DC PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

An Honest Approach to School Discipline

An authorizer's approach to school discipline and how three public charter school networks reduced out-of-school suspensions.

Executive Summary

Public charter schools have an impressive track record of helping students improve their academic performance. Using a variety of teaching methods and school models, public charter schools have lived up to the expectations of early proponents, creating quality learning environments for students who previously lacked good school options. Seeing these results, parents are choosing public charter schools in great numbers. Nearly half of public school students in Washington, DC now attend a public charter school.

One factor in public charter school success has been the ability of schools to develop strong cultures built around core values and high expectations. Students contribute to and benefit from their school's sense of purpose and mission, and the belief that success is possible for every student.

Yet proponents and opponents of public charter schools alike, as well as policymakers, civil rights leaders, members of the media, and the public, have recently questioned whether efforts to maintain a school's values and structure through strict disciplinary standards may work against some students. In particular, multiple studies have shown that students from minority backgrounds – who make up the majority of students at most urban public charter schools – are more likely than their white peers to face the toughest forms of discipline, namely out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. These demographic trends are found in both traditional public and public charter schools.

The chief concern about excessive out-of-school suspensions and expulsions is easy to understand: removing a student from a classroom makes it less likely the student will excel academically. The goal should be to keep students in school whenever possible.

Sometimes suspension and expulsion cannot be avoided. It may be necessary to remove students whose behavior represents a threat to other students or proves consistently disruptive in the classroom causing other students not to be able to learn. However, there is growing recognition throughout the public charter school movement that these forms of discipline should be used less frequently than in the past, reserved for the most serious infractions that cannot be corrected through other means.

Several years ago, the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB), as the single authorizer of public charter schools in Washington, DC, set out to ensure that the discipline policies used in our city's public charter schools are consistent with educational equity and academic quality. As an authorizer, we take the mandate seriously to avoid prescribing solutions to be implemented in independently managed schools. We believe schools themselves should determine the policies that work best for them, given their culture, philosophy, student populations, and other factors. We also believe, however, that a public charter school authorizer can help schools to improve by bringing concerns to light, studying them carefully and transparently, and encouraging school leaders to take action.

To that end, in 2012 DC PCSB began requiring public charter schools in the District of Columbia to collect and report data on school discipline every month. By analyzing this data and making it public, we helped to focus attention on the need to be more mindful about how discipline was handled in schools and allowed schools to see how their practices and outcomes compared to those of other public charter schools. In conjunction with DC Public Schools and city educational leaders, we began to include this data in annual Equity Reports produced for each school and made available to parents and the public. Our staff also began analyzing this data each month, and contacting outlier schools immediately to be sure they were aware that their discipline rates put them outside the norms of their peers. Thus schools had the opportunity to address issues mid-year, rather than waiting until the next school year.

The result of these combined efforts has been to increase dramatically the visibility and awareness of each school's discipline rates, among school staff, school board members, parents, and the community. In addition, some schools' independent, internal monitoring activities further informed sector-wide reporting. Individual schools' efforts, combined with those of DC PCSB, led to a decrease in the number of students suspended from DC's public charter schools each year. At the same time, academic achievement measures in both public charter and traditional public schools has continued to rise. Charter school authorizers do not need to rely on mandates or prescriptive regulations. As this white paper demonstrates, an approach centered on transparency and dialogue with public charter school leaders and boards can produce significant reductions in out of school suspensions while preserving public charter school freedom. We has taken to use data to inform public charter schools, resulting in their improvements in out-of-school suspensions. This paper also looks at the specific experiences of three networks operating multiple schools in Washington, DC.

Introduction

There is a growing opinion among the education community that a school's excessive use of out-of-school suspensions can have negative consequences for students – including decreased academic engagement and outcomes[1]. In Washington, DC, along with other parts of the country, minority students are disproportionately suspended.[2]

In recent years, research has suggested that proactive and preventative methods used to manage classroom behavior are more beneficial to students acting out[3].

Out-of-school suspensions have also been shown to be related to student dropout, disengagement, and course failures[4]. Our data shows that out-of-school suspensions for more than three days (or multiple out-of-school suspensions) may result in students withdrawing from school. Multiple or long-term suspensions increase the likelihood of students not returning to school.

1 US Department of Education's overview of discipline practices at http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html#suspension-101 .

2 2013 report on DC discipline rates prepared by DC's Office of the State Superintendent here: http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE_REPORT_DISCIPLINARY_G_PAGES.pdf .

3 Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014; Skiba & Peterson, 2000

4 Balfanz, 2013; Felice, 1981; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002

Creating and maintaining an environment that will allow the school to achieve its mission is important, but schools should be deliberate when suspending students.

We believe that effective oversight by a charter authorizer can lead to decreased discipline rates among the schools in its portfolio while preserving public charter schools' essential freedoms to design and run their institutions.

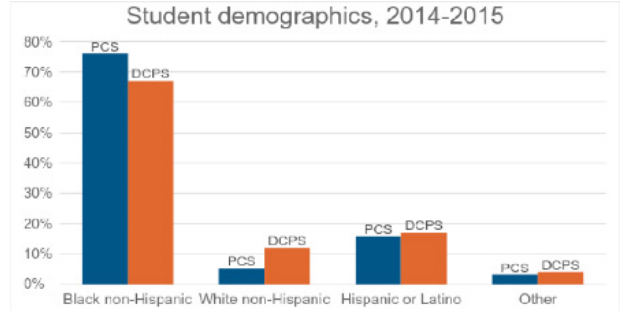
This oversight creates the environment that allows public charter schools the space to do the hard work to find behavior modification approaches that best support student learning and further the school's mission and vision.

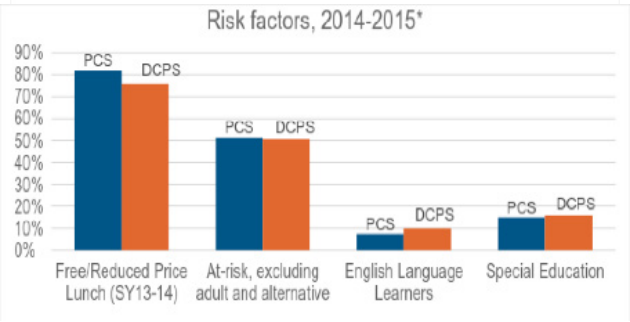
This white paper examines our approach to supporting decreased out-of-school suspension rates, as shown in Appendix A, among public charter schools, and also focuses on strategies put in place by three DC public charter school networks - Center City Public Charter School (Center City PCS), Cesar Chavez Public Charter School (Chavez PCS), and Friendship Public Charter School (Friendship PCS) - which resulted in markedly decreased discipline rates at these schools. Although these networks had neither the highest nor lowest out-of-school suspension, their practices are highlighted due to their positive impact on their performance. The three networks recommended the following best practices as essential to reducing out-of-school discipline rates:

1. Schools must build and maintain strong relationships between students and teachers;
2. Instead of focusing on consequences, a school's philosophy on discipline must focus on the cause of the student's behavior and encourage positive behavior;
3. Schools should be intentional and strategic with their school discipline data; and
4. Parent engagement is critical at every stage.

Background

DC's public charter schools serve an equally, or sometimes more, disadvantaged student population than traditional public schools in the city. These graphs show the difference in student population between DC public charter schools and the traditional public school district (DCPS).





Since 2011, the growth rate of children has outpaced the growth rate of the adult population in Washington, DC. And, while the public charter school market share rate has stabilized over the past several years (44.2 percent in school year (SY) 2012-2013 versus 44.5 percent in SY 2014-2015), citywide enrollment has increased. Public charter schools now serve 38,905 students in DC (versus 34,673 in SY 2012-2013).

As more students move into the city, it is our mission to ensure every student has access to quality education. With national data suggesting that public charter schools suspend students at slightly higher rates than traditional public schools, DC's charter sector began, in 2012, to have difficult but transparent discussions around discipline data in order to address some of the most critical issues about equity in public education.

Though not solely attributable to these discussions, sharp declines were observed in the DC charter sector's discipline rates. Proficiency for public charter schools has increased over the last six years for virtually all subgroups[1]. Additionally, academic performance increased over the same time period. As research shows, suspensions are negatively tied to academic achievement, and since schools are held accountable for academic performance, schools have an incentive to find effective behavior management strategies.

Each public charter school interviewed is unique and had neither the highest nor the lowest out-of-school suspension rates. They implement strategies that work best for their schools and students.

- Center City PCS teaches a liberal arts and humanities curriculum. It has an average of 250 preschool, elementary, and middle school students at each of its six schools. Center City PCS serves predominately Hispanic/Latino and African American students; additionally 79 percent of their students are considered at-risk.[2]

- Chavez PCS focuses its curriculum on public policy and advocacy. It has an average of 335 middle and high school students at each of its four schools. Chavez PCS serves predominately Hispanic/Latino and African American students; additionally, between 53 percent to 69 percent of their students are considered at-risk.

- Friendship PCS focuses on preparing students to actively participate in their communities and succeed in the new global economy. It has an average of 415 pre-school, elementary, middle and high school students at each of its nine schools. Friendship PCS serves predominately African American students; additionally, between 45 percent to 78 percent of their students are considered at-risk students.

1 http://www.dcpcsb.org/2015-naep-data
2 http://dccode.org/simple/sections/4-1345.01.html

An Authorizer's Approach to Monitoring School Discipline

DC PCSB uses five strategies to reduce out-of-school discipline rates while preserving public charter school autonomies:

- **Collecting accurate discipline data.** Public charter schools submit self-reported data each month to DC PCSB that reports which students have been suspended or expelled, as well as the rationale for the discipline action. Failing to submit accurate monthly discipline data in a timely manner can result in the school receiving a Notice of Concern.[1]

- **Making exclusionary discipline data public, accessible and transparent.** Each year, DC PCSB publicly reports out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates for each school. Such transparency ensures individual school accountability for these outcomes, and provides vital information to members of the school community and the general public. Since 2012, DC PCSB has collaborated with other DC education agencies to publish Equity Reports for each traditional public school and public charter school. These reports include each school's expulsion and out-of-school suspension rates, disaggregated by subgroup[2]. Each school has an individual report in which metrics are broken out by subgroup and show the school's rate compared to the citywide average of all public schools (public charter and traditional) in the city. The citywide comparison is shown by grade band for the majority of metrics[3]. Data transparency leads schools to improve their performance because they begin to prioritize issues and their responsiveness produces positive outcomes.

- **Monitoring school discipline data.** DC PCSB staff review school discipline data every month, analyzing out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates for schools with marked increases or decreases, along with reviewing which schools are outliers from the public charter sector with particularly high discipline rates overall or for particular subgroups (e.g., African Americans, Hispanics). Rather than waiting until the year's end, DC PCSB contacts outlier schools right away. Depending on the severity of the issue this outreach could range from a quick email to a request for a formal meeting with a school's board. Often, we have found that a school's board is unaware that their school is a discipline outlier and acts aggressively once informed of the facts.

- **Require strong discipline policies of schools.** In recent years DC PCSB has implemented a requirement that school discipline policies include such items as an explanation of the rights and responsibilities of parents, students, and staff, a clear explanation of the school's infraction system, and due process and appeals procedures[4]. We review the discipline policies annually for compliance with the

1 See PCSB's policy on discipline data collection at http://www.dcpcsb.org/sites/default/files/data__policy_apr_8_12.pdf.

2 Equity reports can be accessed through www.learndc.org.

3 For the citywide rate, a grade band specific comparison is shown for attendance, suspension, expulsion, and graduation. The citywide comparison on the state assessment graph reflects all grades, and there is no citywide comparison for demographic enrollment.

4 PCSB's policy on school discipline plans can be found here: www.dcpcsb.org/policy/attendance-discipline-truancy/discipline-plans-policy.

requirements listed in our policy. In addition, groups applying to operate a public charter school in Washington, DC, are required to include proposed discipline policies and procedures as part of their public charter school petition, and DC PCSB includes an assessment of the school's approach to discipline in its analysis of the school's application.

- **Facilitate discussions about approaches to school discipline.** DC PCSB regularly convenes public charter school teachers and leaders to discuss best practices in discipline through conferences (e.g. the semi-annual "Ahead of the Curve" professional development conference DC PCSB co-sponsors) and internal meetings to share practical approaches to discipline reductions.

By focusing only on student outcomes and without requiring any one behavior modification approach, DC PCSB avoids intruding in schools' decisions about operational and behavioral programs, allowing schools to find the best program for their instructional model and target student population. Once data is publicly available, families are equipped with the right information to make informed decisions and find the right fit, not only academically but also culturally, for their children.

Successful Strategies Implemented by Schools

Reductions in out-of-school suspensions in each of the public charter school networks interviewed occurred as a result of intentional practice. Teachers and staff worked in partnership with students and parents to make positive changes in the schools. The interviews brought to light some of the benefits of intentionally engaging in proactive measures to change student behavior and improve upon students' character development instead of reacting to students' behavior problems by dismissing the students from school.

While there were several similarities found across the three school networks, it was clear that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that works for all schools. The schools interviewed discovered they had to figure out what worked for their student community to achieve positive results. However, all three schools took away these four lessons:

Key Lessons Learned

1. Schools must build and maintain strong relationships between students and teachers.	Schools should be committed to fostering respectful and appropriate relationships so students are committed and feel connected to the mission and values of the school.
2. Instead of focusing on consequences and punishments, a school's philosophy on discipline must focus on the cause of the student's behavior.	Many students come to school with "emotional baggage." Suspending a student will not fix the underlying issues; instead, schools must work in tandem with students to understand the root of the problem.
3. Schools should be intentional and strategic with their discipline data.	Schools should use their discipline data to their advantage to proactively help struggling students before the issues become more severe.
4. Parent engagement is critical at every stage	Often times, parents can provide invaluable insight into the student and serve as a partner with the school. Engaging parents from the outset helps to mitigate problems later on and prevent them from escalating.

Lesson 1: Schools must build and maintain strong relationships between students and teachers.

Relationship-building is one of the most important pieces of a school culture. A school's mission and vision will not succeed if students, teachers and staff do not feel connected to one another. When students develop strong relationships with their peers and with adults at the school, their behavior improves and they are less likely to repeat poor behaviors.

Center City PCS

At Center City PCS, the focus is on relationship building through their core values of character, excellence and service at the classroom and school-wide level. Morning Gatherings are Center City PCS' foundational piece of driving a positive school culture. During the gatherings, the entire school community (e.g. teachers, students and parents) gather for ten to fifteen minutes every morning to recognize and celebrate each other for making great academic strides (e.g. when a PK student learns to write their full name, when a third grader master's their multiplication facts, or when a middle school student wins a class oratorical contest), perfect attendance, student birthdays, new additions to families, or when a parent earns a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree. The Morning Gatherings set the tone for the day and ensure that everyone, regardless of background, receives a positive, yet deliberate message to take with them for the rest of the day.

At the classroom level, teachers are intentional about deepening the relationships in their classrooms by building upon what was discussed during the Morning Gathering, to help each classroom family become more understanding of each other. This helps students and teachers build trust, understandings and bonds, which fosters better communication and collaboration, and helps peers better resolve conflicts with each other, as well as with teachers. Additionally, the expectations of each classroom, or the "Classroom Constitution" are developed by teachers and students, which keeps students accountable and is used for restorative conversations.

Center City PCS also places an emphasis on building student leaders within its schools. Through Center City PCS' structure and the core values instilled in each student, students learn to be stewards within their immediate and national communities. Students are developed to take over and run Morning Gatherings and eighth graders are developed to become the most influential leaders in the building. Center City PCS helps cultivate leadership skills within all students, but the eighth graders are given a special focus to help them lead their younger peers and get ready for high school. The eighth graders are provided with leadership development to learn how to communicate positively through challenges, verbally and non-verbally. In effect, the younger students get excited to matriculate to the next grade level because they watch the experiences of the older students and see the older students as role modes.

Each school also has a culture plan, which is individual to each school and its students. This plan includes goals and specific actions and verbiage that should be used school wide to mainstream not only the expectations, but the language that students hear from the adults in their buildings. This level of norming in each building, as well as across all six schools allows for all students to understand the expectations of all staff and buildings without confusion. The culture plans also highlights accountability for all school staff and students, including the wonders of earned incentives.

Cesar Chavez PCS

Chavez PCS is dedicated to instilling its Chavez values (e.g. honesty, achievement, engagement) in students. All Chavez PCS middle school students participate in an advisory class every Friday where they are taught the Chavez values, restorative practices, digital literacy and college awareness. Through these classes, one middle school male student overcame his significant behavioral issues because he started to feel connected to the school and wanted to live up to the Chavez PCS values. At the middle school promotion ceremony he was recognized for being "Most Improved" in both behavior and academics. At the high school level, Chavez students participate in a seminar every Friday where they learn how to be a change agent in their communities. Additionally, staff want students to be more committed to their future than to their current conflicts, so students meet with counselors during the seminar to work on goal setting, preparing for college or getting focused on their career after high school. These advisory and seminar classes give students the tools to be better members of their communities.

Chavez PCS also hired a consultant to work with teachers around building life-altering relationships, having the right mindset around students and having strong classroom procedures. The goal is to have teachers become proactive behavior detectors instead of reactively addressing behavior concerns. Moreover, during the first week of school, students go through diagnostic testing to help identify their academic strengths. They also learn about different types of personalities, as well as Chavez values and community values. Chavez PCS incorporates community building activities into the first few weeks of school to help staff and teachers establish expectations and standards. Students and teachers also participate together in team-based activities, including competitions, that allow students and teachers to interact as part of the same team.

Friendship PCS

The mission of Friendship Public Charter School is to provide a world-class education that motivates students to achieve high academic standards, enjoy learning, and develop as ethical, literate, well-rounded and self-sufficient citizens who contribute actively to their communities. Friendship PCS operates around the principle that all students must be prepared for college completion and enjoy life success. Its schools instill in staff Friendship PCS' mission and vision for their students and their aim to serve the students who are most in need of a high quality education. Professionals who join the Friendship community are immediately immersed in a caring culture of academic achievement, caring, and dedication to Friendship PCS' students and families. Friendship PCS celebrates its students' successes, keeping staff members informed of their achievements through regular communications blasts. Friendship PCS celebrates teachers' dedication to their students by sharing their stories and rewarding high performance.

Staff members are expected to model Friendship PCS' core values: integrity, responsibility, confidence, caring, commitment, patience, persistence, and respect. In the first days of school, teachers, with support from other members of the school community, set clear expectations for student behaviors and focus on getting students acclimated to classroom norms. Teachers engage students, encouraging them to be partners in the educational process and engaging them in a range of activities that strengthen their academic skills as well as their communication, ability to collaborate and skill in debating concepts in a constructive, respectful manner. This encourages students and helps them take an active role in supporting a positive classroom culture. Throughout the school year, teachers build and reinforce their connection to students and their homes. Quarterly Learning Contracts afford teachers the opportunity to engage students and their parents in discussions regarding their performance, commend them on the areas in which they excel, and, if needed, map out action steps for improving their performance.

Relationships between teachers and students are also strengthened through the additional time teachers spend working with students outside of regular daily instruction. Students are encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities during which teachers and activity sponsors are able to build and reinforce relationships with students around activities they enjoy as well as reinforce Friendship PCS' core values. Many teachers also provide tutoring and support to motivate students who need help with concepts taught during the school day. Friendship PCS teachers see themselves as part of a family, going beyond classroom instruction to ensure students receive the personal and academic encouragement and support they need to thrive.

Finally, student surveys are administered to gather feedback on strengths and areas to improve at Friendship PCS and its campuses. For instance, several students at a Friendship PCS campus reported not having a close relationship with an adult in the school. To address this concern, the principal took photos of every child and asked each staff member to identify students with whom they had a relationship. For any photo without a staff name, assigned staff members were charged with reaching out to these students to begin building relationships.

Lesson 2: Instead of focusing on consequences and punishments, a school's philosophy on discipline must focus on the cause of the student's behavior.

Teachers and leadership are well aware that students often come to school with challenges that stem from their homes or the surrounding community. This can negatively impact a student's attitude for the day which, in turn, can impair the student's learning process. Staff and teachers should deliberately intervene to ensure the student's attitude does not impact his or her ability to excel in school.

Center City PCS

Staff at Center City PCS also focus on character development through community service, mediation, reflection, and redirection as strategic practices in the behavior modification process. Through character development, a student's behavior is expected to change for the long-term instead of temporarily. Center City PCS' focus on character development has impacted the way its schools view discipline issues. While the character development piece has always been a part of Center City PCS, staff and leadership are constantly thinking about if the schools are living up to their mission and vision – conscious reflection of practices has been key to ensuring that Center City PCS is helping its students succeed. Building and District leadership of Center City PCS continuously self- assess, looking for and through different avenues of data to determine if they are delivering the right messages to their students, in the right, and effective ways to bring about real change and positive growth for each student.

Many of the staff and leadership understand or work diligently to understand the backgrounds of the students since they teach in such an urban environment. Understanding a student's home life, values, as well as aspirations helps all staff relate to their students on a more personal level. Relationships, coupled with positive recognitions and reinforcements, helps Center City PCS students focus on their academic and character goals positively and proactively.

Teachers are also more deliberate about developing appropriate personal relationships with their students by greeting them each morning as they enter the school. This helps teachers identify any outside issues that might be affecting students' attitudes, which could trigger negative behavior. Teachers can begin to adjust the tone and atmosphere for the day, helping students to leave external problems behind before fully stepping into the academic environment. In recent years, Center City PCS has worked to understand teacher autonomy and how teachers can have true autonomy within the classroom. More authority and training has helped teachers become less reactive and more intentional about behavioral issues because teachers are now more empowered to take ownership in redirecting a student's behavior.

Cesar Chavez PCS

Staff at Chavez PCS now use suspensions as an action of last resort. However, once the teacher refers a student for suspension, the program manager must make the recommendation for suspension to the principal and then to the executive director of the school to determine whether a suspension is the appropriate course of action and if all available resources were utilized to support the student.

Staff are very intentional about discipline now. For example, if two students should not be in the same room to avoid conflict, one of the students will be placed in a different class. Staff look at a student individually when deciding how to alter his or her behavior and look for supports to help the student. These may include parent shadowing, intervention services, behavior contracts and therapeutic services. The therapeutic service is both a proactive and reactive measure that allows students to work on conflict and anger management, and grief and loss issues.

Friendship PCS

Friendship PCS is committed to creating a safe and nurturing learning environment in which all of their students have the best possible opportunities to thrive both academically and socially. That said, students must be in the classroom, ready to learn and engage in the educational process in order to develop the skills necessary for their current and future success. Friendship PCS staff therefore focus on developing positive behaviors by setting clear expectations, providing character education, and rewarding positive conduct. In the event that a student does not adhere to the school's discipline policy, staff are encouraged to seek alternatives to out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

Moreover, staff are encouraged to refer students for counseling and other support if behaviors are persistent or warrant additional services. Student support teams that include teachers and other school staff are often used to identify assistance for students. One strategy employed is establishing regular daily check-ins between students and a teacher or staff member with whom they have a close relationship. While there are instances where students may have to be removed from classrooms to maintain a safe environment conducive to learning, every action is taken to minimize out-of-school suspension and to quickly re-introduce students into the classroom.

If suspension occurs, students and parents participate in re-entry conferences that include an agreement between the student and school committing to improved behavior, a restorative component, and sometimes mandatory counseling. Friendship PCS heavily resources counseling and other staff to help mitigate behaviors that may hinder student achievement. Their philosophy places emphasis on the preservation of instructional time to support academic achievement as well as programs and services to support students' development of the interpersonal skills necessary for success.

Lesson 3: Schools should be intentional and strategic with their discipline data.

The interviewed schools mentioned looking at the data and research regarding the use of out-of-school suspensions as a deterrent for inappropriate behavior, and each school concluded that out-of-school suspensions alone were not working. Now, staff at each school regularly meet to discuss their discipline data and what interventions can be put into place to help struggling students.

Center City PCS

Each school meets weekly to discuss academic and discipline data, which helps staff and leadership figure out solutions to on-going issues and find supports to help the students.

For example, looking over the data for the past year, leadership found that sixth graders had a difficult time adapting to middle school. Now, leadership is developing a two-week summer training program for rising sixth graders. Students will be taught how to cope with middle school, by learning organizational skills, what materials are needed to be successful, and how to communicate effectively with teachers. The program will give students a sense that there is an adult around them who understands what they they are going through.

Cesar Chavez PCS

Chavez PCS leaders reached out to their school community to gather feedback on the schools' behavior modification practices. They collected surveys, and conducted interviews and focus groups with more than 1,000 participants, including 100 staff members.

Now, the schools have a very structured and data-driven process. Every week, grade level teams go through a Content Focused Improvement Process. The process involves taking a deep data dive. Teachers and staff take a look at behavior issues, suspensions, attendance and grades, and make adjustments to lesson plans. Additionally, during these meetings, the teams determine which Chavez PCS value they want to emphasize.

They choose the value based on what the students, collectively, are struggling with. Teachers will incorporate it into their lesson plans and continue to work with the students until improvement is made. Teachers also have more supports now. Chavez PCS has a program manager who works directly with the teachers and a behavior interventionist. All three convene proactively to address a student's needs by offering restorative practices, wrap-around services (eg. tutoring services at home), and/or behavior meetings with parents.

Friendship PCS

Friendship PCS trustees and staff regularly review student discipline and other data. During their respective regular meetings, stakeholders are provided campus level data reports that show month-by-month, year-over-year comparisons and other information to help them understand trends. Community Office and school-based staff also review a weekly report comprised of individual student data to develop and implement strategies for success for specific students. In addition, during monthly meetings school leaders review dashboards, discuss data trends, and principals and Community Office members share strategies they are implementing across campuses to address student behaviors.

Lesson 4: Parent engagement is critical at every stage.

Parents who are engaged partners with their student's schools are more likely to help mitigate their student's behavioral problems. The process of getting parents engaged in school should begin early in the year. In addition to communicating school values, culture, and expectations, school leaders should present accurate data, not just anecdotal information, about each student. Out-of-school suspensions not only prevent the student from attending school where they learn new material, but often are seen by older students as a "vacation" from school. Conversely, a younger student's suspension can add stress to a family's life if parents must figure out who will care for the child during the day. Repeated suspensions deteriorate the family and school relationship, which could ultimately result in a loss of the family as a partner with the school.

Center City PCS

Center City PCS starts engaging with parents in the summer through home visits done by the student's lead teacher and an assistant. The home visits allow teachers to see the student's home environment and to set goals for the students with the parents.

Center City PCS is cognizant of the fact that schools have to start off the relationship with parents in a positive manner and ensure parents feel welcome into the school building. For example, Center City PCS's uniform company is based in Silver Spring, Maryland, so instead of having parents drive to Maryland, the company comes to the school so parents do not have to travel quite as far. There continue to be warm touches with parents throughout the year, and at the end of the year, Center City PCS has a field day with parents and students as a way to celebrate.

When there is a discipline issue that arises, parents are brought into the conversation because sometimes the issue extends into a student's difficulty dealing with something happening inside the home. Center City PCS taps into every known and available resource possible in those instances, to provide the student and parent the appropriate wrap around services to help not only the scholar, but the parent as well.

Cesar Chavez PCS

Chavez PCS uses a system, which sends weekly emails to parents that explain how many behavior-based "credits and debits" the student earned for that week; credits can be used to purchase items in the school store, for example. Parents and students can download the application and view the data in real time. This system gives parents an opportunity to be proactive. If, for example, the parent sees that the student has issues with respect at school, the school does not have to call the parent; instead, the parent can talk with the student about shortcomings associated with his or her behavior. Parents have been very engaged with the tool. One parent was so engaged that he would come to the school to check in with his child when he received a debit. The parent is now a representative on the school's board.

Friendship PCS

Friendship PCS believes that parents, students, and staff must work together to ensure a quality educational experience for every student. Parental engagement leads to better classroom behavior and enhances academic performance. At the beginning of the year, Friendship PCS encourages staff to engage parents around both positive and negative behavior in order to build a strong connection with students' homes. Parent engagement begins early in the school year with parent orientation sessions and back-to-school nights, and parents are welcomed into the school.

As the school year progresses, parents are offered workshops that focus on student behavior, they participate in chats with school principals where they discuss a range of topics, and participate in Parent Advisory Council meetings where they have discussed matters related to school culture and made recommendations to principals. Parents are also surveyed to get their perception of the school and programs offered with survey items that probe for their perception of school culture and feelings about school discipline.

At Quarterly Learning Contract meetings, parents are engaged as partners in reviewing their children's academic performance, attendance, and behavior and agree to action steps to either support continued positive performance or help their students improve. Staff and parents meet to discuss students' behaviors and appropriate responses. If suspension is absolutely necessary, a re-entry protocol is instituted for each student returning from suspensions. Finally, in instances where it becomes apparent that the student and family require support services from local government agencies or community organizations, Friendship PCS staff help facilitate connecting the parent with the appropriate group.

Conclusion

Out-of-school discipline in DC public charter schools has been reduced through a combination of focused efforts by the authorizer to direct attention to the issue and the hard work of individual schools to rethink their approaches to discipline.

For us, the key tool has been transparency. Collecting, sharing, publishing, and communicating discipline information has been remarkably successful. Few schools like to be publicly shown to be a discipline outlier, and school boards are inclined to act when presented with the facts. Transparency is particularly appropriate to working with public charter schools, which should be given the maximum possible deference to develop their own approaches. We have seen sharp declines in exclusionary discipline without resorting to mandates or one-size-fits-all policies.

However, it is ultimately the work of individual public charter schools that produced the change. The schools we profiled worked deliberately to create behavior modification plans that improve the school's climate, engage teachers and families, and emphasize proactive over reactive responses and individualized responses to each student. Schools are applying corrective action in a way that results in as little disruption to the learning process as possible.

As a result of changes to their behavioral policies, schools within these three public charter school networks have gone from having among the highest suspension and expulsions rates of all public charter schools during the 2012-2013 school year to some of the lowest discipline rates by the 2014-2015 school year.

Endnotes

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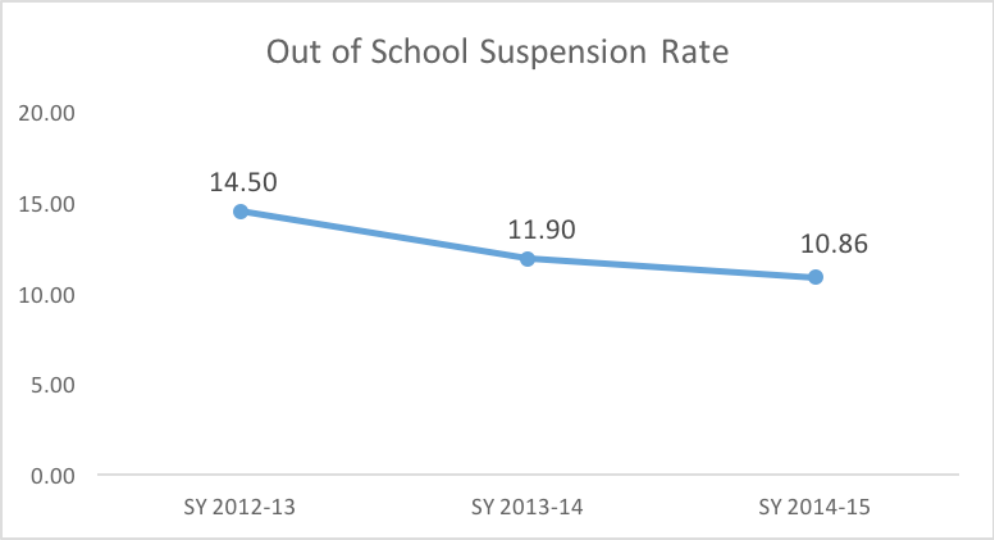
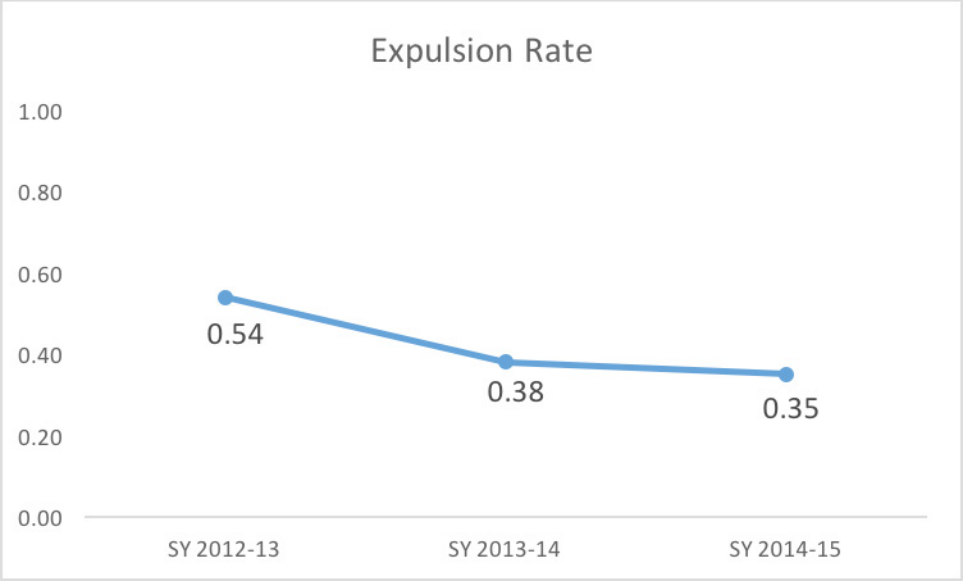
Appendix A

Suspensions decreased from 11.9% in SY 2013-14 to 10.9% to SY 2014-15



Expulsions are down by nearly half, from 0.8% in SY 2012-13 to just .4% in SY 2014-15.