loss of instructional time when their student is suspended from school. Then, when the student returns to school, he or she must make up the work, which only increases the stress level of not only the student but the parent, as well. By implementing our balanced discipline approach, this will result in less instructional time being lost.

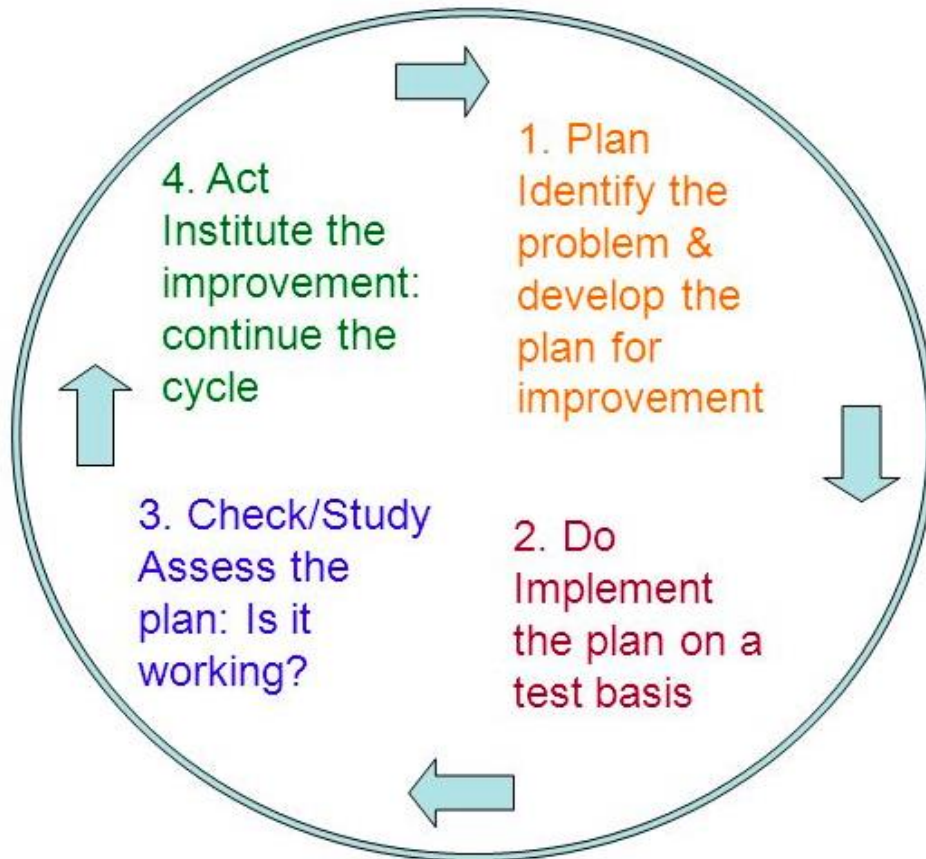
Finally, the community's needs would be addressed in our new policy. The community expects the schools to be high quality. They pay taxes to ensure that this happens. Also, the success of the schools affects the community members' property values. If the schools are successful and well-managed, their property values increase because the area in which they live becomes more desirable. Ultimately, by teaching the students the skills they need to manage their own emotions and behavior at school, we are in turn preparing them to add to the success of the community.

## Basis for Goals and Objectives to Be Appropriate and Good

Accountability, which is the idea of holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for results, has become the most recent watchword. Schools today need to provide clear documentation of researched-based interventions being utilized for students who struggle either academically or behaviorally. This is extremely important when coming to decide if students need additional services. Therefore, in our district, behavioral support teams and teachers need to work together to ensure every child is getting what they need through a problem solving/continuous improvement framework (see Figure 4). The steps of that framework are as follows: First, you identify the situation that is in need of the action. Next, you implement the plan that will support the situation in the best way possible. Then, you check to see if the plan is working by looking at the data or observations. Finally, you decide whether or not to continue or alter the plan based upon the check that was performed in the previous step. This policy document has already recognized and completed the first step. The remainder of the document provides a structure for the other steps.

Every student's social and emotional needs must be met before any type of learning can occur. Therefore, by implementing a proactive discipline program that focuses on the SEL standards and restorative practices in the schools, we are following best practice. This would not only fit into our MTSS/RtI process, but also follow the SB 100 law, which states that every school will be required to provide students with tiered-behavioral intervention.

Figure 4. Problem solving / continuous improvement framework.





## SECTION FOUR: POLICY ANALYSIS

### Support of Advocated Policy

Our schools' current zero-tolerance policy for student discipline was popular in the past with politicians and some school leaders, who felt that it was key to creating a safer environment more conducive to learning in dangerous and often poorly controlled schools. However, these types of policy deterrents have been repeatedly shown to remove the least equipped students from a learning environment, causing them to enter adulthood unprepared (Skiba, 2014). This removal from learning and opportunity has been called a pipeline to prison (Skiba, 2014). Furthermore, it has been proven that removing students from school does not improve their behavior. It greatly increases the likelihood that these students will drop out and wind up behind bars (Elias, 2013).

As the only middle school in our district, we do not have the option of creating a separate learning environment for students with behavioral issues, as do other districts. We must address and meet their needs while still providing a conducive atmosphere for those students without behavioral concerns. The social emotional learning and restorative practices model proposed is the best way to achieve this goal, as it equips the entire school community with the communication and relationship tools they need to be most effective, provides a framework with clear expectations and processes for behavioral remediation, and creates an atmosphere in which students and staff feel valued and ready to succeed.

Behavioral issues often begin long before a student comes to school. Those labeled as disciplinary problems often live in difficult home environments that they are not prepared to cope with at their young ages. They may have little practice with the

cultural expectations or the use of emotional and social skills required at school (Glass, 2014). Asking a child to use behavioral skills he or she has rarely seen modeled and never been taught is like asking a physically disabled child to compete in an athletic competition against those who do not have physical limitations, and then punishing the disabled child for being unable to perform like those without the same challenges. It is morally unethical to ask teachers and school leaders to punish a child in this situation. We are tasked with nurturing and equipping our students, and it is our job to teach them, including teaching them the non-academic behavioral skills they need to take advantage of their learning opportunities. Waajid, Garner, and Owen (2013) proved that using SEL methods to assist students in developing the conflict resolution, decision-making, relationship and communication skills they need enables them to interact in a productive manner. Further, as they advance in their equipping, they are able to advocate for themselves, communicating both their own needs and potential ways these needs could be met, a vital skill for productive lives (Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013). When students have learned to apply these skills and methods through SEL instruction, modeling, and support, classroom behavioral issues not only drop dramatically, but their likelihood of getting in trouble outside of school also diminishes, leaving them able to have better attendance and focus more on their schoolwork. This saves the community the resources it might have used dealing with their behavior (Butler, Lewis, Moore, & Scott, 2012).

Social emotional learning also provides a framework for the individual to take responsibility for his or her own behavior, while restorative practices provide a similar framework for school staff in addressing these students' needs. Just as students must

learn the appropriate skills for productive behavior, so must teachers and staff learn these skills. Van Ness and Strong (2013) explained that restorative justice is not simply some new method to make children behave; it is a mindset and philosophy teachers understand and embrace to meet students at their point of need and draw them into classroom functioning. When teachers and staff have internalized these concepts, they focus on preventative and instructional approaches to behavior problems both real and potential (Irby, 2013). This also allows teachers to bridge cultural and social norms between community groups and appreciate differences between groups of students and between students and the teacher's cultural and social experience. This understanding and perspective can assist a diverse student body in working together to establish a positive and engaging learning environment, as well as equip them for the many diverse situations they will likely encounter in their lives. In turn, teachers are empowered to create the positive classroom they desire, and their effectiveness and confidence in their profession increases (Irby, 2013).

Combining the skill sets and frameworks of SEL and restorative practices creates an environment in which both teachers and students feel valued and safe, two components necessary for learning (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2012). If students worry about their personal safety or feel that no one is invested in the outcome of their studies, they are less likely to achieve academically and more likely to misbehave (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2012). Similarly, teachers who are unsupported or not respected provide significantly lower instructional and classroom management quality than those who feel valued and safe (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010). One of the strongest arguments for this policy change is the shift it will create in the classroom environment,

moving from a place where students are punished by the teacher, to one where teachers and students work together collaboratively and supportively to achieve the students' learning goals.

### Considerations Regarding Advocated Policy

As with any new undertaking, there are concerns regarding this policy, which need to be considered. First, this policy will require an organizational shift, and even when such change is positive, it often meets resistance (Zins, 2004). Some teachers may not believe the new methods will work until they try them. If one has been doing something one way for a long time, it can be difficult not to slip back into the habit of repeating that behavior; it will take time for new methods to become normative (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013). Similarly, students need time to learn to use their new skills and self-monitor their behavior (Rafferty, 2010). Therefore, it may take teachers, staff, and students some time to learn the new methods and put them into regular practice, resulting in a period of uncertainty.

Surprisingly, another potential resistor to change comes from the parents of children who are not behavioral problems (Dalporto, 2011). Often, stakeholders who experience the negative consequences of others' behavioral issues in restorative justice practice can clamor for the situation to be "controlled" and the perpetrators to be removed or punished, so that they and their children are not adversely affected (Dalporto, 2011). Communicating the changes and the ways they will eventually benefit all students is required to successfully address this adoption period (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009).

Additionally, the training required for implementing the new policy will require resources and staff time. Not only will teachers need to complete training, but they will also need additional planning time to incorporate restorative practice into their classroom plans. Skiba (2014) noted that community members may argue that this time could be better spent in academic instruction, and that resources allocated for training, lesson development, and additional staff (such as the proposed coordinator position) could be better used elsewhere. Good messaging and communication from the school are required to help persons taking this perspective understand the importance of the ways restorative practices and SEL will improve classroom learning.

## SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

We are proposing that we change our discipline policy in District XYZ to be more restorative, with a stronger focus on the SEL standards. The rationale is that we need to do a better job building social-emotional competency and capacity with our students. Our focus is on providing a nurturing environment that is developmentally appropriate. Additionally, we will try to level the playing field by increasing the instructional time for our at-risk male students. This is due to the fact, that we have found that this gender group is most likely to be suspended as noted in a recent study by the U.S. Department of Education (Arcia, 2006).

Unfortunately, by suspending these students, we are denying our at-risk students access to high-quality education and making it more likely that they will drop of school. Ultimately, this will increase the number of students falling into the school-to-prison pipeline. To counteract this, our school needs to do a better job at intervening more quickly so that they do not fall behind academically. This will help to make them more connected to their learning environment by keeping them in school.

### Needed Educational Activities

Our new discipline policy will align our current school-wide infraction system, PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports), SEL, and restorative justice to provide a coherent network of supports for our students. Therefore, we will need to refine our current school-wide infraction system/behavior plan, reinforce the use of PBIS (Positive Behavior Support System), integrate our social-emotional curriculum, and begin to utilize restorative practices.

### *School-Wide Infraction System/Behavior Plan*

Classroom discipline is based on what is known as the Five Step System. When a student is being disruptive to the educational environment, a “step” is assigned. Examples of steps include not following the teacher’s requests after multiple redirects, excessive talking, tardies, talking back, and other classroom disruptions. The consequences increase as the student earns more steps. Step 1 is a warning; step 2 is a phone call home; step 3 is a phone call home and 30-minute detention scheduled by the issuing teacher; step 4 is a 60-minute detention scheduled by the dean of students and a phone call home; and step 5 is an automatic office referral. Every step issued to a student is documented on a Google spreadsheet and is shared with all staff. Steps do not accumulate over the entire year, and each student will start the quarter off with zero steps. Students can also earn classroom and school-wide rewards for receiving either one step or fewer.

However, we are aware of the fact that negative situations may occur with our students in their personal lives that are out of our control. These situations may have an impact on how the students behave in school the following day. Students are not automatically assigned a STEP for their misbehavior in the classroom. Every effort is made by the teacher to intervene and discuss the matter privately to get to the root of the problem before the step is assigned.

### *Positive Behavior Support System (PBIS)*

We will continue to reinforce the use of PBIS in our school. We have been a PBIS school for 10 years now. However, we have not implemented the program with fidelity. That means that we need to follow the model set by PBIS more closely. We

need to develop a Tier 1 Universal Team that will meet monthly to review general behavior data. This team will be made up of administrators, staff members, and parents, and will be looking at school-wide behavior data to locate specific trends. The team will then share this data with classroom teachers during monthly staff meetings. The team will also plan monthly school-wide celebrations.

We will also begin having the Tier 2/3 Team meet every two weeks. This team will be comprised of staff members and administrators. They will analyze biweekly referral reports from our School-Wide Information System (SWIS) and assign “at-risk” students to our first behavior intervention, Check-In, Check-Out (CICO). Participating students complete a “check-in” with a CICO facilitator each morning after arriving to school. The facilitator provides students with a Daily Progress Report (DPR) and offers pre-corrects for meeting daily behavior expectations and point goals. Using expectations listed on the DPR, students receive regularly scheduled specific feedback about behavioral performance from their classroom teacher.

Teacher feedback occurs at the end of each class period or during natural transitions throughout the school day. Specifically, the classroom teacher gives positive, specific praise for appropriate behavior, provides corrective feedback when applicable, and then rates student demonstration of expectations using a predetermined point system. Teachers are explicitly directed to initiate the feedback interactions if a child does not independently ask for ratings on the DPR. At the end of each school day, students return to the intervention facilitator for “checkout.”

Points earned on the DPR are totaled at this time. Intervention facilitators provide students with additional verbal praise and may offer a token associated with the existing



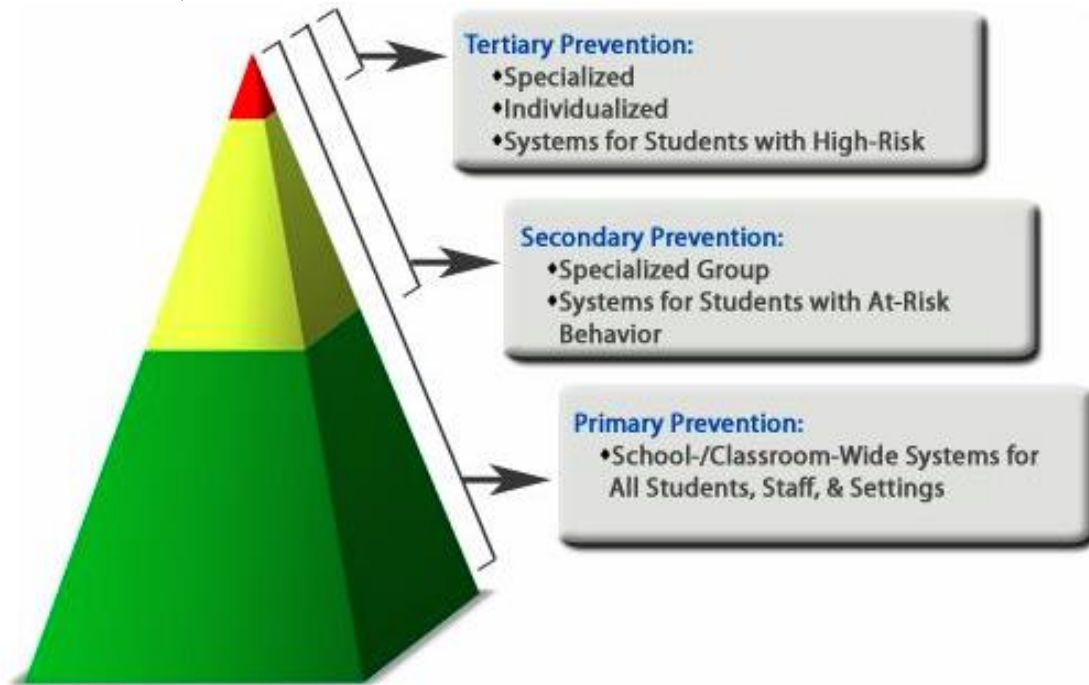
school-wide recognition system if daily or weekly goals are met. If a point goal is not met, the facilitator provides re-teaching of expectations and supportive encouragement. Intervention facilitators enter the percentage of DPR points earned by each student into a data collection spreadsheet. Student data is periodically graphed and then reviewed by the school's Tier 2/3 Team. Students who are not making progress through CICO will then be assigned to the appropriate Social Academic Intervention Group (SAIG) based upon need. Students placed into a SAIG will meet with the social worker in a small group setting two times a week for 30 minutes to receive instruction in social skills, problem-solving skills, or academic behavior skills. These students will also carry a DPR sheet with them all day that will need to be signed and scored by the teachers. Therefore, we will be able to see if this student is being successful with this intervention.

Finally, students not meeting the expectations of the SAIG will be assigned a mentor. The school social worker will then complete a Functional-Behavioral Assessment (FBA) for students not meeting expectations, and develop a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). Students not meeting expectations (80% on DPR, for 12 weeks after being on CICO, SAIG, BIP) are then referred to our Proactive Approach to Student Success (PASS) program.

Our PASS program is taught by a specific teacher who has received training in behavior interventions. PASS is a level-based system in which all students begin on level 3. Through the use of a DPR sheet, students may move up and down the level system. Success moves students to level 2, then level 1, at which point they have graduated from the program. Continued issues lead to a more restrictive environment (levels 4 and 5) or alternative placement considerations. Level 3 means that the student will have

homeroom, intervention time, encore (music, art, industrial technology), and social studies in the PASS classroom with the PASS teacher providing instruction.

*Figure 5.* Response to intervention and the pyramic model (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010).



### *Social-Emotional Curriculum Integration*

Beginning this year, every teacher will be required to teach a social-emotional skill lesson from our Second Steps program to their homeroom class once a week. These lessons will focus on six specific areas: relationships and social interactions with peers, social and emotional understanding, conflict negotiation (problem solving), regulating emotions and behaviors, engagement and persistence, and responsible conduct. Also, teachers will use these lessons to focus on our areas of need as described by the PBIS Tier 1 team during our monthly staff meetings.

### *Restorative Justice Initiative Plan*

Talking Circles, which are classroom community-building tools, will occur on a weekly basis in conjunction with our SEL lesson. The circles are used for classroom management, conflict resolution, and compassionate climate building. Through this structure, students are able to listen and share with each other, communicating the ways they are affected by the actions and behaviors of another. Peer juries will also be utilized to solve minor altercations between students. Student leaders trained as peer jurors will meet with the students and offer guidance and support. An agreement that outlines actions needed by the student to repair harm will be developed at the end of the session(s).

Finally, we have built in a merit program to help students erase their demerits earned through discipline infractions. Students can earn merits by volunteering their time outside of school (e.g., at a homeless shelter, Respond Now, or the South Suburban Humane Society), after school, or during their enrichment time during the school day (if they are not in an intervention). Students who volunteer their time during the day work with teachers to help give back to their classroom or students through such as activities as peer tutoring, reading buddies, or organizing books.

### Program Budgets

As noted in the above section, students may earn after-school detentions through our school-wide discipline infraction system. Students who need to serve a 60-minute detention will be taught a SEL skill reinforcement lesson that addresses their specific infraction with our school social workers. The school social workers will receive an extended-day stipend for their time. These lessons will take place on Tuesday or

Thursday of the school week. We will provide late bus service on those specific days. This will cost the district about \$11,000 total.

During the school day, we will need to provide additional funds for a restorative justice coordinator position. We will build on our existing in-school suspension program to base it on best practice and make it more therapeutic for students. We would call it the School Center for Special Instruction (SCSI). Students would not only complete class work in this program with a certified teacher from our existing staff but also devote time to personal reflection, coping strategies, student recognition, and acknowledgement of problems. This would all be done with our social workers who would push into the classroom during the school day (Morris, 2003). When working with these students, the social workers will follow the Strong Kids Curriculum, which our district already owns.

#### Staff Development

Good teachers form the foundation of good schools, and improving teachers' skills and knowledge is one of the most important investments of time and money. To ensure that every teacher is provided with the support necessary to provide for the successful implementation of the shift in discipline practices, they must receive staff development in several different areas, which will cost the district around \$25,000. First, teachers must receive training in cultural competence. Cultural competence is a key factor in enabling educators to be effective with students from cultures other than their own (Munoz, 2015). Currently, the racial makeup of our teachers does not reflect that of our student body. We are aware of the fact that American classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Teachers must be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to value that diversity among students.

Building a strong foundation in cultural competency will also help support the consistent implementation of our school-wide discipline program. Teachers will issue steps to students in the classroom for not following the rules. Obviously, the tolerance level varies from teacher to teacher. We have had problems with students receiving a step for something they had just done in the previous classroom with no consequence at all. This sends mixed messages to our students and parents regarding our rules. Therefore, it is important that we work as a united staff to hold students accountable for the same expectations across all classrooms.

Also, teachers must receive training on the SEL standards and curriculum. They must understand how to teach the lessons, but it is important that they know how this will not only benefit both the students and themselves. Explicit SEL skills instruction comes with fewer discipline problems, less emotional distress, and greater academic success in students. Also, our school social workers will go into every classroom in the beginning of the year to model a SEL skill lesson for the teachers and students.

Finally, the teachers must be provided with an overview of the restorative justice practices, specifically talking circles. PBIS, SEL, and restorative justice are all connected to support and develop the whole child. We need to focus on supporting our students not only academically, but also emotionally.

#### Progress Monitoring

Whenever a new program is put in place, it is crucial that you carefully monitor the progress of the change and review the data collected to look for areas of concern. Currently, we have a discipline warehouse where minor and major infractions are entered. An example of a minor infraction would be the 30-minute detentions. Examples

of major infractions would be a 60-minute detention or office referral. The PBIS Universal Team reviews the school-wide data on a monthly basis and shares this data with staff.

Also, when a teacher issues a step, he or she must enter it into a Google spreadsheet that is shared with all staff. Therefore, the staff members will be able to track the student from classroom to classroom. Also, when a student receives demerit points because of a behavioral incident, the deans enter that data into a Google spreadsheet that is also shared with all staff. Currently, our CICO data is entered into our discipline warehouse and is then reviewed by the PBIS Tier 2/3 team each time they meet every six to eight weeks.

Finally, since the social workers modeled a SEL skill lesson for every teacher in the beginning of the year, they will be doing classroom observations of the lessons throughout the school year. They would then provide non-judgmental feedback to the teachers during their weekly PLC meetings. Additionally, the administrators will review a suspension report generated by SWIS on a monthly basis. Specifically, they will be looking to see if we are making progress in closing the racial discipline gap.

## SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

An important part of this new initiative is assessment of its effectiveness. Too many times, leaders in education have embarked upon or been forced to enact new policies, only to have them replaced by a very different policy a short time later. The move to SEL and restorative justice practices is one that will benefit both students and staff, and it is important to both document these successes to support its continuance and to examine the program as it unfolds to make improvements where and when needed. This requires a system for evaluating the effectiveness of the SEL/restorative justice initiative.

### Monitoring Plan Progress

Feuerborn and Tyre (2012) explained the importance of ongoing monitoring in implementation and maintenance of a positive school discipline plan. They noted that without monitoring, the plan may be implemented inconsistently, as some teachers embrace innovation while others resist changing strategies they habitually use (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2012). Monitoring allows areas that are not being realized effectively or where misunderstandings exist to be addressed and improved upon. It shows areas where additional training may be needed, and where resources should be allocated or reassigned (Marchant, Christensen, Womack, Conley, & Fisher, 2010). Monitoring can also document the effectiveness of the plan, which supports its continuance (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). Therefore, monitoring of the program must be more than simply comparing discipline records at the end of a quarter or year.

Monitoring for this program encompasses several components to achieve feedback from those impacted by the policy. Therefore, while disciplinary records

including school referrals, suspensions, and STEP data will be reviewed against those of the previous year on a monthly basis, other monitoring activities will also take place.

Teachers will be asked to discuss how the program is working during at least one monthly grade-level meeting and send a brief summary of the discussion to the assistant principal supervising the program.

To begin with, this strategy will help examine the utility of the program while making sure that the teachers are actually teaching the SEL lessons and implementing the restorative justice strategies in their classroom (Patton, 2008) Additionally, this will also support the feasibility of this entire process. Is it realistic for teachers to fit the SEL lessons and restorative practices into their daily/weekly schedule? The feedback will facilitate the accuracy of the program and determine its merit or worth. Is the program working? Are we seeing a positive change in our students? Are office referrals declining?

School staff will also be encouraged to come and discuss the program at any time with either the assistant principal or the restorative justice coordinator. Both may make classroom observations of a student struggling with these new SEL skills or a teacher's implementation of the program.

The assistant principal will also have a focus group and lunch with members of the student government at the end of each quarter and hold talking circles to hear feedback from students impacted by the program. It is also anticipated the assistant principal will have the opportunity to have conversations with students who have historically had discipline issues.



This will help to determine the propriety of the program by checking to see if the students feel like the SEL lessons and restorative justice strategies are helping to support the needs of all students. Are the SEL lessons and restorative justice practices supporting a stronger relationship with the students and teachers? Is the language or skills used in the program ethical and respectful to every student (Patton, 2008)?

Parents will also be encouraged to provide feedback regarding the program at the various meetings with the larger parent community as the year progresses. Finally, the program will be discussed in regular meetings with the restorative justice coordinator, social worker, and in meetings of school leadership.

#### Evaluating Outcomes and Results

The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) holds that educational evaluation requires established standards be met in the areas of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability (American Evaluation Association, 2016). That is, the evaluation must provide useful information, be within the ability of the school or district to conduct, handle privacy and similar concerns appropriately, result in accurate findings, and be conducted transparently and with oversight (Frye & Hemm, 2012). Owston (2007) explained that both teachers and students must support an innovative initiative for it to have long-term success. Similarly, administration must support both the initiative and the activities of teachers in implementing it; this includes providing teachers with support in both professional development and in messages and actions that support the innovation (Owston, 2007). These concepts form the basis of any evaluation model.

The evaluation will be conducted on an ongoing basis within the Problem-Solving Continuous Improvement Framework already used in the district. This involves a four-step process of identifying the problem or situation, creating and implementing the plan, evaluating effectiveness through review and analysis of data and observations, and then making changes and decisions regarding future implementation and maintenance of the plan. This will be used both in a broad sense to evaluate overall program effectiveness and on a micro level to evaluate individual components of the program. For example, SEL methods vary in their application by the age of the student; what is empowering for a young child may be diminishing for an older child (Vega, 2012). While this will be covered in staff training and accepted at the concept level, it is likely that teachers will need to do some experimenting to see what techniques involved with the restorative justice discipline model work best with their grade level and teaching style (Yoder, 2013). Therefore, teachers will receive training or a review of this model and be encouraged to apply it to their own individual implementation of the program.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are required for evaluation, as was established by gathering of both numeric data and the perceptions of those involved as described in the “Monitoring Plan Progress” section. Quantitative analysis of the discipline records will be performed, comparing the number of discipline situations, severity of the situations, and resolution of these situations with already existing data from the previous two years. This analysis will look for trends that indicate the program has improved the discipline climate at the school; an example of such a trend would be fewer discipline events elevated outside the classroom. As the monitoring plan also includes a substantial amount of feedback from teachers, students, parents, and

administration, qualitative analysis of this information is also required. The overall reaction to the program will be gathered through surveys designed specifically for each individual stakeholder group. Since it is easy to misuse qualitative data or see what one wants to see, this data will be coded based on categories developed prior to the plan's implementation, with the flexibility to include additional categories if needed. Data in each category will be evaluated as positive, negative, or neutral, and overall trends and patterns will be established. Problems or improvements proposed will be considered in context of the overall monitoring information to see if correction or implementation of the new idea is feasible and beneficial.

#### Accountability and Reporting Procedures

Accountability is vital to the success of restorative justice and SEL implementation. This includes not only ensuring that students are held responsible for their behavior, but learning the behavioral management skills provided in the framework, holding teachers and staff accountable for implementing and continuing the program, and keeping administration accountable to both effectively manage and accurately report the program's effects on school culture. The first area of accountability—student behavior and learning—will take place within the classroom. Students struggling in this area will be referred to the restorative justice coordinator, and if necessary, to the social worker for additional resources. Students may additionally engage in community service. They can also apologize either verbally or in writing to those affected by their behavior, or perform similar actions to reinforce the importance of their accountability.

Teacher accountability will be ensured through classroom observations, discussion of the program in staff meetings, and records of disciplinary referrals to the

assistant principal and restorative justice coordinator, with additional staff training and support provided when necessary. For example, if a teacher refers a student for a discipline problem immediately without attempting to use SEL methods, the student will work with the restorative justice coordinator to develop better self-management skills. However, the teacher will also receive follow-up in a positive manner on how this situation could be handled more effectively in the classroom, at least as a first step. Additionally, teachers meet in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) every day to work collaboratively to improve their teaching skills and the performance of students. One PLC per month will be dedicated to discussing restorative justice and SEL skill implementation in the classroom.

Administrative accountability will involve an open-door policy to discuss the program and monthly reporting on its progress. This reporting will include the quantitative analysis of the program's effectiveness, as well as comments from parents, students, and staff (with their permission). This will both provide reporting to those impacted by the program and serve as an encouragement for everyone to stay enthused about it. It is important in particular for the administration to remain enthusiastic, as programs often fail because of lack of support or perceived value from teachers or administrators. These reports will be made available within the school to staff and administration. In addition, quarterly summaries of these reports, which will be stripped of any information that would allow for identification of individual students or staff, will be posted on the school website.

## SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

### Policy Justification

Closing the achievement gap and adequately serving all students requires a positive classroom environment, one in which students are valued and engaged. This cannot be achieved in situations where students are constantly fearful of punitive disciplinary actions. This is especially true when those actions may result from cultural differences or students being expected to employ behaviors and coping skills they have not been adequately taught. Research has demonstrated that zero-tolerance and other behavioral control practices that remove students from the classroom are not in the best interests of the students or the school, and often create an environment that adversely affects the learning process (Glass, 2014). Therefore, it is important, particularly in the middle school years when students are defining themselves as individuals and as learners, that schools deal with discipline and behavior in an appropriate and affirming way.

Unfortunately, School A has employed the politically popular zero-tolerance policy for several years. These policies were originally implemented to regain control of schools where discipline had become lacking to the point that it affected student safety. However, used in the long term, zero tolerance actually reduces school effectiveness and creates an environment in which students constantly fear punitive action, often for behaviors that they are either unaware is inappropriate or that they have not been taught how to positively control (Skiba, 2014). At the middle school, this resulted in a high number of suspensions and expulsions, limiting student learning time and putting a burden on the families and community to provide structure for these students outside of the school environment.

It was obvious that continuing with the zero-tolerance policy was not in the best interests of students or the school. Thus, the shift in political and educational views that led to the state requiring schools to exhaust other avenues before removing students from learning opportunities is welcome. There are several models for making this change available to the school, but of these options, restorative justice practices are the most empowering and effective (Dalporto, 2011).

Moving to a restorative justice model of school discipline based on SEL principles addresses these issues and provides the best and most appropriate policy for establishing an environment conducive to learning and student growth. As students and teachers learn SEL skills, they will be better able to both work respectively in collaborative settings and deal with any emotional or social issues that would have previously led to discipline or disruptive behavior (Zins, 2004). A restorative justice model keeps discipline, and students, in the classroom as much as possible, increasing learning time and learning opportunities (Yoder, 2013).

The new policy also changes behavioral attention to prevention rather than reaction, improving the overall learning environment, as teachers have more time to teach and students feel safer (Bluestein, 2008). Further, it teaches students valuable skills in recognizing and dealing with their own feelings and needs appropriately to self-advocate in a positive, constructive manner (Yoder, 2013). Teachers are able to focus on learning outcomes, not behavioral discipline, and create a nurturing, helpful relationship with students. Additionally, this is the best policy because it creates this environment while allowing the school to comply with Illinois Senate Bill 100, which limits suspension and

expulsion, the two primary methods the school has been using to address discipline under its zero-tolerance policy and lack of effective behavioral interventions.

### A Student-Centered Approach

Unlike zero tolerance, restorative justice is student-centered. It provides a comprehensive approach to school safety that focuses on prevention and intervention to achieve a positive behavioral and learning environment (Irby, 2103). Restorative justice is centered on the values of the entire community and giving each member respect, dignity, and a voice to express their perspective and culture (Glass, 2014). As the United States and its public schools become more diverse, the range of what students' families and communities consider appropriate behavior is also growing, requiring teachers develop a more inclusive and flexible approach to classroom norms (Irby, 2103). This student-centered approach develops self-regulation and self-management in students while providing them with instruction and guidance for interacting effectively with those from diverse backgrounds, rather than being forced to conform to the culture of their teacher, regardless of their own values (Gosine & Islam, 2014).

A school that does not have students at its center, that places emphasis on what is best for teachers or what is most popular among politicians or others with their own agendas, does not provide a healthy learning environment (Skiba, 2014). We have seen the result of this type of focus at the middle school under the zero-tolerance policy, which catered to the need of others to feel that they were doing something to address school discipline and safety. But, it could be argued these people were really acting a way that was most beneficial to themselves (Skiba, 2014). Schools should be designed and operated with the students' needs first, and the restorative justice model proposed in this

dissertation reflects that student-centered approach, one that will empower students to succeed emotionally and socially in a way that opens new doors for academic success while providing a safe, nurturing educational environment that promotes each student's best learning. This further represents the values of the students' families and communities, allowing for self-determination and empowerment.

### Policy Implementation

As the SEL-based approach of the new policy is very different from previous practice, it is important that adequate training and planning be provided for its implementation. As this is an inclusive plan with support and awareness built into its enactment, the plan for policy implementation must also align with the values and vision that drive it. First, comprehensive teacher training will empower staff to learn and use new methods and techniques in their classrooms to achieve a positive approach to discipline and safety (Dalporto, 2011). Training for school administration also equips school leaders to support the teachers in these new strategies, and to communicate the changing focus of school safety to students, parents, and the larger community (Dalporto, 2011). Weekly SEL instruction in the classroom and the availability of the restorative justice coordinator for one-on-one and small-group interventions provides students with the guidance they need to manage and be responsible for their own behavior, and to express their emotions and views in a positive manner (Vega, 2012). Therefore, the plan to implement the new policy provides the training and support needed to ensure its success. We will be providing the foundation for more positive social behaviors and peer relationships. Students will be taught how to effectively solve problems and avoid conflicts. This will result in fewer conduct problems and improved grades. Students will



remain in school where they belong and learn from their mistakes. These are skills that will benefit our students as they move forward in their educational career.

In addition, funding requirements for the policy implementation support the overall vision it provides. Unfortunately, ideas and policies can often be introduced into schools with good intentions but without the adequate resources required for their proper implementation. This leads to teacher and administrative frustration, as staff is expected to carry out new initiatives without necessary resources. The vision for this policy includes additional instruction and support, sometimes one-on-one or in small-group settings, and a policy that is holistic throughout the school. As such, funding the restorative justice coordinator position and the trainings mentioned above aligns the policy implementation with its greater vision and improves the likelihood it will become successful practice at the middle school.

#### Needs and Concerns of Stakeholders

Given the nature of this policy, it is imperative that the needs and concerns of all stakeholders are considered and addressed in the policy's implementation. These stakeholders include students, their families, teachers, school leaders, district administration, legislators, and the general community.

Students' needs and concerns are given voice in this policy through increased classroom interaction and opportunity for self-advocacy. The school administration will meet with the student government group every quarter to gather feedback about the program.

Students will also have access to the restorative justice coordinator as well as teachers to discuss and facilitate implementation of the new program. In addition,

equipping students with additional self-regulation and communication tools will allow them to control own their own behavior and decisions (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2012).

Parents will also have the opportunity to voice concerns and understand how the new policy will better meet student needs. As reported by Dalporto (2011), sometimes the greatest opponents of restorative justice or similar school safety policies are parents of students without behavioral issues. For this reason, presentations and messaging to parents will inform them of the new policy, including the legislative mandate behind it, its implementation and use, and their opportunities to comment and discuss its points. Importantly, this communication and consideration of any concerns expressed will be framed within the overall positive benefit to all students who will result from the policy change (Dalporto, 2011).

Teachers' needs and concerns will be addressed as part of the training process, particularly those who may feel that more punitive measures are a better plan. There may be some teachers who initially favor simply having "troublemaker" students removed from the classroom. However, we need to change their mindset and help them understand that keeping those students in school will limit the amount of class time missed for disciplinary reasons. Therefore, it will not have such a significant impact on the academics of difficult students. If raised, these concerns can be addressed by helping these teachers see the broader cost of continued absence, both to those students and society. In addition, it should be emphasized how these "troublemaker" labels may have come from disconnect between home and school norms. School leaders and district administration are already supportive, but policy monitoring provides opportunities to address any concerns that arise or potential improvements that are identified.

Legislators will have their immediate concern (i.e., the large amount of time outside of school experienced by the most troubled students) addressed by this policy. This will allow them to demonstrate to voters that they are taking progressive and positive steps to ensure school safety in a manner that empowers students and values their need for education. While legislators obviously have the power to make their concerns known at any time, the nature of the restorative justice model also provides government representatives the opportunity to raise any additional needs or concerns that may be identified as the policy implementation progresses. Finally, the implementation plan for the policy and its ongoing monitoring practice meets the needs of the community to have orderly, decisive, and positively empowered citizens who can successfully engage in negotiation, communication, and conflict resolution to address community needs.

### Conclusion

This policy has the potential to make a long-lasting and positive impact not only on the middle school students, but also their families and the greater community. Using a restorative approach centers on how conflicts affect all members of the community: students, teachers and parents.

By providing tools that allow these students to take responsibility for their behavior and decisions, the school is equipping them for success in life. As students begin to employ these skills at home and in their community, the restorative justice policy also provides the potential to ripple out into the community, providing greater empowerment to many more than just the middle school students and staff directly involved.

Administrators utilizing a restorative philosophy need to help staff make a paradigm shift in the way they view and resolve conflicts in schools. Zehr (1990) argued that a paradigm, a construction of reality, shapes the lens through which we understand, determine, and resolve conflicts, as well as construct what we know to be possible and impossible. Moving a school from a retributive lens to a restorative lens means shifting the community from (1) focusing on blame-fixing to problem solving; (2) focusing on the past to focusing on the future; and (3) focusing on punishment to focusing on repairing harm.

In closing, a restorative policy would leverage conflicts as a learning opportunity for students. It breaks down the autocratic face of authority in schools, places less emphasis on punishment and more emphasis on supporting victims and offenders. The process itself helps to build trusting relationship between students and adults in the school and a sense of community ownership of conflicts and their resolutions.

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