

# 5

## THE EVOLUTION OF A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP ON EQUITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

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Studies of school disciplinary practices have revealed racial disparities in exclusionary outcomes for more than 50 years. Black, Latino, and Native American youth—particularly young Black men—are significantly more likely than students of other backgrounds to be referred to school administrators for disciplining and to receive out-of-school suspension or expulsion as punishment (Skiba, Mediratta, & Rausch, 2016). These exclusionary discipline sanctions often have adverse implications for students' academic and life trajectories, pushing them out of school and into the criminal justice system (Skiba et al., 2016). Although this issue has caught the attention of national media outlets and federal agencies in recent years (e.g., Lhamon & Samuels, 2014), only a small number of districts have voluntarily responded to the problem of racial discipline gaps with robust policy reforms (The White House, 2016).

Denver Public Schools (DPS), the largest urban school district in Colorado, stands as an exception to these national trends. In response to a multi-year educational justice campaign led by community and youth organizers from *Padres & Jóvenes Unidos* (Padres), the Denver board of education passed a major discipline policy reform in 2008. The goal of the new policy was to reduce suspensions and expulsions, eliminate racial disparities, and increase the use of approaches such as restorative practices and therapeutic interventions in response to rule-breaking behavior.

Three years later, *Padres* released an accountability report evaluating the impact of discipline policy reforms in Denver (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, 2011). It recognized the district's success in sustaining reductions in suspension and expulsion rates for students of all backgrounds, but it also highlighted the persistence of racial discipline gaps as an ongoing problem. In closing, the report called on DPS to increase resources that would support stronger implementation

of nonpunitive and nonexclusionary interventions, particularly in schools with high suspension rates.

Around the same time, broad agreement was emerging across regional and local stakeholder groups about the need to disaggregate and analyze school discipline data to monitor reform implementation and improve equity. The passage of Colorado Senate Bill 12-046 in 2012, known as the Smart School Discipline Law, also spurred by Padres organizing, signaled statewide support of efforts to document and disrupt discipline disparities. At the federal level, several initiatives were encouraging educators to use culturally responsive and restorative practices to mitigate racial disparities in exclusionary outcomes (e.g., United States Department of Education, 2011).

As many of these processes were getting under way, the lead author joined the faculty at the Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) at the University of Denver (DU). With a background in university-community partnerships (Anyon & Fernández, 2007) and racial equity in education (e.g., Anyon, 2009), she pursued an opportunity with faculty colleagues to develop a research-practice partnership (RPP) with DPS. Simultaneously, she was also building relationships with Padres because of her admiration of their youth-led campaigns to end the school-to-prison pipeline and her background in facilitating youth voice programs. After separate relationship-building meetings with each stakeholder group, it was clear that there was an interest in locally relevant research using the district's administrative datasets. The work moved forward in part because the research team members were perceived as having the personal values, academic expertise, and professional experiences that were credible to both central office administrators and community organizers.

With initial interest secured from key players, an RPP between the Division of Student Equity and Opportunity at DPS and GSSW at DU was established in the fall of 2012. Guided by interdisciplinary models for bridging the gap between research and practice through iterative and nonlinear inquiry, dissemination, and implementation cycles (e.g., Wandersman et al., 2008), the purpose of the RPP was as follows:

1. Conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices.
2. Collaborate with policymakers, administrators, educators, and other 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.

### **Research-Practice Partnership Design**

In Denver, as in other cities around the country, there is vast disagreement about the root causes of educational inequities such as school discipline disparities. Yet,

few would contend with the statement that these inequities are the result of complex interactions between individuals and institutions over hundreds of years. Such deeply rooted problems have not been solved through quick or narrowly focused interventions or fragmented initiatives led by different research, practice, and advocacy organizations. Our RPP was therefore grounded in a shared belief that multi-year reforms reflecting the expertise of educators, students and their families, and community members and researchers have great potential to generate the knowledge, capacity, and motivation necessary to reduce disparities (Skiba et al., 2016). We felt scholars needed to understand how practitioners, administrators, and advocates make sense of problems of educational equity in order to generate information that has the potential to shift attitudes and beliefs that are barriers to change. Without this type of cross-sector collaboration, it seemed unlikely that researchers would adequately be able to *see* the relevant factors that shape racially disparate outcomes in schools or that evidence-based recommendations would actually be taken up in local educational systems.

Indeed, the literatures on RPPs, research use in school district policymaking, and prevention science frameworks for dissemination and implementation suggest these initiatives typically address the knowledge and beliefs of stakeholder groups at multiple stages through facilitated data inquiry (see, e.g., Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Wandersman et al., 2008). Our RPP was designed to create opportunities to identify local explanatory frameworks for discipline disparities and understand how they sustained, or minimized, racial injustice in schools. We aimed to ensure that interventions designed to reduce disparities would be understood as compatible with—and responsive to—local norms, needs, and historical contexts.

The blueprint of our RPP also reflected consensus from studies in this area that social ties and trust are critical resources in successful efforts to bridge research and practice (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Wandersman et al., 2008). We enlisted a local advocacy group, building-based educators, and central office administrators to engage in an iterative research process that involved explicit relationship-building activities, evolving research questions, and changing sources of data. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups also reflects evidence that alignment between policy efforts at multiple levels supports data-driven decision-making in schools and districts (Honig & Coburn, 2008). As a result, the evolution of our long-term RPP was equity oriented and community engaged from the start.

### **The Evolution of a Long-Term Partnership on Equity in School Discipline**

With this literature in mind, it is important to note that before our RPP began, several threshold conditions were in place that ultimately helped sustain the partnership and its impact over time. First, there was an existing venue for professional learning through which research findings could be communicated to practitioners.

Second, there was strong support among DPS stakeholders, influenced by local, regional, and federal policy initiatives, to use data in discipline decision-making. Finally, DPS partners had very clear and specific questions they wanted to answer, and DU researchers had the methodological skills, content knowledge, and personal interest in these priority topics. These conditions were ripe for an RPP that could engage in significant and focused work to address racial disparities in discipline practices.

We also want to highlight again that our partnership's inquiry and action cycle has been an iterative and nonlinear process that has involved defining a problem of interest, examining related risk and protective factors, assessing implementation conditions for promising interventions, translating research findings for practitioner audiences, and leveraging results to change attitudes and build capacity for equity-oriented practices. This process is presented in the following sections as a discrete set of phases, but in fact, they were overlapping and had more breadth than what is described here.

### ***Phase 1: Address Beliefs and Assumptions About School Discipline***

#### *Addressing Local Narratives About the Problem of Practice Through Facilitated Data Inquiry*

Initial meetings between university and district partners included three central office administrators occupying director-, manager-, and coordinator-level roles in the Division of Student Equity and Opportunity. Two were trained as psychologists, and the other had a background in teaching and school administration. Together, these individuals were responsible for developing policy and data systems related to school discipline, allocating division resources to schools, and designing professional development opportunities for building-based staff. The initial research team included one junior, senior, and clinical faculty member, supported by a doctoral student, who collectively had expertise in mixed methods research, school-based prevention and intervention programs, and racial disparities in education.

Early conversations among the RPP team focused on understanding the district's research questions and the data necessary to answer them. Two working hypotheses were defined: (1) Black and Latino students' increased likelihood of suspension would not be fully explained by poverty, the nature of their offenses, or disability, and (2) students who receive therapeutic or restorative interventions would be less likely to be suspended from school after accounting for other contributing factors such as the type and number of their discipline incidents.

The topics were selected because they addressed competing ideas held by practitioners and administrators in the district about the root causes of discipline disparities. Many school-based and central office staff members believed that racial

disparities in suspension and expulsion were actually reflections of racial differences in behavior, eligibility for special education, or free or reduced-price lunch status. This dominant narrative was captured in conversations about the “bad kids” who ruin the learning environment for a majority of students. Others were skeptical that the alternative discipline approaches encouraged by the new discipline reform policy had much worth. Yet, our district partners were convinced by public reports, particularly Losen and Gillespie’s (2012) report, that both sets of beliefs were unfounded. Our initial research agenda combined these two hypotheses by aiming to identify the key risk and protective factors for exclusionary discipline outcomes that persisted when controlling for confounds such as poverty, disability status, and type of discipline incident.

With our questions clearly defined, the university research team wrote applications to the review boards of the district and university for approval to access identifiable student data. While the requests were being processed, the lead author participated in a variety of discipline policy reform activities, such as community, school, and parent forums, in order to understand how the issue played out in local contexts. These meetings illustrated that competing explanatory frameworks for the problem of racial discipline gaps existed beyond district walls. In contrast to narratives expressed by some educators, parents and community members usually pointed to race as the determining factor in discipline decisions. These stakeholders also found suspension to be an unnecessarily punitive response to what were perceived as minor infractions by students. Almost unanimously, parent and community representatives argued that restorative and therapeutic interventions should be used in lieu of exclusionary approaches like suspension or expulsion.

These tensions among different stakeholder groups generated greater resolve among the RPP team to directly address these implicit hypotheses and spend a fair amount of time disseminating conclusive results before moving on to other topics. Moreover, because of the contentious nature of the problem of practice, the researchers agreed to a confidentiality agreement that allowed the district to ultimately decide if, when, and with whom research findings would be shared. (Of note, in the five years that the partnership has existed, the RPP team has only once been in disagreement about the audience for study results). The RPP team also created a formal authorship agreement that outlined the types of contributions (including partnership meetings where research questions and methods were collaboratively determined) that made one eligible for authorship and how author order would be determined. These documents served the function of building trust by cultivating a sense that all types of expertise would be valued in the products that came out of the partnership. They also provided assurances that the district would not be embarrassed unnecessarily and that the partnership would not be endangered, although it was also understood that professional codes of ethics would supersede any of these interests.

Once the lead investigator received the data, we began meeting regularly to conduct validity checks by reviewing descriptive data in order to surface substantial

cleaning, coding, and/or data errors. This work was fairly time-intensive and required creative problem solving on both sides before all were confident that the final dataset was accurate. Although this took several months, these meetings were essential for building relationships between members of the partnership team and for assuring district partners that our findings would be credible. Given the degree to which there were competing narratives about a relatively controversial problem of practice, the district team was understandably concerned about potential errors, such as duplicative counts of disciplined students or incorrectly coded office disciplinary referral reasons. For example, due to intercorrelations among some study variables (e.g., race and other student demographics or referral reasons and suspension outcomes), a coding error could meaningfully impact study findings about the salience of race in discipline decision-making and the promise of alternatives.

At this stage, we were also worried that our analyses might not provide decisive evidence about our hypotheses of interest. Mixed findings—for example, in which race might be a large predictor of discipline outcomes but not statistically significant—would make it challenging to communicate results to stakeholders. In other words, if trends went in a clear direction, but only due to chance (statistically speaking), the ability to accurately interpret findings would require more technical knowledge of mathematical probability, leading to more complexity in joint meaning-making. Fortunately, findings were conclusive, and we jointly decided as an RPP to release the results in a report (Anyon et al., 2013) that was a public-facing document relying on language and visuals that could be used by community and district stakeholders. Additionally, we further explored the following findings in a peer-reviewed academic journal article (Anyon, Jenson, et al., 2014):

- Clinically meaningful and statistically significant racial disparities in office disciplinary referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and referrals to law enforcement persisted across all four years of data, even after accounting for student characteristics such as disability, family income, and discipline offense type, along with school demographic composition. Specifically, Black students experienced greater risk than their White peers for every type of exclusionary discipline outcome, but this pattern was less consistent for Latino youth.
- The influence of race decreased as students moved through the discipline process: Student racial background had the strongest effect on office disciplinary referrals but was not a statistically significant predictor of expulsion decisions.
- Racial disparities in out-of-school suspension across the district worsened over the years, which primarily reflected larger declines in suspensions among White students compared to students of color. Disparities were especially pronounced in elementary and middle schools. In contrast, suspension gaps in high schools decreased over time and were not statistically significant in the final year of the analysis.

- Students who participated in restorative interventions (RIs) or were assigned in-school suspensions were at lower risk for out-of-school suspension. However, students who received behavior contracts (in which adults identify the root causes of a student's discipline incidents and create action steps) as a consequence for office referrals were at greater risk of out-of-school suspension.

### *Guiding Sense-Making and the Search for Solutions*

With compelling findings in hand, we discussed the best strategies for disseminating key results among practitioners. The partnership team worked together to share findings through presentations at district-level discipline team meetings and the interdepartmental “priority” gatherings. Even though the district already had a stated vision for racial equity, validating it with research that also challenged backroom conversations allowed central office administrators to accelerate their commitment to discipline reforms, as reflected in conversations during senior leadership team meetings.

In order to directly address educators' beliefs about the salience of racial disparities and the promise of alternative approaches to discipline, research partners presented study findings at the district-led monthly trainings for discipline building leaders, then facilitated a conversation about their relevance to, and implications for, practice. To enhance the credibility and utility of study findings with educators, GSSW faculty continued to work with the district facilitator for the rest of the school year to develop and implement activities related to themes from that initial discussion: developing upstream interventions, understanding classroom-based restorative practices, teaching code switching strategies, and building partnerships with mental health and youth development organizations. Ongoing and direct contact with the partnership team increased the relevance of our research by allowing building-based practitioners to have their unique questions or concerns about our findings answered immediately. These activities also served to strengthen relationships that proved to be useful in terms of uptake of recommendations and future participation in our RPP studies.

Participants reported that this deep dive into the data helped them understand the richness of why racial discipline gaps exist and the need to look for alternatives to suspension, providing a stronger motivating rationale for district reforms.

### *Supporting Community Engagement with Key Findings*

Research findings also served as starting point for conversations with Padres about how the partnership's work could add value to its advocacy and accountability efforts. The organization deeply engaged in community advocacy and mobilization to support district-wide and statewide school discipline reform. Transparency with discipline data was a defining feature of Padres' reform agenda, and study results supported its claims about racial disparities and the need to increase

the implementation of restorative practices. These early discussions were promising enough that Padres agreed to co-sponsor an event to draw the attention of educators, parents, and community members to key research findings and the issue of discipline disparities. A nationally known scholar was selected for a one-day consultation and public lecture. His itinerary involved meetings with central office staff, senior district leaders, building-based educators from a network of middle schools, organizers from Padres, and the DU-DPS partnership team, followed by a free talk and reception at DU. The Division of Student Equity and Opportunity covered his consulting fees, GSSW provided event space and food, and Padres publicized the lecture and mobilized its members to attend. Over 300 people participated in the events of the day. Several invited members from the local teachers' union, Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), who had created a working group to document problems with school discipline reforms, also attended.

Afterward, GSSW faculty members invited representatives from DPS, Padres, and DCTA to participate in an impromptu debrief of the day's events. There was broad, if tentative, agreement that a variety of stakeholders were engaged during the visit and many were exposed to evidence that challenged their beliefs about discipline. At the same time, the events highlighted successes in Denver and connected local reforms to national initiatives, effectively conveying a message to participants that their work had value locally and beyond. The success of the visit was also a sign that collaboration between district, community, and university leaders could add value to each organization's mission. Historically, relationships between the district, Padres, and DCTA had been strained and characterized by conflict, with tensions fueled by perceptions of competing agendas. In contrast, GSSW faculty were seen as neutral conveners and credible experts. Building on the positive energy and momentum of the events, representatives from each organization agreed to meet one month later to identify additional opportunities for collaboration.

## ***Phase 2: Assess Intervention Impact and Implementation Status***

### ***Building a Stronger Evidence Base for Restorative Practices Through Implementation and Outcome Analyses***

At this stage of the RPP, we now had some interest and buy-in to the problem of racial disparities and the potential solution of RIs. We wanted to pivot to a focus on equitable and scalable strategies that educators and community members could use to address the issues highlighted in our first set of analyses. Our research therefore aimed to generate stronger evidence about the impact of RIs and identify how often, and with whom, they were being used in the district. Analyses, shared in a second annual report (Anyon, Yang, et al., 2014) and published in



an academic journal (Anyon, Gregory, et al., 2016), revealed the following key findings:

- The use of restorative practices in DPS schools steadily increased after the passage of the district's reform policies in 2008, even though the policy included no new funding for school sites. That year, just 3% of disciplined students in the district participated in RIs, a rate that increased to 25% by the 2014–2015 school year. However, there was great variability in implementation between schools; the percentage of students who received RIs ranged from 0% to more than 87%, with an average rate of 18%.
- In statistical models that accounted for confounding variables, students who were Black or Latino were *more* likely than their peers to receive an RI.
- Longitudinal analyses indicated that disciplined students who received an RI in the fall semester were much less likely to have another office discipline referral or be suspended in the spring semester. This negative association between first-semester participation in an RI and second-semester discipline incidents was stronger in schools that used the approach more often. To illustrate: In a school with an average implementation rate, a disciplined student who did not participate in an RI in the first semester had a 72% chance of returning to the discipline system. Disciplined students who received an RI at a school with a higher implementation rate had only an 18% chance.
- Unfortunately, these practices did not seem to translate into reduced suspension gaps. Black students' odds of suspension compared to their White peers remained essentially unchanged after accounting for student participation in RIs and their use schoolwide.

### *Shifts in Policy and Practice to Encourage Restorative Interventions*

In response to the finding that RIs had positive results in reducing students' likelihood of entering the discipline system or being suspended from schools, district leaders decided that schools would be allowed to use funds from their mental health expansion grants to pay for positions specializing in restorative practices. (This funding stream was previously limited to services provided by psychologists and social workers.) These grants were allocated to schools with the highest needs, operationalized using student demographic characteristics. Around this time, district partners also reworked the discipline "ladder" and "matrix" so that restorative practices were explicitly named at each level of offense and stage of intervention. Finally, to support increased implementation, the district made it easier for whole staff teams to participate in trainings on restorative practices by offering them during new teacher induction training and making them available during staff meetings or professional development days on-site, in addition to existing district-level offerings in a centralized location.

### *Expanding Community Engagement and Formalizing the Involvement of Multiple Stakeholder Groups*

The university research team began holding meetings with Padres, DPS, and DCTA in February 2014. After several sessions, it became clear that although each organization had different priorities, they actually shared several interests: (1) additional partnership research on the implementation and impact of restorative practices; (2) ongoing opportunities for students, parents, and teachers to have a voice in setting the partnerships' research agenda; (3) training for school leaders and staff members on the requirements of the reformed discipline policy and restorative practices; and (4) additional human and financial capital for highly impacted schools.

The group committed to meeting on a monthly basis to work toward these collective objectives through grant-writing, advocacy, and data analysis. We called this group the Denver Collaborative on Racial Disparities in School Discipline (the Collaborative) and viewed it as an informal advisory board to the partnership. The primary purposes of the group were to further strengthen relationships between DU, Padres, DCTA, and the district; generate research questions of interest to all parties; and engage in collective interpretation of partnership study findings. The research team designed these meetings to be a space to build trust and shared responsibility across these organizations, thereby strengthening the social ties that could facilitate the incorporation of research findings into leaders' decisions. Since the data also seemed to indicate that racial discipline gaps were not being reduced, the partnership team selected a second scholar with expertise in culturally responsive practices to visit Denver, meet with stakeholders, and deliver a public lecture. DCTA—along with Padres, GSSW, other departments and initiatives at DU, and DPS—also co-sponsored the event this time, leading to more participation among teachers. There was greater turnout at these events than at the first scholar's visit, which helped sustain participation in the Collaborative.

### ***Phase 3: Identify Conditions and Strategies That Strengthen Promising Practices***

#### *Introducing Qualitative Inquiry Into the Research to Increase Its Trustworthiness to Stakeholders*

With evidence that RIs protected students from reentering the discipline system and being suspended and were being delivered to students with the highest needs but had been implemented unevenly across schools, the Collaborative became interested in the conditions that supported high-quality, widespread implementation of restorative practices and other allied nonpunitive and nonexclusionary approaches to addressing misbehavior. However, using only quantitative administrative data sources, we were unable to identify many school-level factors that were

associated with increased rates of RI implementation, suggesting the need for original data collection. The partners therefore decided to pursue two new qualitative studies, involving interviews and focus groups, to document strategies employed at schools that had low suspension rates or at schools that had been identified by multiple stakeholders as exemplary models of schoolwide restorative practices.

The aims of these two studies were parallel: to identify promising practices from successful schools so that these strategies could be quantified and disseminated to practitioners throughout the district. Our initial focus on studying schools that had met district goals and highlighting “what works” was strategic; we wanted to generate goodwill and social capital that could be leveraged to propose a more rigorous experimental study of restorative practices. Indeed, school leaders were enthusiastic about sharing what worked in their schools and eagerly welcomed the chance to share their strategies for success. The positive focus of this phase of our work, on successful practices in schools, also strengthened the resolve of Collaborative members who work in policy environments where, typically, the emphasis is on what schools are doing wrong.

Together, these studies identified the following key factors that strengthen schoolwide delivery of restorative practices and allied approaches:

- Inclusive and tiered protocols for responding to misbehavior that start with universal classroom-based strategies such as co-constructing and modeling expectations or affective statements; then connect consistently misbehaving students to additional supports through modalities such as peace circles, mediation, or counseling; and, finally, rely on punitive and exclusionary discipline only as a last resort.
- Full-time, site-based coordinators who specialize in restorative practices, school culture building, and/or social-emotional learning.
- Universal professional learning, training, and coaching that strengthen staff members’ awareness of restorative practices, classroom management, racial inequalities, and implicit bias.
- Emphasis on relationship building between students and all school adults through strategies such as home visits, advisory periods, greetings, and classroom-based, grade-level, or schoolwide morning meetings.
- High ratio of support service providers to students, including social workers, psychologists, counselors, youth development workers, and family liaisons.
- District resources such as policy frameworks that encourage the use of therapeutic and RIs in response to perceived misbehavior, consultations with central office coordinators of school discipline and restorative practices, and the provision of professional development units on restorative practices, equity, and culturally responsive instruction.

Results from each study were described in two public reports (Anyon, 2016; Anyon, Wiley, et al., 2016) and a manuscript currently in press (Wiley et al., in press). Building upon these findings, the partnership team is currently leading a

study involving qualitative participant observations at a smaller number of schools. We aim to synthesize findings from each phase of our partnership to develop a user-friendly tool that practitioners and researchers can use to assess readiness and implementation quality of the interconnected schoolwide approaches most utilized in the district.

### *Expanding Resources for Restorative Practices in the District*

In addition to providing more support for ongoing strategies such as school-based professional development on restorative practices, phase 3 partnership research supported several new policies and practices. First, findings were incorporated into trainings of social workers and psychologists. Results were also integrated into electronic training modules on school discipline for new discipline building leaders. In 2016, the district secured \$15 million through a local mill levy for social-emotional learning and restorative practice coordinators, among other support services highlighted in the Spotlight on Success report. Most recently, the district was awarded an Expelled and At-Risk Student Services grant from the Colorado Department of Education to strengthen and expand restorative practices in DPS schools, for which the lead author serves as a consultant.

### *Community Engagement in Efforts to Secure More Resources for the Partnership*

The Collaborative worked together to write several federal grant proposals that would strengthen the RPP and support expansion of restorative practices district-wide. Although the proposals were not funded, they provided the conceptual foundation for what is now known as the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, which includes DPS, Padres, DCTA, the National Education Association, and the Advancement Project. GSSW faculty and students serve as the partnership's evaluation team as part of the broader partnership research agenda. The mission of this coalition of racial justice, education, labor, and community groups is to ensure widespread and high-quality implementation of restorative practices in Denver and beyond through the creation of an implementation guide for schools, a national visitation program, and a local school mentoring initiative. This initiative involves three schools in Denver with a long-standing history of being restorative that are also committed to addressing issues of equity in education (these schools constituted the sample for the Anyon 2016 report) mentoring three other sites that want to strengthen their implementation of the approach.

## **Discussion: Lessons and Tensions**

Like other place-based partnerships, the RPP in Denver aimed to be mutually beneficial to both researchers and practitioners (Coburn et al., 2013). Three additional factors uniquely contributed to the sustainability and impact of our work:

luck, the characteristics of collaborators who represented diverse interest groups, and the mixed blessing of having only internal funding.

### ***Reciprocity***

The partnership was mutualistic and reciprocally beneficial for all parties involved. On the district and community side, working with a university partner granted legitimacy to advocates' and central office administrators' efforts with building-based educators. Researchers provided a voice for ideas that were not always taken seriously when espoused by district officials or Padres organizers (echoing a partner's belief that "you can't be a prophet in your own land"). Having information available to complicate and challenge the myths that were persisting in the district around student misbehavior, alternatives to suspension, and the potential for school improvement proved to be powerful. Surprisingly for the research team, the ability to refer to peer-reviewed articles that were specific to the district was especially useful for maximizing the credibility of some district initiatives. Moreover, our RPP was able to acknowledge strengths and accomplishments, in addition to challenges or problems, thus rejuvenating—and showing respect for—practitioners who are regularly asked to change their behavior. In several ways, the evidence we gathered provided credibility for good practices rather than just undermining negative approaches, as is often the case when studying equity issues.

The research partners benefited in that they gained access to large administrative datasets that are favored by many peer-reviewed journals, with variables that were of theoretical and empirical relevance to the field. (However, junior faculty on the team had to be willing to compromise publication timelines on a tenure clock—the time from acceptance of an assistant professorship to the tenure application—and a more easily fundable research agenda for the sake of meeting the needs of the RPP. Both were especially difficult to justify without external resources.) The partnership was also fertile training ground for Ph.D. students in conducting community-engaged research, from generating strategies for diplomacy when working with multiple stakeholder groups to addressing concerns about practitioner-friendly language in public dissemination of research methods and findings. Such a focus allowed students who did not necessarily share substantive areas of interest with the lead faculty member to remain interested and invested at different stages of the partnership. Finally, the involvement of master's level students allowed them to see how research can inform policies and practices that may improve the lives of students throughout the school district, particularly in the context of a turbulent political landscape. Students reported that this experience was more fulfilling than typical research assistantships because they learned how scholarship can be a tool for promoting social justice, which ultimately led several students from underrepresented groups to consider research careers for the first time.

### ***Kismet***

Introductions between partnership team members were essentially serendipitous and generally the result of existing personal relationships. The first introduction was facilitated by a new clinical faculty member from GSSW who had previously worked in DPS, attended a lecture by the lead author, and identified overlapping research interests. The partnership also happened to be addressing discipline gaps during a time (2012–2017) when related issues of racial profiling and police brutality were taking center stage in national conversations about racial equity, and thus resonated with many of us at an emotional level as well as intellectual and programmatic levels.

### ***Characteristics of Collaborators***

Partnership team members shared several key attributes, including a common sense of urgency, passion, and commitment to eliminating racial disparities in school discipline, that may help explain the emerging successes of the partnership. These characteristics supported an unusual willingness to stretch outside of traditional roles, take risks, and persist in the face of setbacks such as unfunded grant applications. For example, given the politically charged nature of racial equity issues in education, district partners were remarkably unafraid of airing the district’s “dirty laundry” in terms of disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. They reported that their jobs were not to make the district look good, to obscure internal fissures, or protect their positions; instead, it was to fight for the mission of educational justice. Our partners felt this was an issue of integrity and accountability; just as students have learning objectives, the district had a mandate for data-driven decision-making. The superintendent publicly stated his interest in transparency and a desire not to “hide from the data,” so our partners’ value on research was certainly supported by central office norms. Still, above and beyond ideas about evidence-based policy was a recognition that fear constrains one’s ability to think creatively and, as co-author Eldridge Greer remarked, “If you’re going to lose your job, it should be for something that makes a difference.”

Likewise, the RPP and the Collaborative were opportunities for the research team to live their values and commitment to public service scholarship. Fortunately, faculty members’ involvement in the partnership was consistent with DU’s strategic initiatives to become a great private university dedicated to the public good through community-engaged teaching, research, and service. On the community side, advocates had to show willingness to engage with district officials in new ways that were not always consistent with traditional community organizing tactics. Building trust with the targets of their campaigns could call into question where they stood in the movement; instead, they profited from these relationships, leveraging them to fundraise and otherwise advance their organizational profiles and missions. In particular, the Collaborative revealed the possibility that groups

politically at odds with one another can come together, sitting side by side to guide our research agendas.

Other personal attributes that proved invaluable to the functioning of the RPP and the Collaborative were genuine curiosity, a desire to learn and understand, and an openness to new ideas or ways of thinking about a problem. A partnership that involved a variety of stakeholder groups was essential toward this end: community members, district officials, and researchers all had different perspectives and ways of knowing that had to be negotiated in order to be successful. Indeed, this is a central benefit of RPPs. Without the distinct roles of each partner or collaborator, there is a tendency to speak only to niche audiences that are within each one's existing professional networks. Furthermore, though our partnership may mirror others in terms of having multiple types of organizations involved, it also proved critical that we had individuals at multiple levels of each organization at the table: the executive director and director of youth organizing, in the case of Padres; coordinator, managerial, and director-level staff from the district; and the president and field organizers from DCTA. The inclusion of individuals reflecting different levels of leadership ensured that conversations about our research were never too far removed from those working in school buildings, nor would their implications be unsupported by those in administration.

### *The Double-Edged Sword of Funding*

Lack of external funding (the partnership did benefit from several internal awards that had rapid response timelines) was a challenge for the partnership on several fronts. Without it, intervention research, randomized trials, and extensive qualitative research were not possible. It also created challenges to sustainability. All RPPs require extraordinary effort in order to have an impact: researchers have to communicate their methods and theoretical frameworks in new ways, whereas practitioners must be willing to help scholars make sense of complex policy and data systems. Without additional funding, everyone on the partnership team or in the Collective had to essentially volunteer their time in kind, as the possibility of "buying out" teaching or practice time was precluded.

However, our financial independence was also a source of agility. The process of building an authentic community-university partnership should fundamentally be an organic one, yet most federal and private funding streams (even those focused on RPPs) require the articulation of well-specified research questions, methods, and goals many months before implementation. Such structures do not allow for the kind of dynamism necessary to rapidly respond to new findings, relationships, and political contexts. The abilities of a partnership team to bring together historically opposing stakeholders, or to teach each partner to find value in one another's strengths and contributions, is not valued by funding agencies to the same degree as methodological rigor. Flexibility on the part of all parties can allow for creativity and innovation to take hold, which can create new

trajectories for partnership efforts that may produce unanticipated positive results, such as qualitative research in our case. More flexible and nontraditional funding mechanisms are needed, particularly in the context of partnerships between universities that are not research intensive, where faculty have relatively high teaching loads, and urban districts under local control where central office administrators are responsible for hundreds of schools, the majority of which serve low-income students and are sorely under-resourced.

## Conclusion

The overall trajectory of this RPP was to begin by examining dominant narratives about the problem of practice, then to identify a promising intervention and assess the stages of its implementation, and finally, to highlight the conditions under which implementation was strengthened. With a focus on both challenges and opportunities, our collective efforts grew over time and were sustainable without external funding. This sustainability was largely due to the involvement of individuals at multiple levels, from multiple stakeholder groups, who held an unwavering commitment to educational equity and were embedded in institutions whose cultural norms were consonant with the values of RPPs.

The trajectory of our partnership is consistent with much of the literature on RPPs but also suggests a need for RPPs to increase their community engagement in order to expand their reach and impact, especially when focused on equity issues. In Denver, when we expanded the number of community collaborators involved in our partnership, we began to witness measurable impacts of our work on local policies. It should not come as a surprise that complex problems of practice require multifaceted partnership arrangements that involve a variety of stakeholders in order to be impactful. However, these complicated power dynamics require extra attention to competing local beliefs and constantly shifting relationships. Researchers who wish to engage in this work should focus on identifying partners who are passionate about the topic at hand and willing to collaborate without external funding, at least initially. Funders who wish to support this work would be wise to provide resources to longer standing partnerships that have a track record of community engagement and are willing to invest time in trust-building activities that go well beyond the scope of traditional research.

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