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School Mental Health Practice Brief

Strategies to Reduce Disproportionate Discipline Practices in Schools

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Extensive research has documented the link between exclusionary discipline and numerous detrimental youth outcomes including lower academic achievement, a greater likelihood of being pushed out of school, an increase in substance use, and criminal justice involvement (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). Exclusionary practices are defined as removing students from classroom instruction (or school-based social settings) in response to unwanted student behavior (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). Exclusionary practices are ineffective for changing student behavior, and are harmful to students’ wellbeing, the school community, and society at-large (Gerlinger et al., 2021).

Exclusionary practices are most often used with students of color, boys, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students who struggle academically (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Because of the strong association between exclusionary practices and negative outcomes, removing a student from the classroom or school setting should be reserved for incidents that cause safety concerns. Unfortunately, exclusion is used for a range of less severe student behaviors. One study found that 34% of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent behaviors, such as disruption or willful defiance (Losen & Martin, 2018).

In these cases, taking an instructional approach that includes relationship building, preventative classroom practices, and skill development, has been shown to be effective for helping students develop prosocial skills and equipping educators with effective responses to low-level behaviors (Bryan et al., 2020).

Protective factors such as positive relationships with teachers, supportive classroom environments, and positive peer relationships are strongly associated with children's overall health and wellbeing (Gubbels et al., 2019). Positive relationships are important for everyone and are especially crucial for students at risk for emotional and behavioral concerns as well as students from racially or ethnically minoritized backgrounds (Skiba et al., 2011). Why? Because underrepresented students often receive messages that the learning environment is not for them, and that they do not fit in or belong.

Students who feel supported by their teachers are more academically engaged and have fewer disciplinary outcomes (Di Pietro, 2018). Positive student-teacher relationships can decrease emotional, behavioral, and substance use concerns (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). Thus, implementing preventative practices in schools, that include relationship building strategies, is important for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline (Compton et al., 2019). This brief outlines effective strategies to reduce the use of disproportionate discipline in schools.

Prevention and Identification Strategies

Schools are well-positioned to provide educators with training and coaching on fostering and sustaining positive relationships with students (Cook et al. 2018; Gregory et al., 2016) through preventative and restorative practices. Preventative practices include strategies such as teaching, modeling, and reinforcing prosocial skills, student-mentorship, building positive connections between students, and building connections with student families. Restorative practices seek to repair harm through mediation and making amends, such as through group dialogues, classroom circles, and conferences.





When equipped with the necessary tools, educators can develop a deeper understanding with students, consider multiple perspectives during times of conflict, and skillfully resolve disputes (Jennings & Frank, 2015). For example, teachers provided with coaching to increase instructional and emotional supports for students can decrease office discipline referrals (Gregory et al., 2016). In addition, strategies like providing behavior specific praise to students (e.g., positively acknowledging a group of students for working hard on a project), or providing emotional supports (e.g., allowing students to share their perspectives on classroom issues) can create opportunities to build trust and improve school climate (Walker et al., 2004). Finally, instructional and restorative supports can interrupt punitive discipline by uncovering unaddressed social, emotional, and academic needs that can be supported through increased opportunities for skill-building and problem-solving (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

Building relationships with students and creating a caring classroom community are the foundations for reducing exclusionary and disproportionate discipline practices. A teacher's ability to build bonds with students across age groups, cultural backgrounds, and student interests is crucial to creating an environment where all students feel seen and supported. Positive classroom communities are grounded in respectful relationships and student engagement. Teachers must model and teach how to be respectful and kind to one another and provide an environment of care, calm, support, and respect where all students can make errors, learn from challenges, and celebrate growth and development (Duong et al., 2019). The following discussion of intervention strategies serves as alternatives to exclusionary discipline and will highlight relationship building practices.

Intervention Strategies

The Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA) is a school-wide, instructional and restorative alternative to exclusionary discipline. It begins with universal prevention for all students, then layers on additional support for students in need (Nese et al., 2020). ISLA emphasizes that student behavior is learned through educators' modeling and teaching prosocial skills, and that environmental factors, including the quality of teaching practices, influence when and how a behavior is likely to occur (Patterson, 2005). ISLA aims to promote positive student-teacher relationships by providing equitable skill-building supports to improve student social and behavioral problem-solving (Nese et al., 2020). These environmental changes are made through the three components of the ISLA model: School-wide & Classroom Component, Restorative & Instructional Component, and Team & Data Decision Making Component.



School-wide & Classroom Component

The first step of ISLA includes the collection of best practices aimed at strengthening student-teacher relationships called ISLA WOW: Welcome Students at the Door, Own your Classroom Environment, and Wrap Up with Intention (Nese et al., 2022). Welcoming students as they enter the school and classroom is a simple yet impactful practice that allows for a moment of connection between adults in the building and youth. Welcoming students should be done in all spaces (e.g., classrooms, office, cafeteria, bus, afterschool activities) and includes greeting the student by name, making eye contact, sharing a smile, and a few kind words. Owning your classroom environment is the practice of teaching, modeling, and reinforcing the daily routines and prosocial behaviors that make school a safe and welcoming place for learning. It takes intention by all educators to establish, teach, and practice routines and procedures that are connected to school-wide practices, such as how to enter environments safely and engage respectfully with peers. Just like academic skills, prosocial skills are learned through adults teaching, modeling, and practicing the skills with students, and reinforcing effort and success. The last step, wrapping up with intention is the practice of having a thoughtful closing activity at the end of class and the school day to build community and transition students to the next part of their day with a routine. Effective wrap-ups are quick, efficient, done consistently each day, and build skills while fostering community. Wrap-up routines may include exit tickets or a closing circle, a school-wide song or dance over the loudspeaker, or a peer-to-peer positive feedback activity where students share kind words with a fellow student.

The next step of ISLA focuses on effective responses to unwanted behaviors. Effective classroom management depends on thoughtful and instructive responses to behavior concerns that address the function of students' behavior (Green & Stormont, 2018). Both wanted and unwanted behaviors are often functional, meaning they serve a purpose or lead to an outcome the students find reinforcing. Considering what occurs right before an unwanted behavior (i.e., antecedents) and right after (i.e., consequences) helps to determine the possible function of the behavior (Loman et al., 2019). This information allows educators to teach students an appropriate alternative behavior that addresses the same function. For example, when a student is goofing off in class to gain peer attention, a teacher may inform the student that once they complete their work, they can earn five minutes of extra recess for the whole class. The student receives positive attention for doing the right thing.

Another step in the ISLA model is the implementation of a school-wide preventative break system. Breaks keep our brains healthy and allow our minds to reset (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012). Taking breaks plays a key role in developing cognitive abilities. Additionally, breaks can prevent “decision fatigue” and restore motivation for long-term tasks. A school-wide break system allows students to take a break before behaviors escalate, teaches students de-escalation skills, provides an opportunity for students and teachers to recalibrate, and identifies students who might need more supports. Breaks can be in-class or in an adjacent classroom (e.g., Buddy Classroom Breaks) and are meant to be brief (5-15 minutes) and positive.

Restorative & Instructional Component



The next step, called the ISLA Process (Nese et al., 2020), occurs when the school-wide practices are not enough for students to be successful. Students receive support from an adult (e.g., administrator, school counselor, behavior specialist) who has time dedicated to working with individual students. The adult listens to the student, provides skills coaching, and prepares the student to return to class and reconnect with their teacher. This step serves as an effective tool for reducing punitive discipline and takes an instructional approach, whereby prosocial skills are taught, modeled, and practiced prior to the student returning to class. The instructional and restorative experience with an adult and the reconnection with the classroom teacher are critical features of ISLA that keep relationships at the center.

There are five steps in the ISLA Process:

Step 1. Triage: determine if the behavior is a safety concern and the most appropriate staff to work with the student. If the behavior is a safety concern, then the student is directed to an administrator who will work with the student, their family, and additional staff on individualized support and a safety plan in addition to the ISLA Process. If the behavior is not a safety concern, then the student works with a staff member (behavior specialist, counselor, paraprofessional) on steps 2-5.

Step 2. Debrief: provide the student with a trusted staff who will listen to the student and help them identify their behavioral and emotional needs. The staff guides the conversation to give students the space to share their version of events without judgment. It also gives the staff member time to identify which skills a student might need to work on.

Step 3. Behavior Skills Coaching: give students the opportunity to learn and practice prosocial, replacement behaviors with a trusted staff. The coaching during this conversation helps students understand how they can handle future situations and gives them the opportunity to practice the new skills in a low-stakes way.

Step 4. Reconnection Conversations: support students in going back to class and reconnecting with their teacher. Together, the student and staff plan out how to reconnect with the teacher and complete the ISLA Reconnection Card. The ISLA Reconnection Card documents (a) what the student learned, (b) how they can make things better, (c) how they can prevent the issue from happening in the future, (d) supports the student needs from their teacher to be successful, (e) something else the student might want their teacher to know about them, and (f) something they want their teacher to understand about them from their cultural perspective.

Step 5. Classroom Re-Entry: support students through reconnecting with their teacher and reentering the learning environment. When the student is ready to return to class, their teacher is informed so they can indicate if they have a moment to reconnect with the student. When the student is ready to read their Reconnection Card and engage in the Reconnection Conversation, it is the teacher's time to listen, acknowledge the student's point of view as well as their own behavior as a teacher in the situation, commit to working with the student on the skill they identified, and invite them back into the learning environment when appropriate. The support staff is there to support the success of this conversation: they may encourage the student to share specifics about what they discussed, pre-correct expectations for how the teacher and student can listen to one another, and model how the conversation can be productive.

The ISLA Process gives school staff and students tools for dealing with challenging situations in a way that is both instructional and restorative. When implemented with fidelity, these steps can improve teacher-student relationships, allow students a mechanism to feel heard and validated by their teacher, keep students in class and engaged, and teach students and teachers the skills needed for problem solving (Nese et al., 2020). ISLA holds promise as an effective intervention for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and the minutes of instruction lost (Nese et al., 2020). Additionally, the suspension risk for students of color and male students declined after implementation of ISLA compared to white and female students respectively (Pimentel-Mannan et al., 2023).

Team & Data Decision Making Component

Implementation of ISLA takes a team to efficiently oversee and ensure that all staff are trained, coached, and supported with implementation. The ISLA team is typically made up of representatives from all grade levels, behavior supports, and administration. Additionally, the team must have access to two types of school-wide data to assess the impact of ISLA: Fidelity data and Outcome data. Fidelity data allows schools to assess if they are implementing ISLA the way it was intended. Teams can use a WOW checklist to ask teachers to rate their use of the WOW strategies in class. Similarly, the staff supporting students when they are sent out of class may use an ISLA Process checklist to assess how often they follow the five step ISLA Process. Outcome data allows schools to determine if implementing ISLA results in improvements for students, educators, and the school community. Teams may look at rates of office referrals, in-school, out-of-school suspensions, and disparities in exclusion. Fidelity and outcome data are necessary for the team to assess if implementing ISLA is helping to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. Furthermore, teams can ask students and staff members, either through interviews or surveys, the impact that ISLA is having on their classroom environment, school climate, and their connectedness with one another.



Key Implications for Practice



Exclusionary discipline is harmful to students and the school environment. It is disproportionately delivered to students of color, students with disabilities, students struggling academically, and students living in poverty.



Exclusion is not a teaching strategy. For substantive change, preventative, instructional, and restorative practices are necessary.



Building and sustaining positive relationships with students improves the learning environment, student engagement, and reduces unwanted behaviors. Positive relationships serve as a prevention tool, by creating environments that set everyone up for success.



At the individual level, ISLA can improve school connectedness and student-teacher relationships. Both outcomes have been linked to improvements in academic engagement, mental health, and overall well-being. Through training educators on providing equitable supports and resources, it can help students who are at risk of exclusion stay engaged in school, on track for success, and more connected to their teachers.



At the school level, ISLA can improve school climate. By providing an alternative to suspension that emphasizes instruction and restoration, schools can reduce exclusionary practices and create a more positive and supportive environment for all students and educators.



At the community level, ISLA may contribute to the development of more equitable and inclusive schools and communities, as students from minoritized groups are disproportionately affected by suspension and other disciplinary measures. By reducing exclusionary discipline and providing support for all students that build skills and strengthen relationships, ISLA can help create an inclusive, equitable, and healthy community.

Related Resources

- **ISLA Resources and Training Videos:** <https://www.neselab.org/isla/>
- **Practice Guide for ISLA Implementation:** <https://www.pbis.org/resource/instructional-and-restorative-alternatives-to-exclusionary-discipline-isla-guide>
- **Resources on School and Classroom Equity:** <https://www.pbis.org/equity>
- **Essential Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching:** <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/equality-inclusion-and-diversity/five-essential-strategies-to-embrace-culturally-responsive-teaching/>
- **60-second Strategy Videos for Classroom Engagement:** <https://www.edutopia.org/search?query=60-second>



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