School discipline policies have been under considerable scrutiny amid concerns over the negative effects of zero tolerance and similarly-inflexible disciplinary practices on students' educational prospects. The January 2014 release of a guidance package on school discipline by the U.S. Department of Education has spurred important discussions about how to define and remedy discriminatory school discipline practices, the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of zero tolerance policies, the pros and cons of suspension and expulsion, and the underlying needs of students with behavior problems.

While the topic of school discipline may be a recent headline, it is not a new issue, and there are resources to help those interested in promoting constructive school disciplinary approaches. Here are five things to know about school discipline and the movement to reform disciplinary practices:

1. **School disciplinary actions are, at their core, a learning opportunity.**
   Though often viewed through a negative lens as managing student behavior, school personnel, families, and other student support services can work together to use disciplinary matters to support positive child and youth development and ensure school success.

2. **Student behavior problems may be about more than the behavior itself.**
   Student disciplinary infractions may reflect students' struggles with increasingly rigorous academic expectations, or circumstances affecting them outside of school. While behavior issues, absenteeism, and violence in schools undeniably impact academic instruction, policies and disciplinary actions that fail to consider the range of student backgrounds and contexts are missing an opportunity to identify needed supports for at-risk and struggling students.
Research shows a strong link between disciplinary policies and actions and a host of negative outcomes.

Suspension in ninth grade doubles a student's likelihood of dropping out, from 16 percent to 32 percent for those suspended just once, and students with a history of disciplinary issues are at risk of ending up entangled in the criminal justice system. Nonpunitive responses to negative behaviors (such as targeted behavioral supports) have shown promise in reducing violent behavior in school.

Recent federal guidance supports efforts to ensure that discipline practices are fair and equitable.

In response to evidence of the uneven application of school discipline practices based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics -- known as "disproportionality" -- the Department of Education is encouraging schools and districts to develop research-based, locally-tailored approaches to discipline that strive to circumvent exclusionary discipline, especially for minor misbehaviors. Many school systems are embracing this opportunity to showcase and/or accelerate their progress in this area.

Schools set the tone for the disciplinary climate.

Thoughtfully-designed and administered school discipline policies can serve to maintain safety and order, while also providing supports for students. Encouraging positive relationships between students and adults, promoting students' sense of belonging, having student supports available, and training staff on classroom management are at the core of positive school climates and solution-focused disciplinary environments, and can minimize the need to resort to harsher school discipline.

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