FRAMEWORK FOR
EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Framework for Effective School Discipline

Positive and effective school discipline is critical to promoting students' successful learning and well-being. This guidance provides an evidence-based framework for effective school discipline policies and practices that promote a positive school climate, reinforce positive and prosocial behaviors, promote school safety, and keep students in the classroom and out of the juvenile justice system. These efforts require a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach including school psychologists, school administrators, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals, and other specialized instructional support personnel. As such, it is essential to develop a shared understanding of the key components of effective discipline, the benefits of effective practices, consequences of punitive discipline, and specific steps schools can take to implement effective approaches. This document outlines these key practices and offers federal, state, and local policy recommendations to promote equitable and effective discipline and to reduce the use of suspension, expulsion, and other exclusionary discipline practices.

KEY COMPONENTS OF POSITIVE AND EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Positive school discipline is a culture and a way of operating. It is not a standalone program you buy or a list of punishable behaviors. It is important that each component listed below work together to create a supportive and equitable culture in which all students feel valued, engaged, and safe.

Positive approaches to discipline:
- Teach, model, practice, and reinforce positive behaviors;
- Are clear and are applied consistently and equitably for all students;
- Employ culturally responsive practices;
- Safeguard the well-being of all students and staff;
- Keep students in school and out of the juvenile justice system;
- Incorporate family involvement;
- Embed principles of positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional development, and restorative justice interventions (i.e., creating a culture of community, engaging all parties affected by a transgression/harm to engage in respectful dialogue, and resolving conflict by collaboratively deciding how to make things right and restore relationships);
- Teach alternatives to violence and aggression; and
- Focus on establishing a positive school climate.

Effective discipline requires a collaborative, school-wide, multitiered approach that prioritizes teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors. This approach focuses on effectively intervening, addressing the cause of unwanted behavior, and teaching alternatives for negative and harmful behavior as opposed to focusing on punishment. Positive and effective discipline incorporates positive behavioral interventions and supports, social–emotional learning, restorative justice practices, and other evidence-based interventions to help resolve conflict and teach alternatives to negative behavior, violence, and aggression.

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These practices are associated with a reduction in student suspension, bullying, and feelings of rejection among students (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; and Waasdorp et al., 2012). Importantly, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports are associated with more equitable discipline practices among students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds (McIntosh et al., 2018; Vincent et al., 2011).

Key components of effective discipline include:
1. Clearly defined behavioral expectations that are taught and consistently reinforced;
2. Clearly understood and equitably enforced consequences that are instructional instead of punitive;
3. A tiered system of behavioral supports to meet the needs of *each student*, including universal prevention, skills building, early identification and intervention service;
4. Data-based decision making within a multidisciplinary problem-solving team;
5. Positive adult role modeling of expected behavior;
6. Culturally responsive positive discipline techniques that help to mitigate bias; and
7. Ongoing, job-embedded professional development to increase school staff capacity to implement effective, positive, and equitable discipline for school staff that reinforces culturally responsive positive discipline techniques and helps to mitigate bias.
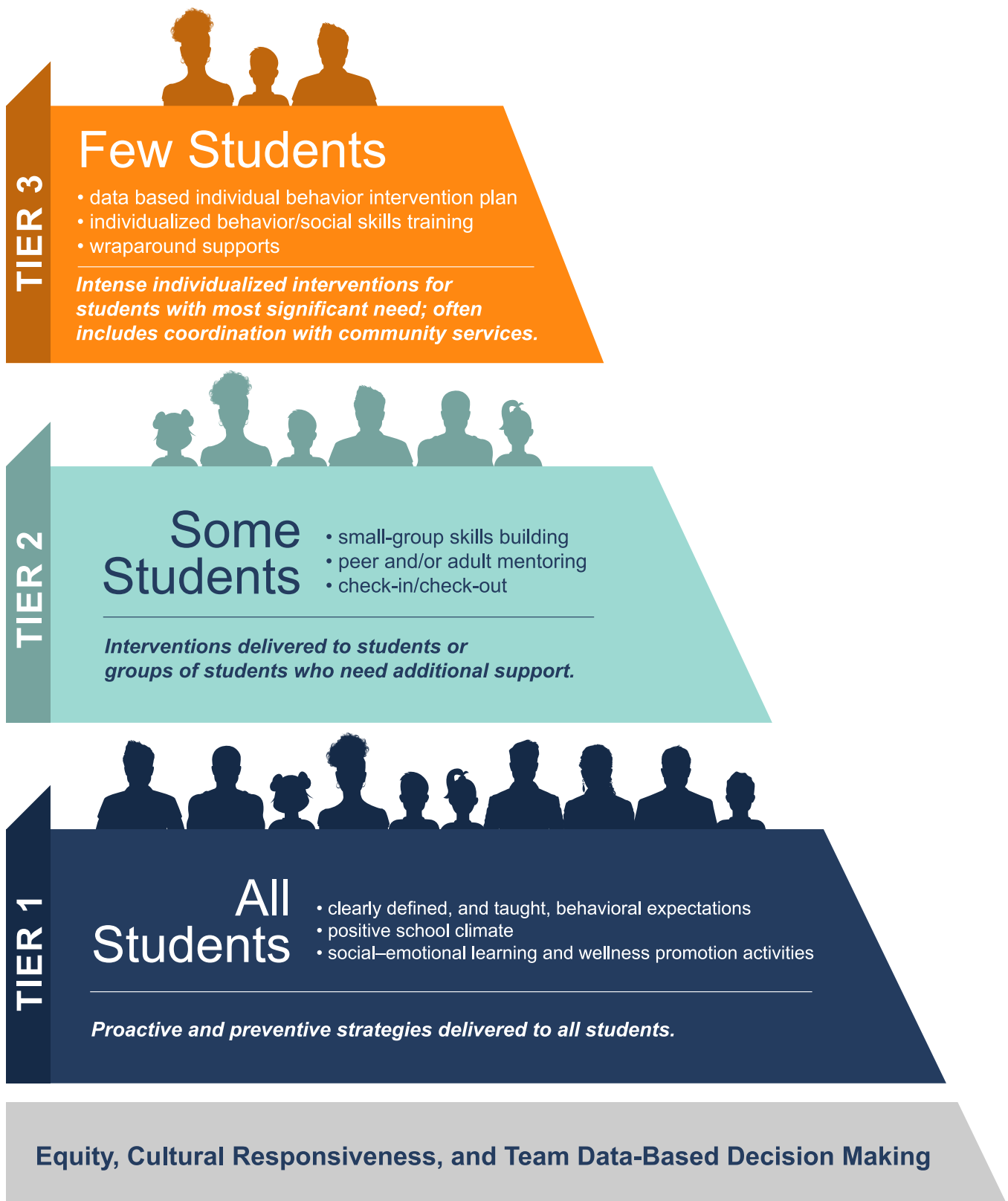
DISCIPLINE APPROACHES

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports – a proactive approach to teaching behavioral expectations and preventing unwanted behaviors. Typically, these supports are delivered in tiers where all students receive preventions, at-risk students receive more targeted interventions, and those with more intensive needs may be assessed and provided individualized support.

Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) – a framework for helping youth understand their emotions, the emotions of others, how to better relate to others, how to manage their feelings and behaviors, and how to engage in responsible decision-making. SEL should be infused and integrated throughout the school community and school routines through explicit instruction and modeling by staff as well as integrated with the curriculum.

Restorative Justice (RJ) – practices focused on building community through healing together after an incident of wrongdoing. RJ focuses on creating resolutions for all parties, including the offender, and particularly for those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or harmed. RJ asks individuals in the school building to consider who has been hurt, what their needs are, whose obligation it is to meet their needs, what the causes are, who has a stake, and what must be done to make things right (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015).

TIER 3

Few Students

- data based individual behavior intervention plan
- individualized behavior/social skills training
- wraparound supports

Intense individualized interventions for students with most significant need; often includes coordination with community services.

TIER 2

Some Students

- small-group skills building
- peer and/or adult mentoring
- check-in/check-out

Interventions delivered to students or groups of students who need additional support.

TIER 1

All Students

- clearly defined, and taught, behavioral expectations
- positive school climate
- social–emotional learning and wellness promotion activities

Proactive and preventive strategies delivered to all students.

Equity, Cultural Responsiveness, and Team Data-Based Decision Making

IMPORTANCE OF A MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

The use of a multidisciplinary team is critical to the sustained success of any school-wide initiative, including the implementation of an effective discipline framework. Schools may employ several different multidisciplinary teams, composed of various stakeholders, to address a variety of school-wide efforts (e.g., school safety, student literacy). The team responsible for developing and implementing school discipline policy and practice should include school administrators, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals (like school psychologists), and other relevant stakeholders, such as family members and students. Important functions of this team include the following.

1. **Develop and implement school-wide, culturally responsive discipline policies and practices.** The team should examine existing codes of conduct, district and state level behavioral policies, and school-level data, including existing discipline data, to design an effective school-wide discipline policy that meets the needs of their school community and promotes equity. This policy should include:
   a. A set of clearly defined school-wide behavioral expectations and a developmentally appropriate plan for teaching and reinforcing these behaviors;
   b. A continuum of equitably enforced consequences that are instructional and do not rely solely on exclusion;
   c. A multitiered system of support (MTSS) that is responsive to the diverse cultural experiences of the student population and that identifies as well as addresses underlying causes of behavior;
   d. A clear process for school staff to appropriately document disciplinary and behavioral concerns that allows for examination of disaggregated data; and
   e. A clear process to facilitate parent and/or school staff referral for a student in need of support.
2. **Regular evaluation of the school-wide policy by examination of school-wide discipline data**. The team must develop a process for regular review of school-wide data that balances student privacy with the ability to:
   a. Identify students with multiple infractions and pair them with the appropriate interventions;
   b. Identify and address school-wide trends in discipline incidents (e.g., specific times of day, locations, behaviors, groups of students);

   c. Identify and remedy discipline disparities (e.g., by race/ethnicity, disability status, gender, LGBTQ+ identity);
   d. Obtain and use student perspectives using validated school climate surveys that can be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, disability, and LGBTQ+ identity (e.g., School Climate Survey Suite; www.pbisapps.org);
   e. Plan, deliver, and evaluate behavior and social–emotional practices along a continuum of support in an equitable and culturally responsive manner; and
   f. Monitor progress and make appropriate adjustments to the policy as needed.

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3. **Identify and address professional development needs of school staff.** Current research indicates that among the primary reasons teachers leave the profession are difficulties managing classroom behavior and lack of access to appropriate staff and professional development (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The multidisciplinary team should do the following.
   a. Work with school and district administration to ensure high-quality and ongoing professional development to promote the use of effective school-wide and classroom discipline practices; additional topics, based on the needs of the school, could include:
      i. ways to mitigate bias in discipline practices; and
      ii. awareness and knowledge of privilege, racism, and implicit bias and their impact on school discipline.

b. Educate school staff about available resources if they need assistance or consultation in working with individual students and groups of students.

4. **Ensure sustainability.** The team must engage in efforts that promote sustainability over time.
   a. Regularly engage with key stakeholders such as families, teachers, and community members.
   b. Develop plans to ensure staff and community buy in.
   c. Share relevant data, including positive outcomes and areas for improvement. Actively seek stakeholder engagement in addressing challenges.
   d. Develop a plan to provide professional development "refreshers" including a plan to educate new staff members on the school's policy and practices.

ADEQUATE ACCESS TO SCHOOL-EMPLOYED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

School-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and in some cases school nurses) have specialized training in school-wide prevention, early identification, and early intervention efforts to address student behavior within the school setting. Importantly, these professionals have knowledge and understanding of the various influences on student behavior and can help properly address the root causes while also addressing systematic variables that contribute to the behavior. School-employed mental health professionals can collaborate with administrators and other school staff to develop and implement evidence-based behavior screenings and data collection. They help ensure that students demonstrating discipline and behavior concerns receive the necessary and appropriate interventions and work with teachers to implement effective discipline strategies. Importantly, school-employed mental health professionals can help provide high-quality and ongoing professional development to school staff. Failure to implement these critical processes can result in inappropriate and even harmful discipline practices that ultimately undermine student well-being, safety, and learning. As such, it is imperative that these professionals are staffed at adequate levels: 1:500 for school psychologists, 1:250 for school counselors, 1:250 for school social workers, and 1:750 for school nurses.

SCHOOL-EMPLOYED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

School-employed mental health professionals like school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers provide and support wellness promotion, prevention, and intervention services to support students' social–emotional learning and mental and behavioral health. They work with teachers, administrators, and parents to create safe and supportive learning environments and ensure that all students are successful in school.

Despite their widespread use, punitive approaches to discipline do not work to improve student behavior or safety.

CLARIFYING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Police who work in schools should be trained as school resource officers (SROs) according to the standards outlined by the National Association of School Resource Officers. Appropriately trained school resource officers can play an important role in school safety teams and creating positive relationships with students, but they have no role on school discipline teams. Schools that employ SROs or other school-based law enforcement should enter into a memorandum of understanding that clearly outlines their roles and responsibilities and clearly states that **SROs and other school law enforcement officials have no role in student discipline matters**. Discipline is the responsibility of school administrators, and school law enforcement should not be involved unless there is a clear legal violation or their involvement is necessary to protect students and/or staff (e.g., a student bringing a weapon to campus). It must be clear that in such cases these are legal actions, not disciplinary actions. It is never appropriate to rely on or expect school resource officers to take on disciplinary issues that are the responsibility of the school administrator.

IMPACT OF PUNITIVE, EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

Despite their widespread use, punitive approaches to discipline do not work to improve student behavior or safety. Zero tolerance policies that focus primarily on punishing negative behavior can decrease academic achievement and student perception of safety while also increasing rates of dropout, problem behaviors, and involvement in the criminal justice system (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Monahan et al., 2014).

Moreover, the widespread use of punitive approaches (e.g., suspension and expulsion) and inconsistent policies and practices often disproportionately impact minorities and students with disabilities (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2013, 2018). According to data gathered as part of the 2015–2016 Civil Rights Data collection (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2018), a survey of U.S. public schools and school districts, approximately 2.7 million students (5–6% of overall student enrollment) were suspended or expelled during the 2015–2016 school year. The use of these exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately impact Black males and students with disabilities. The disparities between Black and White students has nearly quadrupled over the last 50 years (Losen et al., 2015).

Although the goal of effective discipline is to reduce the use of ineffective and harmful exclusionary discipline practices, the team must acknowledge that there are times in which their use is mandated by law (e.g., weapons or drug use on campus) or necessary to protect the safety of others. However, the school must make every effort to ensure that students who are excluded from school have the opportunity to make academic progress even while excluded and that they have access to behavioral supports related to the discipline infraction upon their return (See Swenson & Ryder, 2016).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Implementation of effective discipline requires coordinated action and investment at the federal, state, and local levels. Examples of policies that will advance effective discipline include:

Federal Policies

1. Require states to publicly report discipline data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and disability status annually, including the number of students suspended and expelled and the reasons for suspension and expulsion.
2. Support investment in efforts to recruit and retain school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and other qualified personnel who can provide behavioral supports to students.
3. Work with colleges of education and other teacher preparation programs to ensure that preservice teacher education includes training on positive and effective school-wide discipline and classroom management.
4. Reinstate the 2014 joint U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice school discipline guidance package.

District/Building Level Policies

1. Eliminate zero tolerance policies and replace them with positive approaches that teach and reinforce desired behavior and support student needs.
2. Develop and consistently implement a school/district-wide discipline policy that includes:
   a. Clear behavioral expectations and an appropriate (and consistently enforced) continuum of consequences;
   b. Adoption of a culturally responsive school-wide behavior framework that reinforces positive behaviors, reduces negative behaviors, and provides a range of behavioral supports; and
   c. Clearly delineates the proper role of school administrators, and specifies that school resource officers should play no role in noncriminal student behavior.
3. Employ the use of multidisciplinary teams to regularly review student discipline data to identify and address disparities, and provide appropriate support to students who need it through a multitiered system of support.
4. Provide ongoing professional development for administrators, teachers, and specialized instructional support personnel, school resource officers, and other relevant personnel on effective classroom management strategies, strategies to mitigate bias, and other evidence-based methods to effectively handle student discipline while decreasing the use of suspension, expulsion, and other forms of exclusionary discipline.

5. Ensure adequate access to school-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers) who can provide needed mental and behavioral health supports to all students.

6. Maintain data collection systems that allow for the review of disciplinary data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and disability status.

7. Obtain regular, meaningful input from families and students on discipline policy and practice.

Role of School Administrators

School leaders at the building and district levels play a critical role in prioritizing equitable, proactive, and restorative discipline practices. District leaders can set policies that require all schools to engage in efforts to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and implement effective practices that promote a positive school climate and reduce discipline disparities. Principals have a responsibility to create schools that are safe, supportive, and equitable environments for all students. Importantly, school principals don't need to wait for a district-level mandate to begin incorporating effective practices to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.

ACTIONS SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS CAN TAKE NOW TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

State and federal policy change can take time, and but there are immediate actions that school administrators can take to advance effective discipline in their districts and individual school buildings.

District Leaders

- Allocate funds that ensure all schools are appropriately staffed with school-employed mental health professionals, at ratios aligned with national recommendations. Create district-wide policy that prohibits the use of exclusionary discipline, except in extreme cases, and as a measure of last resort.

- Ensure school principals receive ongoing professional development on effective discipline, including approaches such as restorative practices, social–emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and support, culturally responsive classroom management, etc.

- Establish clear guidelines for school personnel and school resource officers regarding the role of each in responding to disciplinary infractions.

- Regularly review the district's code of conduct, in conjunction with district-wide discipline data, to determine if certain offenses disproportionately impact specific student groups (e.g., disrespect, insubordination, dress codes) and if exclusionary discipline is applied at disparate rates. Create a plan to immediately examine and remedy any disparities.

School Principals

- Develop a school-wide discipline plan that focuses on prevention and early intervention and seeks to reduce the use of suspension and expulsion.

- Evaluate policies and processes for vulnerable decision points—or times when decision-making in discipline may be susceptible to bias, such as when a teacher seeks to write a referral or an administrator decides to suspend a student (see McIntosh et al., 2014)—and provide training to staff in recognizing and monitoring for bias in these decisions.

- Examine school discipline data monitoring for disproportionate impact (particularly for students with disabilities and other minoritized students) and make a plan to remedy any disparities.

- Prioritize hiring and supporting staff who are diverse and culturally reflective of the population being served.

- Provide ongoing and job embedded professional development for teachers, school-employed mental health professionals, and other team members on effective discipline, including approaches such as restorative practices, social–emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and supports, culturally responsive classroom management, etc.

- Structure and encourage the role of school-employed mental health professionals to provide mental health and social emotional supports to students, deliver consultation and support to teachers and other colleagues, and support trauma-informed schools and practices.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are uniquely trained school-based professionals who help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments. The broad-based role of school psychologists, as well as the range of competencies they possess, is described in the NASP *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2020).

School psychologists have substantial training and preparation in data-based decision making (at the individual and systems levels) and research and program evaluation. Thus, they possess the knowledge and skills required to help lead efforts related to conducting needs assessments, establishing progress monitoring systems, evaluating and interpreting data, and helping use data to inform future directions for bullying intervention and prevention efforts. Additionally, school psychologists are trained in

counseling, positive behavior supports, and other school-based intervention techniques necessary to help prevent and remediate bullying behavior. School psychologists possess skills in consultation and working with others collaboratively, including fellow educators, families, and community stakeholders, making them prime candidates to serve on school safety teams and advisory boards. With extensive knowledge of education law, they can also help ensure legal compliance.

With their extensive understanding of school systems, knowledge of student development and behavior, and understanding of mental health, school psychologists offer a unique perspective. As a result, they can help design appropriate discipline procedures, identify individual student and school-wide factors that may contribute to bullying and victim behavior, facilitate the establishment of systems of support for students, design methods for teaching prosocial behaviors, and offer suggestions for how to respond to incidents of bullying.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services*, NASP Practice Model Overview.

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Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion: Going Beyond Admiring the Problem to Taking Action Podcast

NASP MISSION

NASP empowers school psychologists by advancing effective practices to improve students' learning, behavior, and mental health.