Executive Summary

The way to transform troubled schools is through building healthier learning environments where students receive nurturing rather than punitive intervention. To improve school climate, the authors suggest:

- Schools do not suspend students, but offer behavioral interventions for students who are referred for discipline.
- Schools support students with social capital because it can mitigate the undesirable effects caused by poverty, unstable housing, institutional racism, and limited access to early care.
- Schools embrace culturally relevant education because it has been shown to increase confidence and engagement, two factors that are associated with student achievement.
School improvement policy for the past few decades has neglected school climate and discipline to the peril of our nation’s school systems. For over 30 years, plans for improving schools have been characterized by mandated lists of activities designed to stimulate a dramatic turnaround in student achievement. However, this prescriptive approach to policy, particularly district-level policy, has not resulted in fundamental shifts in school capacity to better serve students attending our nation’s most vulnerable schools.

Recent policy has been fairly anemic when it comes to promoting systemic changes needed to support teachers and school leaders. In the long run, this policy approach will not engender the school-level changes necessary to create rife learning environments for all students, or practices that might support teachers and leaders in facilitating student pathways for success.

Perhaps the most important lesson from the past decades has been the explicit focus on improving the capacity and stability of teachers and leaders in vulnerable settings. This research suggests that transforming schools will require a systemic “broader and bolder approach” that goes beyond another mandated checklist or organizational trend.

Systemic school change is, however, possible. There is growing evidence that schools can make substantial improvement, but no one school can do it alone. The evidence is clear: school systems can only be as strong or effective as the support systems surrounding them. By contrast, they can never be any richer or more viable than the social capital built into them. These broad conclusions are, perhaps, doubly true for chronically low-performing schools.

Still researchers and school leaders alike have been lost for answers to the most vexing questions facing our most vulnerable schools—schools where the consequences of poverty and the haunting realities of structural and physical violence have become so entrenched that, for many, the only solution given is closure. There is mounting evidence, however, that closing “failing schools” is no solution for improving education, particularly for our most vulnerable youth. Recent studies suggest some school closings exacerbate social inequity as opposed to interrupting it.

Evidence for transforming troubled schools is now accumulating. This scholarship sheds light on ways that school workers might curve climates of hostility and disorder to build healthier learning environments where all students are nurtured and can grow. Such studies raise serious questions as to how low-performing schools, for instance, might rethink discipline to shape community and help students build character. They also ask how successful models of educational practice might offer new solutions for supporting and transforming struggling schools. These questions are central to conversations on school climate and discipline, and are unique to the American quest for educational equity. None of these questions, however, is privy to easy or singular solutions.
Schools Can’t Do It Alone

In this brief, we present a framework for school transformation that grows out of the idea that schools can’t do it alone. We suggest that schools can turn around by preparing more culturally competent teachers, by investing social capital in students, and by reframing the purposes of discipline. Based on the evidence, we present three broad recommendations for improving school culture and discipline practices: 1) move beyond suspension, 2) invest social capital in students, and 3) embrace culturally relevant education. Each recommendation offers supports and strategies that incorporate the multiple assets existing in and around any given school.

The first two recommendations are policy driven, aimed at supporting the development of students. Thus, “alternatives to suspensions” sees discipline as non-punitive, but rather constructive in its aim at teaching students how to live in a world with the capacity of enlarged character. Incorporating mentoring looks at ways that schools might provide human models for students as they are groomed into fuller citizens. The third recommendation—culturally relevant education (CRE)—affirms teaching practice most responsive to the needs of particular student groups. Instead of focusing on students, this recommendation examines what teachers need to know about students in order to sustain them culturally and motivate them intellectually.

A South Bronx School Opens Its Doors for Change

For many schools across the United States, the need to improve school climate and discipline practices is a matter of life or death. This was particularly true for a school in New York City’s South Bronx: Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in Crotona Park East. In 2010, over the spring break recess, five of Fannie Lou Hamer’s students lost their lives to gun violence.

The violence in the South Bronx at that time was emblematic of the violence of its schools. In 2010, Fannie Lou Hamer registered almost record rates of suspensions due to in-school fighting and other violent and threatening behaviors. Gangs claimed territory surrounding the school; teachers reported fearing for their safety; and students reported feeling as if their schools were prisons.

It is well known that students in the South Bronx face a daunting assortment of obstacles. In some districts:

- As many as 93 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged; the light of learning is sometimes lost in the darkness of unpaid electrical debts.
- More than one in 10 students is homeless or in foster care.
- The average school attendance rate is among the city’s lowest; suspension rates are among the highest.
- Environmental conditions for learning are poor, and by association student health is among the poorest in the city.
- Teacher turnover is epidemic, and student graduation rates are extremely low.

In response to the violence of 2010 and the compounded effects of its consequences, there were school leaders who wanted Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School closed. However, a committed community of educators, parents, and students pledged to keep the school open by holding a rally that would forever change the culture of the school and its surrounding community.

In collaboration with the Children’s Aid Society, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School launched a campaign to transform its school culture by hosting an event that could transform the community in which the school is housed. The event, titled “The Peace Block Party,” was a new treatment to what had become a chronic plague of violence in the community. What many had come to believe as an untenable social illness that had spilled into the school was now receiving attention and resolution based not on school closure but on community closeness. Instead of playing prey to conditions that hindered students’ educational achievement, the community surrounding Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School organized and created a framework responsive to the full range of academic and non-academic factors necessary for student success. Their framework looked beyond the school to improve conditions within it.

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School was but one of many schools across our country that function almost hopelessly in the shadows of violence and socially toxic conditions. What the community surrounding Fannie Lou Hamer understood was that the school alone could not surmount the daunting assortment of obstacles that its students face. They enlisted help. Instead of closing its doors, Fannie Lou Hamer High School opened them.
The recommendations we present here are not meant to be prescriptive or monolithic. One-size-fits-all prescriptive policies rarely work in educational practice, which implies a complex system of activities that require contingencies and flexible articulations. The framework that we provide here is meant to be broad so that it can be customized to any given school context.

Schools can be improved, and practices of discipline, transformed. The success of schools such as Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School (see box), which today is among the highest-performing schools in the South Bronx, can be directly linked to a broad and bold approach that blunts instances of violence and reduces the impact of poverty on students. Fannie Lou Hammer couldn’t do it alone; however, its significant refractions of school culture gives us reason to hope. It also gives us evidence that a bold equity framework can improve school climate.

From a theoretical perspective, we can think of school climate as positing congruence between the transformative impact of alternative discipline models, social capital investments, and culturally responsive education. In positive school climates, culturally responsive educational systems are marked by school cultures that are concerned with deliberative and participatory discourse practices,9 and creating spaces for teacher reflection, inquiry, and mutual support.10 With the appropriate supports, school culture has the potential to transform schools into educational communities where teachers engage in a “recursive process of self-reflection, self-critique, self-correction, and self-renewal,” thus increasing the capacity of schools to educate all students.11

**Recommendation #1 for Improving Schools:**

**Move Beyond Suspensions**

In some schools, punishment, short of suspending a student, essentially takes the form of a decision to do something that the student does not want done. In addition, a demand for future compliance usually is made, along with threats of harsher punishment if compliance is not forthcoming. The discipline may be administered in ways that suggest the student is seen as an undesirable person, and such practices contribute to a negative attitude toward self and school. Overreliance on traditional discipline practices (e.g., using rewards and punishments to counter misbehavior, exerting power, excluding students) may temporarily control behavior, but such practices are overall detrimental.

Recent research on school discipline practices suggests that removing students from schools can exacerbate educational inequity and have a detrimental effect on school climate. To respond to this issue, researchers have presented a litany of programs that move educators beyond suspensions. Programs such as Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Justice/Practices (RJ/P), and others are prominent in the landscape of school climate improvement.12 Some of these alternatives emerge in two federal policies, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Within the articulation of these policies there is close attention to these alternatives as necessary for ensuring equitable access and outcomes for various subgroups.

Despite the prominence of these programs, there are continuing questions surrounding the development and implementation of these alternatives in schools and districts as they relate to addressing disparity patterns in behavioral referrals and suspensions.13

In this section we provide evidence from research of one program, PBIS, to illustrate how ecological conditions need to be framed that affect the development and/or implementation for outcomes in populations with inequitable access and for underrepresented racial/ethnic and low-income students.
### TABLE 1. Components of Standard PBIS Implementation and Additions Under a Culturally Responsive PBIS Model.


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<th>COMPONENT</th>
<th>PBIS IMPLEMENTATION¹</th>
<th>CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PBIS</th>
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| Establish Commitment | • Administrator support and active involvement  
                        • Faculty/staff support | • Schoolwide commitment to addressing racial/ethnic disparities |
| Establish and Maintain Team | • Representative team established: admin's/teachers, gen/special ed., etc. | • Representative team established: racial/ethnic, socioeconomic status diversity |
| Self-Assessment | • Effective behavior support survey  
                        • Discipline data  
                        • Identification of strengths, focus  
                        • Action plan developed  
                        • Action plan presented to faculty | • Survey and interviews on culture  
                        • Disaggregated disciplinary data  
                        • Hypotheses about data that include culture  
                        • Develop culturally responsive intervention |
| Schoolwide Expectations | • Define schoolwide behavior expectations  
                        • Curriculum matrix  
                        • Teaching plans  
                        • Teach expectations  
                        • Define consequences for problem behavior | • Examine intersection of culture and school expectations  
                        • How does a cultural perspective affect instruction and management?  
                        • Teach with awareness of cultural differences |
| Establish Information Systems | • System for gathering useful information  
                        • Process for summarizing data  
                        • Process for using information for decision-making | • Disaggregate outcome data  
                        • To what extent has intervention worked for all groups?  
                        • How does awareness of culture affect teaching? |
| Build Capacity for Function-Based Support | • Personnel with behavioral expertise  
                        • Time and procedures for identification, assessment, and implementation | • Text-based discussion and critical friends to enhance awareness of culture  
                        • Institutional procedures for ensuring ongoing dialogue on culture-based issues |

¹ Components and activities for standard PBIS implementation drawn from SWPBIS Implementers Blueprint and Self-Assessment, U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Center on PBIS, 2005: Effective Behavior Support Team Implementation Checklists (Quarterly).
Sufficient research identifies the effectiveness of PBIS in improving school discipline, classroom management, and student behavior. Research highlights dimensions of PBIS as effective: schools appear to be able to implement school-wide PBIS with fidelity; rates of problem behaviors can be decreased through active supervision, positive feedback, and social skills instruction; function-based positive behavioral interventions have demonstrated a positive impact on students with serious problem behaviors; and PBIS improves student behavior, school climate, and academic achievement. Thus, when implemented with fidelity, PBIS has been shown to contribute to reductions in overall school suspension and expulsion, and to other positive educational outcomes.

Despite these findings on the effect of PBIS, there is an emerging body of research highlighting the persistent patterns of disparity in behavioral referrals and suspensions within PBIS school sites. Emerging research points to varying considerations as to how and why PBIS is not reducing disparity patterns while reducing overall referrals and suspensions. Researchers have identified the nature of bias emerging in the decision-making points as shifting the manner in which practitioners understand behavior and translate into interventions. Another researcher finds the prominence of bias-based beliefs about race and culture, such as colorblindness, deficit-thinking, and racial discomfort among practitioners in disproportionate schools and as negatively correlated with practitioner self-efficacy. In other words, increases in bias-based beliefs about culture and race significantly correlate with decreased practitioner self-efficacy.

Other research also documents the school composition and school climate as having a net effect on teacher expectations of student success; pre-service courses on diversity alter perspectives on culture and race among pre-service teachers; teacher cultural perspectives present in measurements of emotional and social functioning; and student race and gender categories differentially predicted patterns of teacher referrals. In order for PBIS and other alternatives to improve school climate and reduce racial/ethnic and gender disparity patterns, research points to a need for these alternative solutions to be adaptable to address these ecological conditions.

Outside of conceptual reviews, there have been only two empirical investigations of a culturally responsive model of PBIS, both of which are case studies. Table 1 provides an initial conceptual roadmap to demonstrate the manners in which a cultural and race lens can be applied to the development and implementation of school climate alternatives like PBIS.
Recommendation #2 for Improving Schools:

Use Social Capital to Stimulate Student Support and Growth

The elegant theories and research of scholars such as Luis Moll and his colleagues speak to the importance of investing social capital, or what they call *funds of knowledge*, into student growth and development. Social capital is a social or group property that can exist when individuals come in contact with others. Recent research on the topic suggests that school climate can be transformed by stimulating student growth and better nurturing student development. Programs such as Head Start, community-based education, tutoring, mentoring, and others leverage social capital to support productive learning outcomes. Within the broad articulation of these programs, social capital investments (in early learning, in community, in academic support, in socioemotional support, and so on) become the mechanism for school climate improvement.

There is evidence suggesting that, while social capital is no cure-all for toxic school climates, it can provide mediating support that can be used to broker improvement. In this section, we provide a mediational perspective on social capital investment, drawing from research on mentoring to discuss how productive investments in social capital need to be framed.

Several studies have demonstrated that exposure to role models, or mentors, can contribute to positive school climates and offer positive meditational support when it comes to school discipline. Mentoring has been described as a strategic relationship between a less experienced individual and a more experienced one. Experts have suggested mentoring as tool for stimulating positive school environments and reimagining school discipline practices in ways that advance students’ professional, academic, and personal development.

A preponderance of mentoring programs focus uniquely on males of color. This is, perhaps, because males of color are at the bottom or near the bottom of all academic achievement categories and are grossly over-represented among school suspensions, dropouts, and special education tracks. Nationally, more than 50 percent of African American and Latino males dropout of school. African American and Latino males, compared to their white counterparts, suffer from shorter life spans, higher mortality rates, and poorer qualities of health. Males of color also are more likely to be incarcerated and grow up in single-parent homes than other youth.

Scholars suggest that the lack of positive adult males of color in schools and at home contribute to the lack of academic and social success for these males in schools. Early interventions within schools may be the most effective way to prevent some of the problems facing males of color. Strong, positive relationships between mentors and students are critical ingredients for success. Equally important is the personalized learning space, counseling, and other supports that mentors—who are regarded more like big sisters and brothers and mother and father figures—provide.

Mentoring programs provide youth with positive social experiences and valuable support systems needed to proceed with confidence throughout life. While there is very little research that validates the impact that mentoring has on the academic achievement of youth, more educators are embracing the idea that the educational and social challenges confronting vulnerable youth can be solved, or at least ameliorated, through positive mentorship programs.

When implemented with fidelity, effective mentoring programs help create safer schools where students feel as though they can be themselves; where the peer culture reinforces the value of learning; and where character, ethics, and moral development are far more important than rigid discipline policies. In schools that lack some form of mentoring, students, and primarily males of color, are left without viable supports needed for success. And before many of them ultimately leave school, they are frequently suspended from school and achieve poorly academically. Thus, improving school climate and discipline practice requires a genuine interest in providing support and services to students—social capital investments—that can mediate the effects of inequity. If done effectively, social capital investments will necessitate concerted efforts both outside and inside schools—to support children from birth to career.
Recommendation #3 for Improving Schools:

**Embrace Culturally Relevant Education**

Other concepts for improving school climate and discipline work on a more cultural level. They beg questions of relevance and connection. Perhaps chief among these concepts is culturally relevant education (CRE), which has been defined broadly as a pedagogy that empowers students by incorporating their cultural backgrounds in all aspects of learning. This includes the provision of ample opportunities to succeed in the classroom, curriculum that is relevant to students’ everyday lives, and an environment that affirms their cultural backgrounds.

A recently launched race- and gender-based initiative in New York City (NYC) provides us with an opportunity to examine CRE in practice. CRE has been an essential component of the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI)—an NYC-based intervention designed to increase college and career readiness for Black and Latino males. Early on in the initiative, the Department of Education’s central ESI staff took several actions to emphasize the importance of CRE, including: 1) facilitating a CRE-focused symposium for all 40 ESI schools in the first year of ESI; 2) providing intensive CRE training to a group of 10 ESI schools; 3) generating a list of individuals/organizations who could provide CRE training; and 4) offering summer workshops on CRE across the core subject areas, open to staff in all ESI schools. Studying these efforts and their influence on school climate allows us to add an important dimension of empirical evidence to this framework.

Many who have studied the achievement gap suggest that students of color often experience a disconnect between their cultural backgrounds and their experiences in schools and argue that this disconnect may help explain why some students are less likely to engage and excel academically. To try to bridge this gap between students’ lives and their school experiences, many ESI schools initially responded to CRE training by modifying their curriculum. Specifically, they became more conscious of the texts they were using and increased the number of books and texts (both fiction and non-fiction) written by people of color and/or featuring male protagonists of color. One teacher explained that CRE has had the school “shift away from Walt Whitman to Ernesto Quiñonez.” Another strategy to bridge the cultural gap was to find meaningful ways to celebrate students’ cultures and backgrounds, including projects that highlighted students’ families/ancestors, communities, or ethnic backgrounds and histories that acknowledged the contributions of individuals and communities of color.

Research suggests that focusing on topics and issues that are intrinsically interesting to students and relevant to their lives as young people can help increase student confidence and engagement—two factors that are positively associated with student achievement. To that end, teachers across subjects also reported incorporating relevant topics—especially current events affecting male students of color—into their instruction. Staff reported focusing curricula and lesson plans on topics that revolve around race, poverty, and specific events, such as the Central Park Five, the Eric Garner case, and the shooting of Tamir Rice—all cases of injustice targeted against young men of color. These were not only deeply relevant to the young men in their classrooms, but also provided opportunities for students (and in some cases, teachers) to develop critical consciousness about the world. In this way, CRE is not just about textbooks and pedagogy, but also represents a “firm commitment to social justice education and seeing the classroom as a site for social change.” CRE should aim to facilitate students’ ability to think critically about systems of power that perpetuate inequities.

Finally, CRE should address underlying biases educators may have about their students, which can further alienate students and appear to contribute to stark disparities in the use of suspensions and other disciplinary actions. As part of the increased focus on CRE, staff in about half of the ESI schools also reported greater understanding of and connection to their students. They described learning about their students’ backgrounds, cultural and religious differences, struggles at home, challenges around gender issues, and specific interests as individuals. Some of the educators we spoke to talked about CRE in terms of its capacity to help teachers better meet students’ social and emotional needs.
How Can We Improve School Climate and Discipline Practices?

Examples included building boys’ self-esteem, helping students feel valued, providing more leadership opportunities, encouraging public speaking, and teaching young men to advocate for their needs. This orientation is notable for its contrast with what is known as a deficit perspective, an attitude often found in high-needs schools that focuses on the disadvantages of these students, rather than the strengths and positive qualities they bring to their education.

In NYC, more than 85 percent of public school students are racial minorities, 59 percent of teachers are white (and 76 percent are female) according to the New York City Independent Budget Office (2014). One teacher explained: “A lot of the young men, we feel like they’re on the periphery of what’s being taught. These students come in sometimes with very—not necessarily negative—just very different experiences. Oftentimes the classroom is an alien place.” ESI was an attempt to tackle this issue head on by emphasizing the importance of CRE. As a result, principals and teachers in ESI schools reported that changes had been made to their curriculum and instruction, as well as their mindsets and beliefs about their students. While many educators and school leaders acknowledge that the development of CRE is still ongoing, there are positive signs that these changes are located in more than just a few classrooms and are becoming part of schools’ overall approach to educating boys of color.45

Conclusion

The recommendations we’ve offered in this brief are meant to break the link between socioeconomic disadvantage and academic achievement, the link between school climate and school discipline practices. The research reviewed here suggests several ways of doing this, but we believe it also makes a larger point that school climate is never about schools alone. If we accept the dogma that schools exist in isolation, we will fail to explore the ways they can thrive with commonsense supports. If we attribute school climate to unchangeable defects, then we run the risks of being unreasonably pessimistic about prospects for improvement. How we think about school climate matters, and how we situate it will determine how we might improve it.

Thus, the recommendations that we offer here speak more implicitly to a need for continual school improvement through leadership training and on-going teacher development; restorative and culturally sustaining practices responsive to the non-cognitive, socioemotional aspects of student development; and equal and early access to high-quality education nested in programs that support low-income students academically and help provide appropriate social, economic, and behavioral skills. These recommendations are not every solution nor will they be universally relevant to all school contexts. Even in best-case scenarios, we must acknowledge that shifting the mindsets of educators and making a real difference for students will take time. For these recommendations to take hold in a meaningful and sustainable way requires commitment from leadership, buy-in among staff, ongoing development, and structures to sustain the work over time and in the face of turnover. Working in concert, however, the recommendations we propose do offer a framework for moving ahead.

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Endnotes


18 Skiba et al. (2008)

19 McIntosh et al. (2014).


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38 Rhodes (2005).


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