Opportunities to Promote a Positive School Climate in the Every Student Succeeds Act

Use this handout in a meeting on school climate with community members, or to support improved school climate as an ESSA school improvement strategy.

Measures of School Quality (Indicators)

- ESSA requires states to use at least four different measures to determine how schools are performing. These measures are called “accountability indicators” and include test scores and graduation rates.
- States have the option to use school climate as one of the indicators of school quality.
- Selecting school climate as an accountability indicator can help states make sure that unfair discipline practices that target certain groups of students (e.g. students of color) are addressed.
- States can measure the quality of school climate by using discipline data (e.g. how many and which groups of students are suspended every year) and school climate surveys completed by students and parents.
- States that select school climate as an indicator of school quality should develop a definition of positive school climate to incorporate in their state plans.

Supporting Districts

- ESSA requires states to describe how they will support districts to improve conditions for student learning in their state plans.
- This includes reducing:
  - bullying and harassment;
  - school discipline practices that remove students from the classroom; and
  - practices that may threaten students’ health and safety. For example, isolating students from others and physically restraining them.
- States should provide districts with funding and other resources to support them in using alternative discipline strategies, such as restorative practices that help students address conflict in a positive way.

State Plans CAN Change

States have already decided what their accountability indicators will be. However, states can make changes to their plans through an amendment process. It’s not too late to push for the indicators you want to see in your state’s plan!

The Dignity in Schools Campaign (dignityinschools.org) envisions an educational system where all schools work toward preventing trauma, repairing harm and promoting healing, and reject a culture of punishment, and criminalization that fuels the school-to-prison pipeline by pushing students out of the classroom and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. In this vision, all schools provide equitable resources — resources like funding, support staff, or positive school discipline interventions. For more, check out their resources: dignityinschools.org/take-action/every-student-succeeds-act-essa/. In particular, check out The Model School Code on Education & Dignity — a set of recommended policies to schools, districts and legislators to help end school pushout and protect the human rights to education, dignity, participation and freedom from discrimination.

This is a Tool from the Engage for Education Equity Toolkit. Find more at partnersforachandeverychild.org/engageforedequity
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State and District Report Cards

- Every year, states and districts must publish a report card that includes measures of school quality, climate and safety in language parents can understand. Measures of school climate that must be included on the report card include:
  - In- and out-of-school suspensions;
  - Expulsions;
  - School-based arrests;
  - Referrals to law enforcement;
  - Chronic absenteeism (excused and unexcused); and
  - Incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment.

School Improvement

- Schools that are low performing based on the state’s accountability indicators must be identified for Targeted Support and Improvement or Comprehensive Support and Improvement.
- When schools are identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement, the school district must work with community stakeholders to develop and carry out a plan to improve student outcomes.
- This plan must be based on a needs assessment, which identifies additional supports and services that could improve the school.
- Community members can push for the school district to include measures of school climate (e.g. discipline data and school climate surveys) in the needs assessment to determine if supports to reduce practices that push students out of the classroom should be included in the improvement plan.

What is Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice is an approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm through inclusive processes that engage students and adults in schools.

Addressing Suspension: What is the impact?

“Besides the obvious loss of time in the classroom, suspensions matter because they are among the leading indicators of whether a child will drop out of school, and because out-of-school suspension increases a child’s risk for future incarceration. Given these increased risks, what we don’t know about the use of suspensions may be putting our children’s futures (and our economy) in jeopardy.”

Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School

The Civil Rights Project

Schools must also support struggling students by introducing effective positive discipline practices, training teachers and staff to better address disciplinary disruption, and engaging with families and community leaders. When children are struggling, don’t push them out; bring them closer.