School Discipline during COVID-19:
Inclusive and Supportive Strategies for Schools as they Re-open

The intense focus of schools on health and safety priorities related to preventing the spread of COVID-19 has led to additional rules and substantial changes in procedure, such as mask wearing and physical distancing. As many students return to schools, they are returning to an environment that has changed substantially over the last several months, including new rules, practices, and norms. Children vary in their ability to quickly and effectively adjust to such changes, and children with pre-existing behavioral health conditions and other disabilities may be at particularly high risk for adjustment difficulties. Best practice discipline strategies are needed to implement and enforce new rules and expectations in a way that adheres to important health and safety guidelines, but protects against increased risk of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, which would further remove students from the academic environment and disrupt learning and development. This issue brief provides guidance to schools and districts for addressing school discipline across virtual, in-person, and hybrid settings in an inclusive and supportive manner to keep students

physically and emotionally healthy during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

COVID-19 safety measures may unintentionally disconnect students from school

As schools adapt to new policies and practices, including wearing masks, enhanced physical distancing, and virtual learning, the focus on health and safety and adherence to new rules and expectations places students at risk of exclusionary discipline, defined here as arrest, expulsion, and suspension. Adherence to safety protocols are the primary means by which districts seek to mitigate the spread of disease and avoid longer-term quarantines and school building closures. Moreover, teacher and administrator management of inappropriate or disruptive behaviors on virtual learning platforms comes with a new set of challenges to monitor and address. In these instances, school personnel may perceive limited options to respond to behavior challenges or policy violations without restricting students from fully engaging in the learning environment. Consequently, exclusionary discipline

and limiting access to virtual platforms and interactive functions may occur.

Students who are disengaged or disconnected from the learning environment as a result of punitive discipline have poorer social and academic outcomes. Nationally, over half of students experience a suspension or expulsion during their middle and high school education[1] associated largely with "zero tolerance" discipline policies that punish even minor offenses with removal from the learning environment.[2] It is well-documented that exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students with disabilities and students of color,[3] particularly Black males, across all grade levels. Students who are subject to exclusionary discipline are more likely to become disengaged or drop out of school, and have increased likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system, leading to negative outcomes that may persist through adulthood.[4]

Students' behavioral health and trauma needs are increasing due to COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the re-opening of schools in the fall of 2020 and has significantly disrupted or completely changed the typical routine for homes, schools, businesses, and communities over the past several months. Many of these changes happened suddenly and have caused social isolation, affected access to basic needs such as food and housing, and have limited access to establishing new or maintaining ongoing health care. In addition, the ongoing uncertainty of these challenging times has resulted in both students and staff reporting increased fear and anxiety about returning to school both in-person and virtually, as well as general concerns about safety and security.

Early research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic shows increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress among children and adolescents[5] and their families due to the disruption in their daily lives, particularly among those with pre-existing behavioral health challenges.[6] This additional strain across the school community and on already challenged educational systems gives rise to increased emotional needs among students and lower tolerance

among adults for misbehaviors in the school setting. Taken together, these circumstances are likely to result in increased conflict between students and school personnel, without adequate preparation, information, and resources.

A trauma-informed approach, with intentional focus on proactively identifying and supporting students in managing emotional and behavioral challenges, is required to meet the current demands for a school environment that is both physically and emotionally safe.[7] In light of the increased demands on school staff, supporting their well-being is an important element for ensuring they can appropriately address and de-escalate rule violations in a manner that does not result in excluding students from the learning environment.

Schools play a critical role in providing or linking students to behavioral health care

School personnel are instrumental in helping to identify needs and for supporting families to establish or reconnect to services and supports as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary options. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of implementing comprehensive and sustainable school mental health systems with multi-tiered services. A comprehensive system includes universal approaches to prevention, social and emotional learning curricula, and behavioral health promotion activities for all students (tier one); provision of counseling and support interventions for students with identified needs (tier two); and referral to community-based services for students with more intensive needs (tier three). The comprehensive framework[8] developed by CHDI, in collaboration with the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland provides a model for schools to implement to improve accessibility and quality of behavioral health supports, which in turn promotes health equity, school connectedness, behavioral functioning, and academic outcomes for all students.

Research on exclusionary school discipline indicates that increasing positive behavioral supports and social and emotional learning results in improved behavioral outcomes and more positive school climate.

In particular, restorative justice practices are a promising approach for addressing and preventing negative interactions through relationship-building and group decision-making.[9] Restorative practices promote school connectedness and have been shown to improve relationships between teachers and students and reduce racial disparities in exclusionary discipline.[10, 11]

Over the past decade, Connecticut's School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI) has used a comprehensive approach to reduce exclusionary discipline and connect students to services and supports. CHDI coordinates SBDI in collaboration with State agency partners from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and the Department of Children and Families. SBDI--which has been implemented in 56 schools across 20 districts--has reduced school-based arrests by an average of 33% among participating schools and has resulted in 42% higher rates of connections to Mobile Crisis behavioral health supports. SBDI works with schools to: implement a customized graduated response model of discipline intervention that incorporates restorative practices; enhance skills of classroom teachers to manage challenging behaviors through a trauma-informed approach; provide crisis intervention training and supports to law enforcement; and partner with family advocates, community providers, and police to ensure access to appropriate care to avoid suspensions and arrests.

Recommendations:

Recommendations for schools/districts to proactively address exclusionary discipline in an effort to prevent an increase in office referrals and suspensions, expulsions, and arrests as schools transition in the fall of 2020 include the following:

1. **Review and revise tiered and graduated response models of discipline that prioritize classroom-level behavior management**, rather than administrator or police involvement in minor behavior incidents. The SBDI Toolkit provides a

basic template for development of a graduated response model.

- Update discipline policies and practices to address behavior management and student accountability for adherence to new COVID-related guidelines for virtual and traditional educational settings. CSDE has provided a guidance document for administrators specifically to address code of conduct adaptations during the COVID reopening.

- Ensure that models integrate restorative practices and family engagement to strengthen school connectedness and decrease inequities.

2. **Enhance behavioral health screening and referral practices to better identify students with mental health and/or trauma needs,** particularly in virtual school environments where students may be physically distanced from adults who provide support services in the school building.

- The School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation (SHAPE) System is a national online portal to help assess school mental health quality and sustainability and includes a Screening and Assessment Library to help schools/districts select an appropriate measure. CHDI provides free technical assistance and support to local schools using the SHAPE System.

- The Child Trauma Screen (CTS) is a free tool available to screen children for trauma.

3. **Address staff wellness and provide enhanced professional development so that all school personnel have the skills and expectation to build healthy relationships and positive connections with all students.**

- CHDI's school newsletter series provides resources for staff wellness, including managing anxiety and secondary traumatic stress.

4. **Review and revise MOAs between schools and police, and between schools and local Mobile Crisis providers**, to clarify roles and responsibilities for appropriately de-escalating and managing challenging behaviors. Review your district's MOA with your local mobile crisis provider.

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