


# SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS



Observing Whole Child and School Culture Strategies in Denver  
Public Schools

Study Conducted by the DU-DPS Research-Practice  
Partnership on School Discipline

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# Searching for Solutions

OBSERVING WHOLE CHILD AND SCHOOL CULTURE STRATEGIES IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This mixed methods study assessed the most common practices implemented in Denver Public Schools related to Whole Child initiatives and school-wide culture. Fifteen observations were conducted in ten focal schools with varying suspension rates and student demographic profiles. These observations were complemented by survey data from 38 schools. Findings include:

- **Behavioral recognitions, reminders, and redirects** were commonly observed in all ten focal schools and widely reported in the survey. The two most frequent practices in this category were reminding students about school rules and redirecting them towards expectations. Less frequently observed and reported were the strategies of reinforcing expectations through positive narration, or rewarding positive behavior with incentives.
- **Relationship building** was a high frequency practice in eight of the focal schools and a majority of survey respondents. Common practices included greeting students, using signs of solidarity, and speaking in students' native languages. Although survey respondents reported using strategies such as calling home and hosting formal family engagement activities, these were rarely witnessed during observations.
- **Social emotional skill building** was observed consistently in half of the focal schools. The most common practices observed, and reported in the survey, were visual displays and explicit instruction related to a school's core values, character traits, learner profiles, or personal success factors. Less common was the use of formal social-emotional learning curriculum.
- **Restorative practices** were commonly observed in just three schools, but reported with more frequency in the survey data. Consistent practices within this category were restorative dialogues and the use of reflection or refocus forms to facilitate restorative conversations. Less frequently observed practices were peace circles and restorative mediations.
- **Punitive and exclusionary practices** were observed with high frequency in three schools. Sending students out of the classroom and the use of in-school suspension were most common. Survey respondents reported utilizing these strategies primarily in response to higher-level behavior incidents.
- **Student support services**, such as check-ins, mental healthcare and case management, were reported by survey participants as a relatively common strategy for supporting positive student behavior. This practice was consistently observed in one focal school.
- **Awareness of racial inequalities and bias**, in the forms of culturally responsive visuals and promotion of racial diversity among staff, was frequently observed in one focal school. This observational finding contrasted with the survey data, in which a majority of schools reported high participation in trainings related to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching.
- **Comparing schools by their suspension rates** revealed that the implementation restorative practices may be a key strategy for preventing exclusionary discipline outcomes and racial disparities.
- **Recommendations** focus on increasing integration and reducing fragmentation across district initiatives that aim to strengthen these practices.

## DU-DPS RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP

This project was conducted as part of a research-practice partnership between the Division of Student Equity and Opportunity in Denver Public Schools and the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Established in the fall of 2012, the purpose of the research-practice partnership is to:

1. Conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices.
2. Collaborate with policy makers, administrators, educators, and local stakeholder groups to identify research questions, interpret results, and disseminate findings.
3. Strengthen and sustain efforts to connect research with local policy reforms and advocacy efforts.

Over the course of this particular study, an interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners met monthly from August 2016 through June 2017 to plan the study, recruit participating schools, collect data, and report study findings.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past four years, DPS and DU have partnered to strengthen the connections between research and practice in the area of school discipline. A theme from our conversations with educators is that suspension rates alone do not provide a complete picture of a school's culture and behavior systems. Stakeholders want district evaluations to incorporate school practices in addition to student outcomes. Similarly, the strategic goals of the Whole Child, Healthy Child Agenda 2020 require the assessment of school-wide social emotional learning approaches that are not currently captured by existing information systems. This Searching for Solutions project responds to the interests of building leaders and district partners in developing new ways to measure school practices. The goal of this study was to identify school-wide strategies and approaches commonly implemented within DPS related to discipline, social-emotional learning, and school culture. This information was used to develop an observational tool, available [online](#), that district partners and school staff could use to easily capture and report school-wide implementation.

## METHODS

With support from district partners, the research team led a mixed methods study involving 150 observations at 10 schools and analysis of a survey completed by staff members at 38 sites.

### Qualitative Data

**Sample.** Observations were conducted at 10 schools between November 2016 and March 2017. Participating schools were selected based on their suspension rates, student demographic composition, and grade-levels served. These schools were intentionally selected to provide contrasting cases; while several schools shared similar grade-levels and demographics composition, the schools differed in terms of their out-of-school suspension rates overall, and for Black students in particular. Suspension rates across the sample ranged from 1% to 22%, while the rate of suspension for Black students ranged from 0% to 35%. Schools, on average, were 57% Latino (ranging from 8%-89%), 20% Black (2%-74%), and 19% White (2%-77%). The sample included three elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. The average percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch was 73% and ranged from 6% to 96%.

**Data collection.** Fifteen observations were conducted at each school using a protocol based on an earlier study conducted by the partnership.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on focus group and interview data from 33 schools, that research found that low-suspending schools were using discipline strategies that fell into the following categories: restorative practices; relationship building; acknowledging race; behavioral reminders, rewards and redirects; social-emotional skill building; student support services; and, punitive or exclusionary approaches. The current study considered the extent to which specific practices within these categories were evident in schools with a wider range of suspension rates that were more representative of the school district as a whole.

In order to develop positive rapport and consistency at the schools, one masters- or doctoral-level research assistant was assigned to collect data at each site. An observation schedule was developed in advance to which the entire research adhered, thereby ensuring diverse, thorough,

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<sup>1</sup> Anyon, Y., Wiley, K., Yang, J., Pauline, M., Grapentine, J., Valladares, G., Bell, L., Rosch, A., Cash, D., Downing, B., Greer, E., Kelty, E., Morgan, L. & Pisciotta, L. (2016). *Spotlight on success: Changing the culture of discipline in Denver Public Schools*. Denver, CO: Office of Social and Emotional Learning, Division of Student Services, Denver Public Schools. Available [online](#).

and comparable data from each school. Each research assistant completed the same number of observations in similar spaces at their site (e.g. classrooms, the main office, hallways, etc.).

**Data analysis.** Research assistants used an observational protocol to guide their write-ups of practices and strategies they witnessed during each visit. Research team meetings were used to examine discrepancies in code application and revise the codebook until there was confidence in a shared understanding across research team members about the observational categories. Then, each research team member created a within-case study or site summary of the school(s) where they conducted their site visits. The purpose of the case studies was to summarize, and provide examples of, the types of practices observed at each school. This information was further condensed into a data display for each school. As a validity check, we provided each school principal with a copy of their school's data display and invited them to provide feedback.

The research team then analyzed the data displays to identify the frequency of particular practices and differences between higher and lower suspending schools. For each school, we identified the top 3-4 categories of practices that were observed most frequently at each school. Then, we tallied the number of schools that had that particular set of practices among those most commonly observed.

To identify practices that may be associated with lower suspension rates (overall and for Black students in particular), we conducted a regression analysis to determine whether a school's suspension rate was higher or lower than would be expected in this district given their school composition (grade-level, percent students of color, percent low-income, and percent with disabilities). We then compared the most prevalent categories of practices across these schools to identify any potential trends that might differentiate schools with higher or lower than expected suspension rates.

## Quantitative Data

**Sample.** A random sample of 70 schools from the entire population of DPS schools was drawn to constitute the survey sample for this study. Thirty eight schools completed the survey (a 54% response rate), but only 32 provided their school name. Of the surveyed schools that provided identifying information, fifteen were elementary, seven were high schools, seven were middle schools, and three had alternative grade configurations (e.g. K-8). Suspension rates across the sample ranged from 0% to 22% (average 5%), while the rate of suspension for Black students ranged from 0% to 35 (average 7%). Schools, on average, were 54% Latino (ranging from 8%-97%), 19% Black (0%-74%), and 20% White (0%-77%). The average percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch was 71% and ranged from 6% to 100%. The sample included six traditional public schools, two innovation schools, and two intensive pathway schools.

**Data collection.** The research team initially contacted the principal of each school to complete the survey electronically, followed by a reminder email from our district partners. All data was entered via the web-based Qualtrics online survey system.

**Data analysis.** Descriptive data was generated using the reports function of Qualtrics.

## DEFINITIONS OF PRACTICE CATEGORIES

### **Behavioral Recognitions, Reminders and Redirects**

This category included such practices as: explicit instruction about how to follow school rules (e.g. lining up correctly); recognizing youth for meeting school expectations through positive narration; rewarding students with “bucks,” points, or other incentives; reminding students to follow rules; and redirecting students towards behavioral expectations through warnings, standard consequences, signals, or “the look.”

### **Relationship Building**

These practices included greeting students; signs or acts of solidarity (e.g. shaking hands, high fives); making inquiries into students’ lives; using students’ native languages; initiating positive contact and communication with students’ family or caregivers; hosting community and family engagement activities (e.g., open houses, fall festivals, etc.); extending empathy; staff sharing information about their own lives/experiences with students; meetings of student clubs or groups; and recognizing student accomplishments or leadership by displaying them visually throughout the building (e.g. art, photos, awards, student exhibitions or showcases).

### **Social Emotional Skill Building**

This category included explicit instruction related to a school’s character traits, core values, or learner profiles; student-developed classroom rules or shared group norms/agreements that are visually displayed; consequences for misbehavior that are tied to the students’ behavior (e.g. student has to help clean up vandalism, trash, or food messes to which they contributed); the provision of a rationale behind a request to correct; and the use of formal social-emotional learning curriculum like Signs of Suicide, Second Step, etc. This category also included whole class, grade-level, or whole-school meetings (often called morning meetings) that give students an opportunity to share celebrations, stories, events, and feelings about themselves, engage in a community-building activity (e.g. team building or get-to-know you games) or recognize students’ accomplishments and strengths that relate to the school’s core values, personal success factors, or character traits.

### **Restorative Practices**

These practices involved the following key components: sharing multiple perspectives on a discipline incident or conflict; identifying who was harmed in the incident; reflecting on and taking a piece of responsibility for causing harm; and shared problem-solving to repair the harm or fix the problem. The format for exploring these issues included one-on-one dialogues or conversations, peace circles in a classroom, formal mediations with a victim and offender, and reentry meetings for students who were suspended from school.

### **Punitive and Exclusionary Practices**

Punitive and exclusionary practices involved the assignment of penalties or consequences that removed students from the classroom. Such practices included sending students out of the classroom (an office discipline referral); in-school suspensions; in-school intervention rooms; detention; Saturday school; or, sending students home (out of school suspension).

### **Student Support Services**

This category included therapeutic practices in response to perceived misbehavior that were not captured in other categories, such as referral to or provision of small-group or individual interventions like check-ins, therapy, mental health care, case management, or health and wellness. The other practice that comprised this category included instances when groups of school staff come together to review behavioral data, identify or adapt interventions; and other support services for students (e.g. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (Rtl), or Student Intervention Team (SIT) meetings).

### **Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias**

Awareness of racial inequalities and bias included practices such as positively using or explicitly referring to culture, equity, bias, or prejudice; professional learning opportunities focused on these topics; intentional outreach to parents of color; examining data for disparities by race; identity-based student groups or student activities; diversity among staff; or, displays of artwork or other visuals that communicate messages about or by people of color.



## FINDINGS

The most frequently observed categories of practices were behavioral recognitions, reminders and redirects, followed by relationship-building, and social-emotional skill building (Table 1). It was less common to observe restorative or punitive practices in participating schools, and very rarely did we see educators acknowledging race or utilizing student support services.

Observational Category	Number of Schools where Category was Observed with High Frequency
Behavioral Recognitions, Reminders, and Redirects	10
Relationship Building	8
Social-Emotional Skill Building	5
Restorative Practices	3
Punitive and Exclusionary Practices	3
Student Support Services	1
Acknowledging Race	1

### Common Practices within Each Category

#### **Behavioral Recognitions, Reminders and Redirects**

Behavioral recognitions, reminders, and redirects related to following school-wide or classroom-based rules were commonly observed practices at all participating schools. The two most frequent practices within this category were reminding students to follow rules or procedures (often reinforced with disincentives or warnings), and redirecting students to comply with expected behaviors. These were also common practices reported in the survey, with 84% of schools reporting that most or all staff members used low-level redirects with students and 81% reporting that most or all staff members gave warnings or standard consequences to correct student behavior.

An excerpt from an observation shows how an elementary school staff member redirected a student by explicitly stating the expected behavior:

**Redirects were given by teachers in the form of directly asking students to correct their behavior. During presentations in one 4<sup>th</sup> grade room, the teacher redirects a student, 'George, sit up, face the board, and be a good audience member. You can do it.'**

At the middle and high school levels, reminders of the discipline process and cautionary statements about ensuing consequences were regularly observed. The following excerpt from a middle school site visit provides an example of this:

**'We have a three step process, if you get a Refocus you're out of here. This is your last warning. You know the expectations; you make a choice every day. You have choices; if I see it one more time you're going to the Refocus room.'**

At the high school level, school staff were also commonly observed redirecting students through disincentives or warnings. The following excerpt from a high school illustrates this:

**Teachers remind students of their behavior contract in hopes of deterring the student from continuing the antisocial behavior. One example of this occurred in the restorative approaches teacher's classroom.... The RA coordinator reminds [the student], 'This will be reflected on your contract if you go down there.' The student comes back in the classroom and they close the door.**

Positive narration, in which adults make concrete and specific statements to reinforce expectations, was also observed, though less frequently than reminders and redirects. This practice was also somewhat less often reported by schools (78%) as a strategy that most or all of their staff members used with students. School staff occasionally gave explicit instruction about how to follow school rules and procedures through modeling and rehearsal. This stands in contrast to the survey, in which 87% of schools had most or all staff members providing students with explicit instruction on how to do routine behaviors. In a previous partnership study, schools

reported using this strategy intensively at the beginning of the school year, which may explain why we observed these practices less often, as our site visits not begin until November. Less often did we observe teachers or other school staff use incentives or rewards to reinforce positive student behavior or recognize students based on their behavior. Similarly, a somewhat smaller proportion of survey respondents (68%) reported that most or all school members utilizing incentives to reward students for following rules.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationship building approaches were among the most commonly observed practices at eight schools. The three most commonly used for relationship building were signs or acts of solidarity, greeting students, and using Spanish with Spanish-speaking students. The following excerpt from a high school visit provides an example of signs or acts of solidarity and shows how jokes, chit-chat, laughing, and talking were evident rapport building practices:

**Every minute [the restorative practice coordinator] is also talking with kids, high-fiving, giving shout-outs, inside jokes, the kids smile and nod and come talk with him for a minute at a time before heading off.**

Greeting students was the second most common practice in this category. The survey results around greeting students were in alignment, with 97% of schools reporting most or all of their staff greet students. For example, in one high school, “Students were welcomed into the building daily by the administration. The principal ended his daily announcements every morning by saying ‘Peace and love.’” At an elementary school, these greetings were combined with inquiries about student lives: “Most of the staff members know students’ names and ask questions such as, ‘How are you? How is your day going? How was your weekend?’ as they pass students in the hallways or office spaces.” Similarly, greeting students and acts of solidarity are commonly seen practiced together. For example, administrators and deans at one high school would stand at the front door and greet students every morning by name, followed by a hug or a high five.

The use of Spanish was the third most common example of relationship building. School staff used Spanish with students and their families. For example, at one high school:

**Staff in the front office, teachers, and school administrators, including the principal, often talked to parents and students in Spanish. During an observation with the RP coordinator, a concerned parent came into the school to discuss that her son was being bullied. The RP coordinator held the entire meeting in Spanish.**

There were several relationship-building strategies we anticipated observing because of prior research, but did not see with regularity: naming students' strengths; inquiries about students' lives; positive calls home; and, family engagement activities. It was unusual to hear staff naming students' positive attributes, though we did see recognitions of students' achievements on display throughout the school buildings. We occasionally observed school staff asking students questions that were more personal in nature, or extending empathy in a way that indicated knowledge of students' different life circumstances. These limited observations were in contrast to the survey, in which a vast majority of schools (87%) reported that most of all of their staff members inquire about students' lives and interests.

Very rarely did we observe school staff initiating positive contact with students' family or caregivers. This may have been a function of the observation schedule, which did not take place during times when teachers might have had a chance to contact parents, such as during planning periods. The survey also revealed that phone calls home were most frequently related to discipline, and schools were more likely to contact home for serious incidents versus low-level misbehavior incidents (86% vs. 73%), with even fewer reporting positive calls home (68%). For parent contact to occur only when incidents are serious suggests that parents might not be included in early stages of the discipline process when they could help mitigate more serious issues developing over time. Finally, it was relatively rare to observe formal community or family engagement activities, which stands in contrast to 79% of survey respondents who reported that they hosted such programming.

### **Social Emotional Skill Building**

Five schools frequently used social emotional skill building practices. The two most commonly observed strategies within this category were the use of visual displays and explicit instruction related to a school's values, character traits, personal success factors, or learner profiles. Displays often defined expectations for school-wide and classroom behavior and were posted in the hallway, classrooms, and the library. For example, at a middle school we observed:

**Character values were expressed through visuals throughout the school. They use the acronym, iRESPECT, which represents their values of integrity, respect, empathy, self-advocate, perseverance, excellence, courage, and teamwork. There were posters in classrooms, the hallways, and the front office which displayed these values on the walls.**

Another school used displays to explain the behavioral expectations related to a character value: “One classroom bulletin board reads, ‘What does respect look, sound, and feel like?’ There are student drawings and writing all over the bulletin board.” This was consistent with survey results where 86% of schools reported using visuals to share school-wide expectations. However, we did not consistently see evidence that students had contributed to these rules or their visual display. Such observations were parallel to the survey, in which only 47% schools reported that students were involved in this process.

Another common form of social emotional skill building was the use of explicit instruction related to a school’s values. This trend paralleled the survey, in which 100% of respondents reported that their teachers were the source for sharing school-wide expectations or character traits with students. Explicit instruction involved staff members providing modeling or opportunities to rehearse expectations. An excerpt from a middle school site visit is illustrative:

**The value “show respect” was the focal point of one community meeting held with the whole school. During this meeting, the principal explained “the school’s goal for the rest of the year is to create respectful communities in our classroom.” The principal and vice principal asked students how they would define respect and to give examples of how to show respect.**

In a middle school, a similar approach was used whereby staff members referenced school values as a means for teaching students their importance:

**In conversation, adults will acknowledge student behavior that reflects the school's values by telling them, 'I appreciate your honesty.' In one instance, an adult referenced the school's core values when asking students to complete a task; 'Let's go ahead and have PRIDE and whether that's our trash or not, we're going to throw it away and keep this classroom clean.'**

Less frequently did we observe classroom-based, grade-level, or school-wide meetings that were focused on team building, celebrating accomplishments, or acknowledging students' strengths (often called morning meetings). In the survey, 74% of schools reported most or all of their classrooms held whole-class meetings. The vast majority of schools (94%) also reported holding whole-school meetings, usually on a monthly basis (39%), but some held them per semester (29%) and a minority held them weekly (26%). We did not see schools using formal social emotional skill building curriculum, though 68% of schools reported using such programs in the survey. These trends suggest there are a meaningful number of schools that do not utilize an organized approach to social emotional skill building. Given the Whole Child, Healthy Child Agenda 2020 goal to provide social emotional supports for schools, the absence of formal skill building curriculum by at least a third of our survey respondents suggests the need to extend support and capacity to further implement this approach.

### **Restorative Practices**

Restorative practices were frequently observed in just three schools. The most common practice was restorative dialogues implemented by discipline staff or restorative practice coordinators. Dialogues were also the most frequent restorative practice utilized by schools who completed the survey; 70% of schools stated most of their staff members engaged in restorative dialogue for low-level discipline incidents. These conversations would take place "on the fly" or as part of a "pre-conference" in which students and staff prepared for a more formal restorative mediation.

Here is a short vignette from a high school observation that illustrates a pre-conference:

**During [a] pre-conference, the Dean and the boy sit in two chairs, across from one another. She asks the boy, “What happened? Who was harmed, and how? How will you make it right with the teacher? What could you have done differently?” They talk back and forth, and the meeting ends by the dean and the student figuring out a time to have a mediation with the other student.**

Another common strategy under the restorative practice category was the use of reflection or intake forms to facilitate restorative conversations. These forms looked different in each school, but typically included key questions which walked students through the restorative process. The following is an example of how one high school implements this process via their “refocus” form:

**The CSO returns to the student doing the refocus and together they read through the form... One of the questions asks ‘Who was being affected by your behavior?’ The student responds by saying ‘I am being affected because I am behind in my work... teachers are affected because they can’t teach... other students are affected by my talking’. The dean agrees and says this can be very distracting. Another question asks, ‘What can I do differently?’ and the student responds with, ‘I’m going to do all of my work.’ At the bottom of the form, the student checks that he would like to apologize to his class and that he is ‘ready to go back and be a rock star.’**

Although the district restorative practice model promotes the use of “peace circles,” they were rarely observed. Yet 73% of schools who participated in the survey reported that their classrooms held these meetings, pointing to a potential contradiction between what staff report and the implementation of such practices. A lower percentage (58%) of schools reported that some or all of their staff engaged in restorative mediation, and this too was less commonly observed in schools, potentially due to their confidential nature. This data points to issues of implementation that may be of concern. DPS has prided itself on being a restorative justice district, however the survey and observations suggest that the implementation of RJ may not be that extensive, at least as a school-wide practice.

### **Punitive and Exclusionary Practices**

Punitive and exclusionary practices were commonly observed in three out of the ten participating schools. Sending students out of the classroom to see an administrator because of perceived

misbehavior was a widely used practice throughout most participating schools, and was also reported in the survey as a practice used in response to both low- (53%) and high-level (76%) infractions. Though ultimately the result was the same, the ways that students were removed from classrooms took different forms. Students were sent out for different reasons, and to different spaces, depending on the school and context of the situation. For example, at one elementary school we observed multiple uses of classroom removal, including when teachers escorted students to the office and left them there for a set amount of time. In another observation, staff members discussed sending students to emotional support staff when there was misbehavior during classroom time, especially when students involved are considered “high-flyers.”

The second most common practice we observed was the use of an in-school intervention/suspension room [ISIR] that provided a dedicated space for students who were sent out by teachers. The following excerpt illustrates the implementation of ISIR at a middle school:

**[ISIR] was used when students were involved in a type of behaviors that warranted being out of the classroom. However, depending on the behavior, the student would not spend the entire day in ISIR, they would have a discussion with the para-professional that ran the room, one of the two deans or the restorative practice coordinator.**

The use of in-school intervention or suspension rooms were less commonly reported by schools who participated in the survey (25%).

Practices within this category that were observed rarely included the use of Saturday school, working lunch, sending students home for the day, out of school suspension, and calling campus security officers or school resource officers as means for addressing student misbehavior in a punitive manner. The latter was also infrequently cited in the survey. Just 13% of schools reported that staff members called campus security officers or school resource officers for high-level offenses.

### **Student Support Services**

Student support services were one of the least commonly observed categories of practices, with high frequency in just one participating school. Three practices were often observed within this broader observational category: individual check-ins, team meetings, and small group interventions. Student check-ins were typically used by school support staff as a means for touching base with students or families regarding any concerns, issues, or simply as a means for



building communication pathways and strengthening rapport. An example of a student check-in is provided in the following excerpt from a high school:

**A father came in to talk with the RP coordinators, who pulled the student from class to come participate in a meeting. They were meeting because the student's grades had been slipping and she was skipping classes. She wasn't being punished, they just were checking in to see what was going on.**

Team meetings among staff members were typically utilized as an opportunity for staff members to discuss student concerns, behavioral data, and resources available to support the needs of particular students. For example, at a middle school, a typical meeting involved,

**There are about eight adults in the room. The restorative justice coordinator, a school psychologist, and classroom teachers. One of the teachers was a facilitator for the process, and the Dean took notes, but also kept people moving through the agenda. The meeting was run using a spreadsheet tracker in Google docs that had sections where teachers described the student's strengths, concerns they had about the student, interventions they planned to use, goals, and who would do progress monitoring. The teachers discussed each section, and the facilitator took notes into the document. During the meeting, the group used as a guideline a packet that had descriptions of "functional behaviors." Each page lists a "function" that could underlie what a student is seeking by exhibiting certain behaviors.**

The practice of small groups involved school staff members meeting with a limited number of students to discuss social emotional concerns and build various life skills with them. The following is an excerpt that demonstrates how small groups were practiced within an elementary school:

**[The social worker] runs social emotional support groups, and in these groups students focus on skills that can lead to conflict prevention. There are about five groups, and they are run weekly. In the group I observed, they discussed "the power of words" and discussed instances where they could use positive words to prevent conflict.**

Drawing on the survey data, 65% of schools reported that most or all staff referred students to student support providers in response to low-level behaviors and 75% reported utilizing these supports with higher-level incidents. However, rarely were students observed being assigned to mental and social supports in response to misbehavior. When this did take place, it was usually in schools with in-school intervention rooms where support staff would be available to meet with misbehaving students during class time. The limited observational evidence on the use of support services suggests missed opportunities for connecting students to services.

Another practice observed in just a few school settings was the creation of student-specific interventions, like behavior report cards. This practice was also reported with less frequency than others in the survey; only 44% reported that most or all of their staff created tailored interventions following a higher-level incident, and just 31% documented effectiveness of these interventions. This data may mean that only specialized staff members are involved in the creation and documentation of student-specific interventions, or that this practice is not well utilized in schools.

### **Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias**

Practices that demonstrated an awareness of racial inequalities and bias were commonly observed in only one school. The two most common approaches we observed were displays of artwork representing diverse people and promotion of racial diversity among school staff members. At one school, such displays included visuals which referenced the importance of diversity and awareness, as well as student created artwork in honor of important people of color. An example follows in this excerpt from an observation:

**The school showcased posters all throughout the school referencing the election that said, 'Black Lives Matter here,' 'Latinos are not murderers and rapists,' and 'LGBTQ Lives Matter.' There were quotes throughout the school by Nelson Mandela and Huey Newton, along with student-made posters in the hallway acknowledging Black Lives Matter and that they believe every student deserved to be there.**

The second most common practice observed was the promotion of racial diversity among school staff members. An example of observed diversity among staff is demonstrated in this excerpt from a middle school, "There were several school leaders, teachers, and support staff of color. Specifically, a Dean, a Principal, and a restorative practice coordinator, several teachers, as well as front office staff and school resource officers."

Rarely did we observe teachers referring to equity or diversity in their lessons, during professional development sessions, or while looking at data. However, we occasionally heard administrators, deans, or RP coordinators acknowledge the impact of racial dynamics between students and staff members. It was also infrequent to see any explicit outreach to families of particular racial backgrounds or student activities that were tailored to a particular racial group. Though it was rarely observed, some schools implemented classroom activities related to racial equity, offered Know Your Rights trainings to families, and had celebrations or displays representing topics related to culture and race.

The limited observations of practices in this category is surprising in light of the survey results, which revealed that trainings related to culturally responsive teaching (63%), equity and inclusion (60%), and implicit bias (51%) had been completed by most or all staff members at participating schools. It may be necessary to revisit this content throughout the year in the form of “booster sessions” and ongoing coaching, or to integrate it into other professional learning opportunities, in order to increase these practices in schools.

### Comparing Schools by Suspension Rates

In all types of schools, the most commonly observed practices were behavioral reminders and redirects and relationship building (Table 2). Similarly, punitive practices were observed across schools at about the same rate. In other words, these three practices did not differentiate schools with higher or lower than expected suspension rates.

However, schools with lower than expected suspension rates and racial discipline gaps utilized restorative practices and student support services among their most commonly observed practices. Stated differently, student support services and restorative practices were only observed in schools with lower than expected suspension rates.

Table 2. Most Common Categories of Practices in Participating Schools, Organized by Suspension Rate (overall and for Black students in particular) (n=9)<sup>2</sup>

	Schools with Higher than Expected Suspension Rates (n=3 schools)	School with Expected Suspension Rate (n=1 school)	Schools with Lower than Expected Suspension Rates (n=5 schools)
Behavioral R's	3/3	1/1	5/5
Relationship building	3/3	1/1	4/5
Social-emotional skills	1/3	1/1	2/5
Restorative practices	0/3	0/1	2/5
Punitive & exclusionary	1/3	0/1	2/5
Student supports	0/3	0/1	1/5
Acknowledging race	1/3	0/1	0/5

## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, the sample was limited to ten schools. We intentionally over-sampled schools serving students of color and low income families, but the sample was not perfectly representative of the school district. Second, although observers visited schools 15 times across different school spaces, they did so for only an hour at a time, which means it was unlikely they captured the full range of practices that existed on a particular campus. Finally, our research strategy precluded us from being able to consistently identify the type of staff member (e.g. teachers or administrators) who implemented the practices described in this report.

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<sup>2</sup> One schools were not included in this analysis because it was a new school and did not yet have suspension data.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Study findings suggest that schools are successfully implementing relationship building and behavior reminders and redirects as school-wide practices. Fewer schools appeared to implement social-emotional skill building and restorative practices at the universal level for all students. It was even less common to observe student support services or culturally responsive approaches that acknowledged racial equity issues. We suspect that some of these practices were implemented with smaller groups of students as targeted interventions (at the Tier II or III level using an MTSS framework). However, to ensure that these approaches are implemented school-wide, where they will be most effective in promoting a positive school culture and climate, the district should consider the following recommendations:

- **Centrally shift training practices so that district-led initiatives are integrated rather than fragmented.** For example, content on building awareness of racial inequities and bias could be woven into trainings on restorative practices, with the aim of reducing racial disproportionality in suspensions. Conversations about different categories of practices need to happen across trainings in order to move away from fragmentation toward integration.
- **Provide additional coaching to schools to help them integrate the principles of culturally responsive education and social-emotional skill building into the core instructional curricula** used by schools (e.g. literacy and math). Increase capacity of district staff to offer ongoing coaching around implementation.
- **Reconceptualize restorative practices and student support services as a universal interventions rather than alternatives to suspension.** Rebrand restorative practices coordinators and providers of therapeutic supports as school-wide, rather than targeted, interventionists or disciplinarians. Encourage whole schools to participate in district trainings rather than individuals in specialized roles.
- **Push restorative practices coordinators and support service professionals into classrooms,** where they can working alongside teachers to support students, rather than pulling out students for targeted interventions. Restorative practices coordinators are needed to support the implementation of peace circles and address low-level conflicts without students missing instructional time. Similarly, support service providers can help de-escalate and identify the root causes of misbehavior in classrooms.
- **Embed discussions of restorative practices, social-emotional skill building, and collaborating with student support providers in the LEAP Teacher Growth and Performance system.** Particularly relevant domains include the “learning environment” and “professionalism,” which includes indicators like effective classroom management, positive classroom culture and climate, essential knowledge of students and use of data, and effective collaboration and engagement. Use the Whole Child Observation tool, available [online](#), to complement data collected for LEAD evaluations and School Improvement Grants.

- **Leverage existing initiatives to pilot these recommendations and generate tools that can be disseminated more broadly.** For example, the district’s Expelled and At-Risk Student Services (EARSS) grant could model how school-wide restorative practices and integrated student support services in a small cohort of schools. Similarly, The SEL Initiative funded by the Wallace Foundation could demonstrate how social emotional learning approaches can be implemented school-wide to promote positive school culture and climate. Finally, Mill levy investments could be used to push in services into classrooms or integrate typically fragmented initiatives.