

# Reforming Discipline in Broward County Public Schools: Changing the Process and Changing the Outcomes

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) believe that all schools should be welcoming and productive places for children to learn and for teachers to teach. We believe that exclusionary discipline – suspending or expelling a student from school for a disciplinary reason – should be used sparingly and as a last resort. Measures can and should be taken to build positive school climates, respond to special circumstances of students, prevent student misbehavior, and address violations of school rules in a restorative manner.

School and district leaders have shown that positive discipline strategies can be effective in advancing the district's responsibility to keep all people safe, ensure students are learning and treat everyone fairly. The consequences of harsh and punitive discipline policies, including zero tolerance and the overuse of suspension and expulsion, can be devastating in the lives of children. AASA and CDF are profiling leading districts that have taken the challenge to reform discipline policies and practices. These districts are leading the charge to improve school climate and culture, reduce racial disproportionality in discipline, and improve the odds for children and youth.

## GETTING STARTED

Superintendent Robert Runcie has led Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) toward greater equity, achievement, and success since 2011. One of the cornerstones of Broward County's success has been their commitment to engaging each and every child in school every day and working hard to keep them out of the juvenile justice system. BCPS has seen impressive drops in student arrests, behavior referrals, out-of-school suspensions (OSS) and repeat discipline offenses from students.

How did Broward County Public Schools accomplish this work?

Here's Superintendent Runcie on how it all started:

"In October 2011, I arrived in the district and, shortly after that, began to dive into data on student performance in the district. We quickly recognized that Broward had a high number of arrests, suspensions and expulsions. In fact, Broward had the highest number of school-related arrests of any school district in the state of Florida and a lot of that came from the zero tolerance culture that was pretty prevalent throughout our society. We realized that we are not going to be able to create equitable opportunities for success in our school system if our students are not in school – if they are out on the streets or if our students are in courtrooms rather than classrooms. It is not simply a matter of the superintendent and school board changing school discipline policies, this has to be a community-wide effort. We established a committee to eliminate the schoolhouse to jailhouse which included a number of key community stakeholders including the state attorney's office, public defender's office, local NAACP, the Advancement Project, juvenile judges, sherriff's office, local law enforcement, some elected officials, social service agencies, parent advisory groups, school leaders, teachers and their bargaining agents, and other key stakeholders. **We met for about a year looking at data, discussing the community's approach to discipline** and how those entities interacted with school discipline. **We identified 13 different items on our code of student conduct that were resulting in the greatest number of discipline referrals leading to arrests. These were things that were nonviolent, misdemeanor offenses.**"

## STRATEGIES

In Broward County, the school and community agencies came together in what was called the Eliminating the School House to Jail House Pipeline Committee over a shared interest on behalf of young people in the community and they identified the problem areas.

After identifying the problem areas, BCPS set about finding alternative strategies, solutions, and revising policies to align with their new vision. The code of student conduct was significantly revamped to reduce the reliance on OSS and expulsion as discipline strategies for non-violent offenses and to re-route behavioral issues into a continuum of support and root cause analysis to better engage students. Michaelle Valbrun-Pope, Executive Director of Student Support Initiatives, on what needed to change: "We know what works in changing student behavior has to include practices like restorative justice; it has to include wraparound supports, and finding out what are the root causes of the problem. We had to bring our mental health folks, our family counselors, our social

*"You have to fundamentally change practices.*

*That means you have to restructure how you are spending dollars and resources to engage in a different process that's going to lead to different outcomes."*

*~ Superintendent Robert Runcie, Broward County Public Schools*

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*"We don't look at this as really being about student discipline as much as it is about another form of intervention to help students to be successful."*

*~ Superintendent Robert Runcie, Broward County Public Schools*

workers around strategies that specifically address those behaviors. I think what was key for everybody was that we had to engage the students in discussion around those offenses and then look at root causes. We built the PROMISE program around those key pieces. Part of what students receive upon entering, is what's going on with this child? **If we are going to support the child and keep them from reengaging in the same behaviors, we had to deal with the whole child. We had to deal with their challenges, life circumstances, etc.**"

The PROMISE (Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support and Education) program is a key alternative strategy to exclusionary discipline developed in Broward County. The PROMISE program is an initiative designed to address non-violent behaviors that could result in student interaction with juvenile justice as well as offenses related to harassment and bullying. PROMISE works through a short-term on-site intervention and longer-term, regular school progress monitoring model. Offenses that qualify for PROMISE include petty theft, vandalism, trespassing, harassment, fighting, and some drug and alcohol offenses.

### GETTING BUY-IN

One of the challenges districts face in school discipline reform is how to engage building and instructional staff in policy and practice changes. David Watkins, Director of Equity and Academic Achievement speaks to this challenge, "We had to move away from speaking to their craft as educators and speaking to their hearts. What we really needed was to **improve relationships between children and the teachers**, especially those children that are marginalized." When changing policies, it is critical to provide support and resources to staff to implement those changes and to ensure that changes don't engender resentments. Superintendent Runcie offered his advice, "you've got to give the educators and administrators support and **you've got to give them a relief valve**. You can't just change policy." The relief valves in Broward came from increased roles for support staff – social workers, school counselors, family counselors – and from increased training for new and experienced staff on what works.

Broward County didn't just change policy and offer additional supports – these broader goals toward greater equity were an important focus of the new strategic plan. The strategic plan in Broward spoke specifically to eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline, to closing the achievement gap, and to increasing achievement for children of color across the district. Putting these values down on paper and loudly proclaiming to internal and external constituents that this is what the district is going to be about increases buy-in. As constituents see that this effort is grounded in larger goals and is aligned to district resources and strategies now and in the near future, the resistance is diminished.

Ms. Valbrun-Pope speaks to the value of the alignment of the community in assisting Broward's efforts, "This is a community effort involving all of the agencies that touch children in Broward County. At the same time, there's a level of accountability that's coming from the superintendent and the board, from the court system, from children's services council, from all of these places – so everyone's holding each other accountable and holding our actions as adults in the community to the light."

Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) is the sixth largest school district in the nation and the second largest in the state of Florida. BCPS has over 271,000 students and more than 15,000 teachers in 236 schools. BCPS serves a diverse student population, with students representing 208 different countries and 181 different languages.

Demographics:  
Over 40% of BCPS students are black and 33% are Hispanic. 60% of BCPS students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

## OUTCOMES & NEXT STEPS IN BROWARD

*“You don’t need a whole bunch of money. Just stop doing some of the things you’re doing that aren’t working and reallocate the dollars and people that you have towards proven strategies.”*

*~ Superintendent Robert Runcie, Broward County Public Schools*

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*“We’ve really ramped up our interventions and supports We’ve increased our number of social workers. We’ve increased our pool of family counseling, we’ve extended family counseling – from the number of sessions that students can receive to extending it through the summer so that we can continue to support students and families.”*

*~ Executive Director, Michaëlle Valbrun-Pope, Broward County Public Schools*

Broward County’s system-wide commitment to alternatives to OSS and expulsion are paying dividends. Engaging the community partners and sharing accountability has allowed for greater sustainability and coordination. Shared values and a change in processes are changing outcomes.

Broward County Public Schools has seen a 67% reduction in student arrests and behavior referrals are down by more than 30%. OSS rates have dropped by 25%. Data show that about 90% of students that participate in the PROMISE Program (about 2,000 per year) have no discipline offenses after completion of the program. Broward County was 1<sup>st</sup> out of 67 Florida districts in terms of the highest number of student arrests in 2011; today Broward County ranks 60<sup>th</sup> out of 67.

### **The interventions are changing behaviors and the policy changes are getting results.**

The next steps in Broward include continuing to use data to drive decision-making and to continue to link and align interventions, supports, discipline, and success. Broward is continuing critical conversations with building and instructional staff about behavior issues impacting academic success and a lack of academic success impacting behavioral issues. If the data shows that there are correlations between early grade absenteeism, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency, middle school discipline problems, and high-school dropout rates, then we know that a holistic approach is needed to solve these complex problems.

Reforming school discipline is about more than changing codes of conduct and finding alternatives to OSS. Reforming school discipline and school climate are about better serving the needs of the whole child and supporting students and families before, during, and after behavior problems surface.

All of the stakeholders in this system – district staff, principals, teachers, support staff, students, and their families – deserve the tools, resources, and supports to be successful. The challenge that Broward has taken on successfully is how to find cost-effective ways to provide those supports and how to align and strategically coordinate those tools and supports around strategic goals, data, and new programs.

Superintendent Runcie advises superintendents to look outward and find strategies that are working in other districts, “You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. We need to function, in public education in this country as a large community, that’s willing to help share ideas to help all students, no matter whether those children are in our district or in another district. We should all be working to ensure we increase the number of successful children.”