



POSITIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

What are the impacts of an out-of-school suspension for students without a home? Where do they spend their day? What do they eat? Who cares for them? This document provides a brief overview of school discipline, shares research on the discipline of students experiencing homelessness, and offers tips for implementing positive school discipline for students experiencing homelessness. It also shares stories and suggestions from SchoolHouse Connection Young Leaders who experienced homelessness.

School Discipline Generally

Traditional, punitive discipline practices include detention, suspension, and expulsion. These approaches are based on the assumption that punishment will compel students to change their behavior. In practice, they contribute to the “school-to-prison pipeline” and further isolate children who often are in dire need of positive relationships and support.¹ They also have civil rights implications, as students of color are disproportionately subjected to punitive discipline, particularly African American and Native American students.²

In contrast, positive school discipline adopts a trauma-informed approach to strengthening the capacity of both school staff and students to reduce and prevent inappropriate and disruptive behavior. It recognizes that seeking to uncover and address the root causes of a student’s behavior is more effective than punishment. Positive school discipline is integrated into school policies, programs, and practices and applied systemwide. It often includes restorative justice practices that focus on repairing harm through inclusive processes that engage all stakeholders.

The most important thing I can think of is to operate from a relational and restorative model instead of a traditional retributive one. Traditionally in a school setting, when a child acts out, we ask ‘what rules were broken? Who did it and what do they deserve?’ A restorative model asks ‘who is hurt? What are their needs? How can we address those needs and restore their relationships in the community?’ I think that children experiencing trauma are already so isolated, and this model helps them to form positive relationships with the community in response to unacceptable behaviors. It also helps their peers to see them in a more positive light following a behavioral blow up.”

Kara, SHC Young Leader



Positive school discipline is an important strategy to increase high school graduation rates. Punitive discipline is associated with negative student outcomes, such as lower academic performance, higher rates of dropout, failure to graduate on time, decreased academic engagement, and future disciplinary exclusion.³ In contrast, restorative practices have been found to increase attendance and decrease serious behavioral incidents.⁴ Proactive, preventative approaches to discipline that address the underlying cause or purpose of the behavior, and reinforce positive behaviors, have been associated with increases in academic engagement and achievement, as well as reductions in suspensions and school dropouts.⁵

School Discipline of Students Experiencing Homelessness

Multiple studies have found that students experiencing homelessness are subjected to punitive discipline measures much more often than their housed peers.

- Students experiencing homelessness in Texas are twice as likely to be referred to in-school suspension, 2.5 times more likely to be suspended from school, and five times more likely to be referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program.⁶
- In Indiana, students experiencing homelessness receive both in-school and out-of-school suspensions at twice the rate of housed students.⁷

These disproportionalities are worse for students experiencing homelessness than for other poor students.

- In Florida, 16% of students experiencing homelessness were suspended at least once in the 2015-16 school year, compared to 11% of housed students receiving free or reduced lunch, and 6% of housed students not receiving free or reduced lunch.⁸
- Students experiencing homelessness in Washington were suspended at twice the rate of housed students and at higher rates than housed, low-income students. This disproportionality held true for students in all homeless residence categories, including those sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.⁹

“I had morning basketball practice, and I was late and missed some practices because of not sleeping at night or having to find a way to get my brother and sister to school on time before I got myself to school. My coach never really looked deeper or asked why. I was always punished and used as an example to the rest of the team by having to run suicides and perform extra work. I remember how I felt every time I had to do extra work on top of everything else on my plate.”

Heather, SHC Young Leader



Tips for Implementing Positive School Discipline for Students Experiencing Homelessness

- Always operate from a trauma-informed perspective.

“For our students, the instability, uncertainty and often violence of ‘home’ can be a brutal punishment.” - Jordann Lankford, Montana’s Indian Teacher of the Year at Intertribal Immersion School

- Make school a safe zone for students. Create a space that is predictable, where students can make mistakes and be held accountable, but feel secure.
- Track the discipline rates at schools for all students and for students experiencing homelessness specifically. Share the data with schools and ask schools with high and/or disproportionate discipline rates to create an action plan to address them.
- Be sure the McKinney-Vento district homeless liaison or school-based liaisons are consulted on discipline of students experiencing homelessness and have the capacity to be involved.

“The key is seeing the liaison’s job as a case management model and shifting your district administration’s focus toward seeing a robust McKinney-Vento program as a solution to a lot of problems—classroom management problems, discipline problems, and graduation rate problems.” - Linda Long, Support/Homeless Services Coordinator at Haysville Schools, KS

- Engage students in establishing the rules and consequences, thereby preventing the discipline system from seeming surprising, imposed, or arbitrary.
- Train and engage school administrators, resource officers, counselors, and teachers in implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.

“I trained assistant principals and our school district police force. I was able to raise awareness about the trauma and effects of homelessness. Now assistant principals call me when they have discipline issues with students.” - Norma Mercado, Parent Involvement & Homeless Liaison at Bastrop ISD, TX

- Engage the broader community, such as substance abuse services, police, juvenile courts, and juvenile probation.

“I have developed a good relationship with juvenile probation, and now we are working together to help all students stay in school and resolve their issues. For example, I intervened for a 15-year old student who was going to be incarcerated until age 18. I explained the family was homeless, with limited resources and family trauma, and the judge instead sent him to our alternative program. He is on track for graduation now.” - Norma Mercado

- Be aware of potential triggers.

“In some schools, we found that bells triggered a fight or flight response and negative behaviors. Shutting off the bells cut behavioral referrals in half in some schools.” - Jordann Lankford



- If community service is part of a restorative justice approach, be aware that barriers like lack of transportation, shelter hours, or the need to work may make it impossible for students experiencing homelessness to complete community service after school.

I make community service a learning and community-building exercise. For example, if students are in cooking class, we'll give what they cook to a homeless shelter." - Jordann Lankford

"Our school only let you have something like 11 or 14 missed days of school (without proper documentation excusing you) before they were supposed to hold you back or have you take summer school. Since I was a McKinney-Vento student, as long as I did all my work, kept my grades up, worked with my teachers and counselors, and did my best to be there as much as possible, then I could miss as many days as I needed to -- for reasons such as: the only place I had to stay that night was in another town and other similar reasons. It helped so much not to have to worry about not graduating due to missing days in order to sleep indoors somewhere rather than having to sleep outside in my small town just to make it to school the following day. I'd love to see all schools behaving in such a manner." *Samantha, SHC Young Leader*

Resources

- National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline <https://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/>
- Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators <http://schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices>
- Technical Assistance Center of Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports <https://www.pbis.org/>

¹ Thalia González (2012). Keeping Kids in Schools: Restorative Justice, Punitive Discipline, and the School to Prison Pipeline. 41 J.L. & Educ. 281.

² In 2011–12, 6.4% of public school students received out-of-school suspensions. However, 15.4% of Black students were suspended, along with 7.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native students. Similarly, while only 0.2% of students were expelled in 2011–12, 0.5% of Black students and 0.4% of American Indian/Alaska Native students were expelled. National Center for Education Statistics (2017). Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups, Indicator 14: Retention, Suspension, and Expulsion. Retrieved November 3, 2018 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp

³ <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>

⁴ McMorris, B.J., Beckman, K.J., Shea, G., Baumgartner, J., & Eggert, R.C. (2013). Applying Restorative Practices to Minneapolis Public School Students Recommended for Possible Expulsion: A Pilot Program Evaluation of the Family and Youth Restorative Conference Program. Retrieved November 3, 2018 from http://www.legalrightscenter.org/uploads/2/5/7/3/25735760/lrc_exec_summ-final.pdf

⁵ <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>

⁶ Texas Appleseed and Texas Network of Youth Services (2017). Young, Alone and Homeless in the Lone Star State. Retrieved November 3, 2018 from <https://www.texasappleseed.org/homeless-youth>

⁷ In the 2015-16 school year, 6% of students experiencing homelessness received in-school suspensions, compared to 3% of housed students. 20% of students experiencing homelessness received out-of-school suspensions, compared to 20% of housed students. Coalition for Homelessness Intervention & Prevention (2018). Re: Home: Indianapolis Coordinated Community Plan to Re:Solve Homelessness for Youth & Young Adults.

⁸ Shinberg Center for Housing Studies, University of Florida and Miami Homes for All (2017). Homelessness and Education in Florida: Impacts on Children and Youth.

⁹ Schoolhouse Washington (2018). Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington's K-12 Public Schools: Trends, Characteristics and Academic Outcomes 2016-17.