Exploring the Impact of Interventions in K-12 Schools

Desiree A. Drake
ddrake8@emich.edu

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EXPLORING THE IMPACT
OF INTERVENTIONS
IN K-12 SCHOOLS

Desiree A. Drake
Dr. Celeste Hawkins, Mentor

ABSTRACT

This research will examine how recent disciplinary, mentoring, and testing-based interventions may impact the educational outcomes of youth facing challenges in K-12 schools. In the United States, failing educational systems may unintentionally channel poor and minority youth toward a trajectory that makes them vulnerable to involvement in the juvenile justice system, due to punitive disciplinary policies and practices that push students out of school. This exclusion from school can put students at greater risk of entering the "school-to-prison pipeline," which has garnered nationwide attention and is an issue facing schools across the country (Witt, 2007).

The impact of exclusion and harsh disciplinary practices in schools can have devastating consequences for minority youth. Research underscores the importance of addressing this issue by providing alternatives, such as mentoring or afterschool programs, or through school behavioral interventions to counter this alarming trend. "Although a strong body of research exists on the risks for delinquency, few studies have attempted to understand the variables within schools that exacerbate or counteract these risks" (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005, p. 69). Christle et al. (2005) identified academic failure, exclusionary discipline practices, and dropout as key elements in the "school-to-prison pipeline." This literature review will focus on zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, negative impacts on student learning, and the impact of mentoring as an intervention with students who may be facing challenges in K-12 schools.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

An Examination of Zero-tolerance Policies

The evolution of the "school-to-prison pipeline." The school-to-prison pipeline is tied to the privatization of the prison industry, which began during the Reagan administration (Giroux, 2003) when "the U.S. Customs Agency developed zero-tolerance policies in the 1980s to target the booming drug trade" (Martinez, 2009, p. 154). As crime became a more pressing issue, the Clinton administration passed a number of anti-crime bills, including the "War on Drugs," the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. According to Giroux (2003), the prison-industrial complex resulted from "three-strikes-you're-out" policies requiring lifetime incarceration for repeat offenders, even those guilty of nonviolent crimes (p. 557). The rapid increase in prison populations led to the privatization of prisons to meet the soaring cost of incarceration.

During the same period, the Clinton administration passed PL 103-382, known as the Gun-Free Schools Act, targeting drugs, alcohol, fights, and other misbehavior in schools. Schools began to view truancy, insubordination, and dress code violations as serious misbehavior. According to Lamont (2013), the term "zero-tolerance" was given to a school or district policy that mandated predetermined consequences for various student offenses. Over the years, zero-tolerance policies broadened in scope to include a variety of school disciplinary infractions, such as incorrect dress code, tardiness, swearing, truancy, insubordination, and disrespect to teachers and authority figures (Axman, 2005; Essex, 2004; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Wald, 2001). Punishments typically ranged from in- or out-of-school suspensions to expulsion. Such measures were intended to maintain order by removing students who did not adhere to school rules or continued to disrupt the learning environment. This was also intended to discourage misbehavior by other students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Impacts of the "school-to-prison pipeline" on vulnerable students. Disciplinary exclusion, however, reinforced the opportunity gap faced by poor and minority students. "The

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school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately impacts the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color, especially African Americans, who are suspended and expelled at the highest rates, despite comparable rates of infraction" (Witt, 2007, p. 1). The law did "not require school administrators to provide access to continued education through alternative schooling for expelled students" (as cited in Martinez, 2009, p. 154). Rather than seeking to understand the root causes of individual student misbehavior, school administrators used zero-tolerance policies as a way to remove them from the educational setting. "This expansion of focusing on school disciplinary issues shifted the focus away from pressing matters rather than paying attention to the issues that caused the insubordinate actions" (Casella, 2003, p. 874).

Being excluded from the classroom makes it easier for the student to become part of the school-to-prison pipeline. Bickel and Qualls; Steinberg, Allensworth, and Johnson; and Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman stated:

> The use of school exclusion as a disciplinary tool appears to carry with it substantial risk for both short- and long-term negative outcomes. At the school level, rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion have consistently been found to be associated with perceptions of more negative school climate. (as cited in Skiba et al., 2014, p. 640-641)

Noguera (2009) wrote that:

> Too often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior. Schools also punish the neediest children because in many schools, there is a fixation on behavior management and social control that often outweighs and overrides all other priorities and goals. (p. 113)

Brown (2007) noted that, "In addition, emphases on students excluded from school through disciplinary action as 'disciplinary problems,' rather than as learners, can lead to a greater focus on punishment and behavior modification than on academic learning" (p. 434).

When there is such a heavy reliance in schools to focus on behavior, opportunities to address academic needs go unaddressed. In their meta-analysis, Maguin and Loeber (1996) found that

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poor academic performance appears to be related to frequency, persistence, and seriousness of delinquent activity (as cited in Kremer, Flower, Huang, & Vaughn, 2016). Focusing on a student's punishment rather than the reason behind the behavior problem may also create tension between teachers and students. In an interview conducted by *FutureEd*, Steinberg, Allensworth, and Johnson (2013) stated:

> Our study finds that out-of-school suspensions have a negative effect on student achievement for students suspended for any infraction, including for non-violent or what we call classroom disorder infractions...What we find specifically is suspensions for any reason are tied to lower scores in math and English language arts tests and that the negative effect increases with each additional day of suspension... We find some evidence that suspension has a negative effect on school attendance, particularly for younger students, grades 3 through 5. But we're not talking about many missed days. We also find that students suspended for classroom disorder infractions are significantly more likely to receive a suspension in the subsequent school year. (para. 2)

Growth of school-exclusionary practices. The use of exclusionary practices has grown exponentially over the past three decades. According to Wald (2001), in 1974, 1.7 million students were suspended from school. By 1998, the number of suspended students increased to 3.1 million. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) reported that, out of the 49 million students enrolled in public schools, 3.5 million students were suspended in-school, 3.45 million students were suspended out-of-school, and 130,000 students were expelled from public school during the 2011-2012 school year.

Data from the State of Michigan illustrate the prevalence of school suspensions, most notably in Metro Detroit, located in Wayne County (Figure 1). Across the state of Michigan, a total 1,319 students were expelled during the 2015-2016 school year with the average length of expulsion from school increasing each academic year (Figure 2).
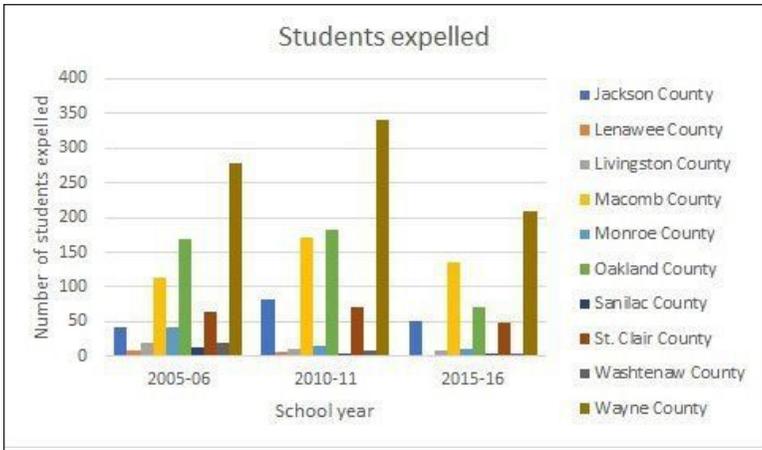
Figure 1. Slagter, L. (2017) Retrieved from: https://www.mlive.com/news/annarbor/index.ssf/2017/07/school_expulsion_policies.html
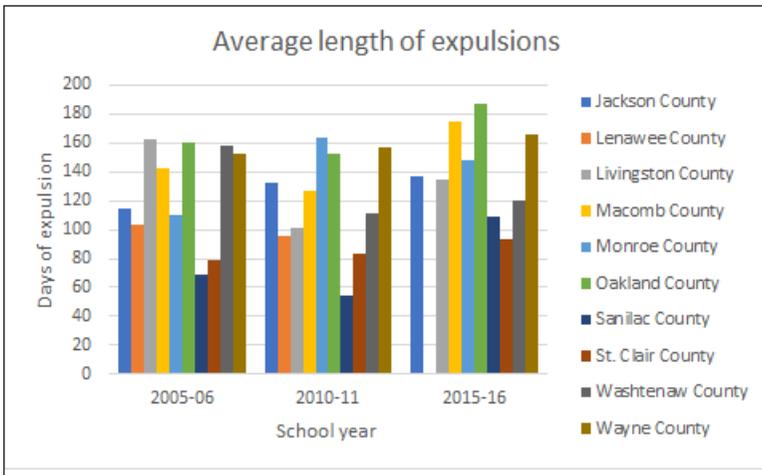

Figure 2. Slagter, L. (2017) Retrieved from: https://www.mlive.com/news/annarbor/index.ssf/2017/07/school_expulsion_policies.html

Concerns about the use of school-exclusionary practices, particularly in low-income and minority communities, has led to a growing resistance to suspension and expulsion. The American Bar Association elected to end its support of PL 103-382, arguing "...that it is wrong to mandate automatic expulsion or referral to juvenile court without taking into consideration the specifics of

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each case. It is understandably important for legal professionals to challenge a "one-punishment-fits-all approach" (Taras et al., 2003, p. 1203). More recent publications note that, "[p]rofessional associations such as the American Psychological Association (2008) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) have issued reports on the ineffectiveness of and risks associated with disciplinary exclusion, and have recommended the use of such measures only as a last resort" (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 642).

Michigan has enacted a state law in regard to the severity of school discipline. Slagter (2017) wrote that:

> Under the new state law, school administrators and board of education trustees now are required to consider the following seven factors before expelling or suspending a student: student's age, disciplinary history, disability, seriousness of behavior, whether the behavior posed a safety risk, have restorative practices been utilized and whether a lesser intervention would address the behavior. (When is expulsion required? para. 1)

The law would hold districts and administrators responsible for not judging the student based on a single infraction. Slagter (2017) added:

> The change in state law also encourages schools to implement restorative practices, which can take various forms of conflict resolution where the students involved talk through how their behavior affects others. This law will give students the opportunity to be heard and given assistance academically and behaviorally. (When is expulsion required? para. 1)

School exclusion and grade retention. Data show that exclusion from school affects "grade retention," or the practice of requiring a student who had been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year. Grade retention is widespread and involves large numbers of pupils and great expenditures of funds (Jackson, 1975). The Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University reported that during the 2001-2002 academic year, the average education expenditure per pupil was estimated to be $7,524 (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Xia and Glennie (2005) added that,

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Past research shows that prior retention experience is associated with higher rates of retention in later grades. Costs associated with retention in later grades can be estimated by: the increased probability of retention in later grades times the average annual expenditure per pupil. A few studies have shown the correlation between prior retention experience and special education placement. (p. 2)

Research showed that retained students experience a higher risk of dropping out of school. Students who drop out consume fewer educational resources, making them vulnerable to future incarceration.

Efforts to Mitigate the School-to-prison Pipeline

No Child Left Behind. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. NCLB was considered an update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. ESEA was created to connect federal funding of school districts to academic achievement in kindergarten to twelfth-grade schools. ESEA initially offered more than $1 billion a year to assist districts serving disadvantaged students. Ongoing reform of ESEA expanded the role of the federal government in local school systems (Klein, 2015).

ESEA was initially intended to address education inequality during President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." Paul (2016) wrote that "ESEA is an extensive statute that funds primary and secondary education, emphasizing high standards and accountability. As mandated in the act, funds [were] authorized for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational needs" (para. 1). ESEA's Title I provision allocated funding to schools and districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families, accounting for "5/6ths of the total funds authorized by the ESEA" (para. 2). Title I's original purpose was to address the disparities in reading, writing, and mathematics scores between low socioeconomic students in rural and urban school districts, and those from higher-income areas. Title II provided support for school libraries and the aquisition

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of textbooks for public and private schools, as well as funding preschool programs. Title III, also known as the Adult Education Act of 1966, "ensured that supplementary educational centers and services would receive funding for additional support services to bolster school attendance" (para. 3). Title III also funded educational programs when school was not in session, and provided special education services to rural and urban areas. In 1968, Title III was amended to include the Bilingual Education Act and the Education of the Handicapped Act. This was the first time that handicap and bilingual education was nationally recognized and funded under United States federal law. "Title IV...allocated $100 million over a five-year period to fund educational research and training, and Title V supplemented grants under Public Law 874 to state departments. ...Title VI provided definitions and limitations related to the law" (para. 3).

The 2002 NCLB legislation made federal funds for school districts contingent upon the academic performance of "at-risk" students, such as English-language learners, special education students, and those from low socioeconomic and minority communities. While states were not mandated to conform to the NCLB guidelines and policies (NCLB Act, Subpart 1, SEC. 1120A), they would be at risk of losing federal funding if they refused to comply (Klein, 2015).

NCLB required districts to test students' math and reading performance in grades three through eight, using tests approved by the government, such the Northwest Evaluation Association test or the Measures of Academic Progress test. The testing continued at the high school level, culminating in the administration of the American College Testing examination or the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Schools were mandated to report the results of their student population as a whole, as well as by subcategories, including English language-learners, students enrolled in special education, racial minorities, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Klein, 2015).

NCLB required districts to bring all students to a "proficient" level in mathematics and reading by a certain deadline; states were permitted to determine what their "level of proficiency" should be. The federal government measured each state's "adequate yearly progress" (AYP), subjecting those schools that failed to a number

of progressively negative consequences. According to SEC. 1111 of the NCLB Act,

> If States fail to meet the deadlines established by the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994…for demonstrating that the State has in place challenging academic content standards and student achievement standards, and a system for measuring and monitoring adequate yearly progress, the Secretary shall withhold 25% of the funds that would otherwise be available to the State for State administration and activities under this part in each year until… (it is) determined that the State meets those requirements (NCLB Act, SEC. 111).

Failing schools also lost a portion of their federal funding for intervention strategies and, after two years of missing their AYP benchmark, were required to offer students the opportunity to transfer to a better-performing public school within the same district. After failing to meet their AYP standard for three years, schools were mandated to offer free tutoring. State interventions, including school closure or changing a school into a charter school, occurred after a fourth year of failure (Klein, 2015).

In 2011, the Obama administration dispensed waivers allowing some financially-challenged states to avoid the negative consequences of the NCLB legislation by embracing certain education redesign priorities (Klein, 2015). States that accepted the waivers did not have to meet the proficiency deadlines, but instead agreed to set standards aimed at preparing students for continuing education and future career opportunities. States had the option of choosing whether they would adhere to Common Core practices or meet the rigorous curriculum standards set by post-secondary institutions and use assessments aligned to meet those specific standards. The Obama administration also required state districts to administer teacher-evaluation systems "…that would take into account student progress on state standardized tests, as well as single out 15% of schools for turnaround efforts or more targeted interventions" (Klein, 2015, What do the Obama administration's NCLB waivers do?).

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a reauthorization of the 1965 ESEA. Intended to reform NCLB, ESSA offered "critical protections" for those considered "disadvantaged" or "special-need" by seeking to

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ensure that all students in America would be "taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers…" (US Department of Education, n.d., p. 6). ESSA also established that state-administered assessments should provide records both of student achievement and their progress toward meeting high academic standards. Assessments should include "evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators consistent with our Investing in Innovation and Promise neighborhoods" (p. 6). ESSA expanded the federal Department of Education's administration of high-quality preschools, strengthening the effort to raise graduation rates in the lowest-performing schools over a period of time.

Support Programs in Schools

Mentoring programs. Mentoring programs can offer significant support to students with frequent behavioral problems and those who struggle with personal environmental disadvantages. "The role of a mentor is to specifically define academic/professional goals and to serve as a guide toward those goals" (Platz & Hyman, 2013, p. 10). Mentoring programs have become an integral part of school support systems in recent years. DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, and Valentine (2011) wrote that:

> The large number of mentoring programs currently in the United States stems, in part, from longstanding public and governmental concern over the negative outcomes experienced by significant proportions of youth in this country, especially those growing up under conditions of disadvantage. (p. 58)

Mentors may address challenges faced by students, such as low socioeconomic status, the household environment, lack of basic living necessities, or unstable living conditions. Effective mentoring programs provide students with the resources and attention they need to succeed in an academic setting. "Young adults who face an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 55% more likely to be enrolled in college than those who did not have a mentor" (The Mentoring Effect, 2014, p. 17). Mentoring programs have been shown to offset the rates of disciplinary exclusion as punishment and academic failure. According to Bandura, Hamilton and Hamilton, Klaw and Rhodes, Taylor, and Walker and Freedman, "by serving as supportive models of success, mentors may directly stimulate improvements in adolescents' self perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors" (as cited in

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Grossman & Rhodes, 2002, p. 201). Research also shows that positive mentor relationships may have an impact on adolescents' perceptions about instructors, administrators, or parents by demonstrating that positive, caring relationships with adults are possible. Further, Flaxman, Ascher, and Harringon; Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch; and Rhodes, Haight, and Briggs stated that "helping adolescents cope with everyday stressors, providing a model for effective conflict resolution, and indirectly reducing parental stress, mentor relationships are thought to have the capacity to facilitate improvements in parent-child interactions" (as cited in Grossman & Rhodes, 2002, p. 201).

Mentoring programs have shown to be effective for young people (Noguera, 2009) because these programs locate the problem (a lack of role models) and solution (deployment of predominately middle-class volunteers) at a personal level, fit neatly into American notions of upward mobility, and mirror the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" ideology (Walker, 2005, p. 513). Research recommends that successful mentoring interventions should continue to be implemented in school districts, especially those that serve a high population of minorities and students living in lower-income communities, as well as those who demonstrate a need for academic support (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006).

Multi-tiered system of support. Many schools have adopted multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), more familiarly known as response to intervention (RTI) programs or school wide positive behavior supports. "RTI has been described as an alternative approach to the traditional IQ-discrepancy approach for identifying students with learning disabilities" (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002, p. 485). This multi-step, or multi-tiered, approach closely monitors student performance to determine appropriate instructional and intervention decisions, which might include consideration for special education services (Sugai & Horner, 2009). This method allows schools to address students' individual needs and learning styles. Avoiding a "one intervention-one school" perspective, RTI offers a number of structured responses to the needs of students inside and outside of the classroom (p. 225). RTI uses six primary methods that can be applied across curriculum areas:

> (1) Interventions that are supported by data-based research, (2) Interventions that are organized along a tiered continuum that increases in intensity (e.g., frequency,

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duration, individualization, specialized supports, etc.), (3) Standardized problem-solving protocol for assessment and instructional decision making, (4) Explicit data-based decision rules for assessing student progress and making instructional and intervention adjustments, (5) Emphasis on assessing and ensuring implementation integrity, and (6) Regular and systematic screening for early identification of students whose performance is not responsive to instruction (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 226).

Figure 3 illustrates a MTSS through a model ascending from school-wide behavioral support (Tier I) to targeted, intense support for individuals (Tier III). Designed to offer a variety of interventions to address students' academic and environmental needs, this system seeks to decrease the number of students experiencing suspension and expulsion from school. Depending on the severity of uniqueness of each student's case, the tiered system is constructed to provide support from all three tiers.
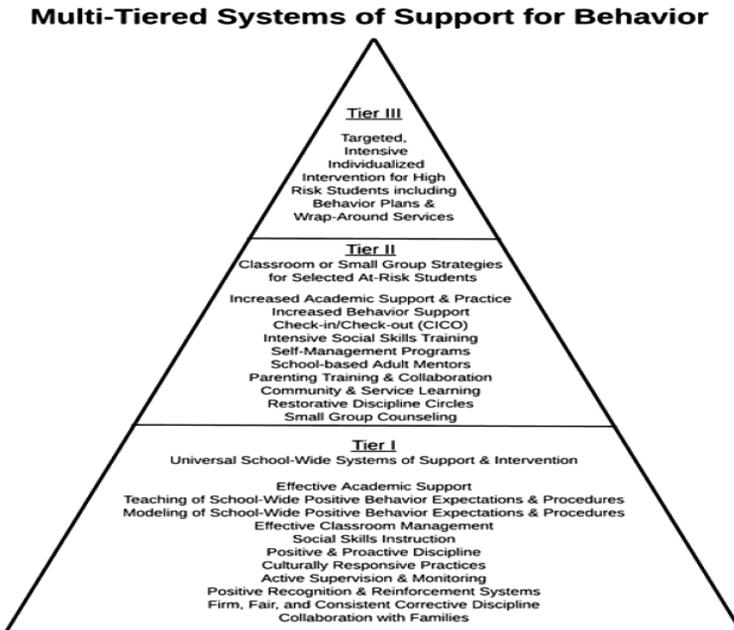
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Behavior

Tier III
Targeted, Intensive Individualized Intervention for High Risk Students including Behavior Plans & Wrap-Around Services

Tier II
Classroom or Small Group Strategies for Selected At-Risk Students

Increased Academic Support & Practice
Increased Behavior Support
Check-in/Check-out (CICO)
Intensive Social Skills Training
Self-Management Programs
School-based Adult Mentors
Parenting Training & Collaboration
Community & Service Learning
Restorative Discipline Circles
Small Group Counseling

Tier I
Universal School-Wide Systems of Support & Intervention

Effective Academic Support
Teaching of School-Wide Positive Behavior Expectations & Procedures
Modeling of School-Wide Positive Behavior Expectations & Procedures
Effective Classroom Management
Social Skills Instruction
Positive & Proactive Discipline
Culturally Responsive Practices
Active Supervision & Monitoring
Positive Recognition & Reinforcement Systems
Firm, Fair, and Consistent Corrective Discipline
Collaboration with Families

Figure 3. Brazoport Independent School District. (2019). Retrieved from: www.brazosportisd. net/district/departments/positive_behavioral_interventions

Multi-tiered support systems disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline by offering those most affected by zero-tolerance policies a number of interventions. Without taking into account the student's personal environment and academic outlook, school districts will continue to fail minority and low-income students.

CONCLUSION

This review of literature has provided research on the history and concept of zero-tolerance policies, their negative impacts on student learning, an examination of supports in schools, and the effects of mentoring as an intervention to address these issues. This paper examined several solutions used to mitigate the risk factors facing students who are likely to experience exclusion from school. Ongoing revisions to our nation's educational policy have brought about some improvements, but we still face a number of challenges to achieving educational equity.

Though enacted to create a safe educational environment, zero-tolerance policies have had a disastrous effect on an unprecedented number of students who are minority, poor, and/or who have learning disabilities. The literature discussed in this review suggested that school systems should implement effective restorative interventions for behavioral issues rather than excluding students. Mentoring programs have been shown to be effective, along with other promising school strategies, interventions, and support programs. Engaging youth who are at greater risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline, and successfully connecting them with proper support, may have a positive impact in their lives. Further research on the development of successful mentoring programs with structured concepts and goal is needed.

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