

2023

Shop Talk: Decreasing The School-to-Prison Pipeline for African American Male Students

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ABSTRACT

SHOP TALK: DECREASING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS

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Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations
Northern Illinois University, 2023
Kelly H. Summers, Director

This dissertation used a plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycle from improvement science to implement a tier three intervention for African American male students in a middle school. The students who participated in the intervention were considered at-risk for school failure based upon behavior and grades in the first quarter of the school year. Community members assisted in creating a shop-talk experience for the students where they were able to engage with each other and successful African American male members of the community. Results indicate the shop-talk intervention was successful. Planning for the next PDSA cycle is discussed as well and a professional reflection on the process is included in this dissertation.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2023

SHOP TALK: DECREASING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE FOR
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS

BY

TREVEDA M. REDMOND

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY,
AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Kelly H. Summers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am blessed to have a bunch of people who have front row seats in my life. These are the people that consistently support me in everything that I do in life. I would first like to thank my fiancé Menelek Shah for encouraging me while I was writing this dissertation. Your love and support have kept me grounded in this process. Your openness and honesty were invaluable. Our conversations about education and policing have kept me on my toes. Thank you!

To my children, Jalon and Jayme, thank you for your love and support throughout my academic and professional career. I am so proud to be your mother. It is because of you that I continue to push to higher heights. Thank you for being the wind beneath my wings; you have helped me soar above all obstacles in front of me.

To my sorority sisters of Delta Sigma Theta Incorporated, thank you ladies for staying the course with me. I am blessed to call you my sisters.

To my pastor, Joe Mitchell, thank you for the prayers and never-ending support. I thank God that I was blessed with an amazing church family that continues to cheer me on from the sidelines.

Finally, to my dissertation chair, Dr. Kelly Summers, thank you for your guidance, patience, and confidence throughout this dissertation process. You are an amazing mentor and model for leadership in education. I appreciate your commitment and involvement from start to finish. You provided the right amount of pressure and support at just the right time. Your wisdom, skill, and insight have allowed me to shine. Thank you for sharing your expertise with

me. Your commitment to ensuring that I produce my best is most appreciated. I am forever grateful. I am blessed to have you in my life as a dissertation chair and as a friend.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Bridget McEwen-Churchill. While my mother has taught me many things in life, she didn't teach me how to live without her. Every day is a struggle to continue to move forward in life without her. It is because of my mother that I strive to attain all that life has to offer me. While my mother is not present on earth with me, I know that she has been present throughout this entire dissertation journey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly”. While Dr. King was not speaking directly of the U.S. public school system, one of the major injustices of the past several decades has been perpetrated in our schools in the form of disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices. Exclusionary discipline is typically defined as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2014). Research indicates that some groups of students, namely Black and Latino males, receive out of school suspensions and expulsions more frequently than their non-Black or Latino counterparts. This phenomenon has come to be known as disproportionate exclusionary discipline, which is the act of schools suspending and expelling certain groups of students more than others, in a manner that does not match the overall demographics of the school. Black and Latino students, and males more specifically, are suspended and expelled more from public schools when compared to other students, and moreover, this trend has played out in U.S. schools for decades (Skiba et al., 2014). A short-term outcome of exclusionary discipline is that a student is excluded from the school environment but short term exclusions have the potential for longer-term negative impacts. “A single suspension or expulsion from school doubles the risk for a student repeating a grade, itself a strong risk factor for dropping out of high school” (Mallett, 2016, p. 21). States have started to pay attention to this research and have put

into place statewide policies aimed at keeping students in school by severely limiting the conditions under which a student can be suspended or expelled. As a result, schools have been tasked with figuring out ways to serve students within the school who may have otherwise been excluded (suspended or expelled) due to some sort of behavior that the adults in the building deemed inappropriate enough to rise to the level of school exclusion.

While the research on the disproportionate exclusionary discipline is clear (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 641) what is much less clear is how to serve students within the school setting who may have behavioral or emotional struggles that would have resulted in exclusion in the past. In Illinois, the state where my study takes place, a law took effect on September 15, 2016, commonly referred to as Senate Bill 100, that took direct aim at exclusionary discipline in our highly diverse state.

Statement of the Problem

Zero tolerance policies and exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspensions and expulsions have historically affected students of color in a negative way. Research has suggested that students of color are suspended and expelled at a higher rate than other groups (Skiba et al., 2014). Suspensions and expulsions cause students to miss out on educational opportunities, create student disengagement, and increase chances of being involved in the juvenile justice system. School exclusionary practices and the school-to-prison pipeline have unfavorable outcomes for students of color. Exclusionary discipline practices have negative and lasting effects on students of color. It is important for policymakers and school district administrators to prioritize dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and create high-quality interventions aimed at keeping students in school. However, in many cases school administrators do not have a

systematic way to serve students within the school who may have otherwise been excluded, which is the problem I will investigate in my dissertation.

Significance of the Problem

The obstacle that many policy makers and school administrators face is finding interventions or solutions that will address the racial inequalities and stop the school-to-prison pipeline. With the implementation of policies aimed at diminishing suspensions and expulsions in order to disrupt the school to prison pipeline, schools have been left on their own to figure out what interventions work for students who may have otherwise been subjected to exclusionary discipline. My research is significant because it will investigate interventions used in a middle school environment. Results may offer policy makers and school administrators a way to address discipline practices in schools, while keeping kids in the building. It will be important for vested stakeholders to increase funding for prevention and positive alternatives to exclusionary discipline. This approach will allow school districts to become laser focused on student achievement and engagement inside of the classroom. This research should motivate policymakers and school administrators to examine current policies and best practices currently used in the educational setting. These policies and best practices should be used to benefit all students regardless of race, gender, or address.

Dissertation Purpose and Structure

The purpose of my dissertation is to implement a locally created social emotional and behavioral intervention aimed at middle school students who may have otherwise been subjected to exclusionary discipline. This dissertation is composed of three distinct, yet interrelated papers.

Paper One provides an overview of the school to prison pipeline, research on exclusionary discipline practices in the U.S., state and local policies aimed at disrupting exclusionary discipline practices, and an overview of improvement science as one possible method for assessing a home-grown, context specific student intervention. Paper Two contains a detailed description of a proposed PDSA cycle for a middle school. The purpose of this study is to examine school engagement practices for students with emotional and behavioral needs who may have otherwise been subjected to exclusionary discipline. One full cycle of PDSA for at least one quarter of the 2022-2023 academic school year. Paper Three will be a reflection of the lessons learned from one PDSA cycle along with plans for the next PDSA cycle.

The purpose of this research is to examine how the impact of exclusionary disciplinary practices used in schools affect students of color. This research will give an understanding of how the history of exclusionary discipline policies and practices have had lasting effects on students of color. These practices have been shown to decrease engagement in school and increase their chances of being exposed to the criminal justice system thus creating the school-to-prison pipeline.

Research Questions

1. *What is the history of the school to prison pipeline, specifically as it relates to exclusionary discipline practices in schools?* This research question will be answered in Chapter Two.
2. *What state and district policies have been implemented to disrupt exclusionary discipline practices?* This research question will be answered in Chapter Two.
3. *What is improvement science and how can it be implemented in a large, diverse, urban middle school to examine school engagement practices for students with emotional and*

behavioral needs who may have otherwise been subjected to exclusionary discipline? This research question will largely be answered in Chapter Two but also in Chapter Three.

4. *What does a full PDSA cycle look like in a middle school when it is used to help stop disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices?* This research question is answered in Chapters Three and Four

5. *How can the lessons learned from one PDSA cycle be used to plan the next cycle of improvement?* This research question will be answered in Chapter Four.

Researcher Positionality

As an educator of twenty-two years, I have seen many changes take place in how students are taught in the classroom. I grew up in Joliet, Illinois and attended both public and private schools. While I tried to steer clear of teaching, my family roots in education suggested otherwise. My teaching career began in DeKalb, Illinois. It was during this time that I began to see students from the teacher lens. Students come into the classroom with varying levels of needs. It became apparent to me that I needed to meet each student where they were. My role as a classroom teacher only allowed me to impact the students that were on my class roster. It was during this time that I felt the desire to go into administration. I wanted to be able to impact a larger number of students. As a current middle school principal, I have first hand knowledge of the needs of students entering the educational setting. Students come with varying levels of trauma. For example, students have incarcerated parents, deceased parents, living with relatives, in foster care, been abused (mentally, physically, and emotionally), and experience hunger.

My experience as a former middle school teacher has helped to shape my thoughts and understandings of middle school students in particular. I understand what it is like to try and

engage students that are experiencing high levels of trauma in the classroom. If a student's socio-emotional needs are not met, their educational needs will not matter.

There are some assumptions and biases that I have about students that experience high levels of trauma and the School-to-Prison Pipeline. As a mother of two children, it is hard for me to understand how any parent could allow harm to come to their children and not help them. I often wonder why parents don't give their all to the children that they brought into this world. As a building principal, I want all of my students to succeed. I want all of my students to come to school ready to learn. My experience and knowledge of the world that we live in tells me that not all students have the necessary support and resources to be successful in school, specifically the middle school level. I do acknowledge that in order to do this research correctly, I need to be mindful of the fact that some families are caught up in a generational cycle of chronic trauma. It is something that students appear to deal with on a daily basis and have no idea that they are experiencing it. To them, this is how life should be like.

I consider myself to be both an insider and an outsider to this work. I am an insider because of the color of my skin. My students assume that because I look like them, that I share the same or similar experiences as them. I am an outsider because I have never experienced their life and the trauma they have endured at such young ages. It will be important for me to have a clear understanding of both my insider and outsider perspectives to do this research. This will allow me to make sure the correct interventions are in place to help students succeed no matter their zip code or socioeconomic status.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The definition of *insanity* is doing the same things over and over and expecting different results. In the educational landscape, a classic example of insanity is the way in which our current systems handle Black and Brown students with respect to discipline. Often, they are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school and researchers often consider this to be but one facet of the school to prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014). The eventual consequences of disproportionate exclusionary discipline leads to significant disruptions in a child's life and can ultimately result in students being funneled from prison-like school settings into actual prison settings. In fact, Wilson (2014) has indicated that exclusion from school leads to poor outcomes later in life, including incarceration.

History of School to Prison Pipeline

“The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is a construct used to describe policies and practices, especially with respect to school discipline, in the public schools and juvenile justice system that decrease the probability of school success for children and youth, and increase the probability of negative life outcomes, particularly through involvement in the juvenile justice system” (Skiba et al., 2014, p.1). While Skiba and colleagues (2014) have a robust definition of STPP, other social scientists and policy organizations have provided various definitions throughout the years as well. For example, the ACLU's juvenile justice arm states that the STPP

“refers to the policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (ACLU, 2023). Twenty years ago Kim (2003) stated that the STPP refers to “policies and practices that systematically push at-risk youth out of mainstream public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (p.956). Over the course of the past decades, some organizations and researchers define the STPP more broadly and some in greater detail. For the purpose of my study, I prefer Skiba and colleagues (2014) definition as it takes into account not only the probability that students can have their schooling negatively impacted by exclusionary discipline but longer-term outcomes can also be impacted as well.

The school-to-prison pipeline can be traced back to key court cases and key pieces of legislation, two of them being *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the Supreme Court “unanimously handed down its iconic landmark decision decrying racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional and psychologically harmful to African American children’s self-esteem” (Townsend-Walker, 2014, p. 339). While the court decision signaled the legal end to de jure segregation in schools, de facto segregation still occurs widely today. Many schools in the nation, especially in urban areas, continue to deal with segregation by class and race. In addition to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, The No Child Left Behind Act was at one time considered to be the flagship program of the United States government for disadvantaged students, designed to safeguard students from low performing or failing school systems (Duignan, 2002). In spite of these legal protections, many students are subject to low performing and failing school systems across the United States. These low performing or failing schools help to create an environment where students are being left

behind with no rescue in sight. Students with failing grades receive little attention. The students on track continue to pass and the failing students never make it. The No Child Left Behind Act does not address poor student learning and makes assumptions as to why students are not meeting expectations. The No Child Left Behind Act focused on teachers not performing and poor curriculum being at fault. The No Child Left Behind Act did not take into consideration the large classroom sizes, building and community conditions, and hunger. The whole make-up of student needs were not taken into consideration and these factors contribute to why students continue to fail and are not engaged in the educational setting. These factors are the reasons why students are on a school-to-prison pipeline track.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

The school-to-prison pipeline was also born out of “zero tolerance” policies which began in the 1980s under the direction of Ronald Reagan. Initially, many people believed that zero-tolerance policies were created to eliminate the crime and drugs in communities across the world. By the 1990’s, many school districts mirrored zero tolerance policies and adopted a zero-tolerance approach to school discipline violations. This resulted in large suspension rates and an increase of students being referred to law enforcement for a variety of school code violations, oftentimes without consideration of context (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force [APA], 2008). School-based zero tolerance policies were a mirror of how people were treated in the larger societal criminal justice system and in this way, schools became like mini prisons for kids, which ultimately led to exclusionary discipline that impacted minority students more than other groups (Milner & Lomotey, 2014) and the American Psychological

Association has also found that exclusionary discipline is not effective at reducing undesirable behaviors (APA, 2008).

Zero tolerance is attributed to punishment or consequences used to eliminate undesirable behavior with the goal of improving school achievement, yet in most cases it has had the opposite effect. In fact, Wilson (2014, p. 50) states, “Ironically, the very policies that schools adopted to manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline.” The school's student code of conduct is the driving force behind how school administrators respond to office disciplinary referrals. No matter the offense, there are set consequences for behaviors that cause minor to major disruptions in the classroom setting.

To examine zero tolerance policies in schools in more detail, the American Psychological Association developed a Zero Tolerance Task Force with the purpose of synthesizing information about the impact of zero tolerance in schools. The task force examined data and outcomes about several key assumptions of zero tolerance policies and their findings were sobering. Amongst other findings that are beyond the scope of this literature review, the task force reported that “overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion has been found consistently for African American students” (APA, 2008, p.854) in spite of there not being any data suggesting that African American students engaged in higher rates of behaviors worthy of exclusionary discipline (APA, 2008). In fact, the report outright states that “African American students may be disciplined more severely for less serious or more subjective reasons” (APA, 2008, p.854).

The logic behind the implementation of zero-tolerance policies was that minimizing minor infractions would prevent disciplinary infractions or serious crimes from occurring; however, the effects have been the complete opposite of what it was intended to do. “Many

students have been increasingly suspended and expelled due to criminalizing both typical adolescent developmental behaviors as well as low-level type misdemeanors: acting out in class, truancy, fighting, and other similar offenses. The increased use of zero tolerance policies and police (safety resource officers) in the schools has exponentially increased arrests and referrals to the juvenile courts” (Mallett, 2016, p. 15). Zero-tolerance policies were intended to make schools safer, however, the adverse effect is that suspension rates contribute to low standardized test scores. If a student is not in school, they aren’t learning and won’t be successful on state mandated tests.

Zero-tolerance policies have contributed a number of problems to rise to the surface in the world of education. Schools began to discipline students for a wide range of misbehavior, which includes cutting ahead of another student in line, writing on desks or walls, minor physical contact with another student, and insubordination, which could include talking back to a teacher or administrator. Serious infractions such as fighting and smoking on school grounds require an out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Suspension and expulsion rates are of grave concern and lead to inadequate alternative schools, low test scores, and higher dropout rates. When a student is consistently missing from the educational setting, it will be difficult to get back on an academic track. This pattern makes the achievement gap impossible to close.

Discipline is progressive and doesn’t take students' life situations into consideration. Progressive discipline is a disciplinary system that provides graduated steps or consequences when a student fails to correct their behavior. Progressive discipline funnels many students onto a track that is difficult to get off of. Harsh policies and procedures and the presence of law enforcement in public schools, in some people's eyes, have helped to create the school-to-prison pipeline track. Expulsions, out-of-school suspensions, and school arrests are used to deal with

student misbehavior and students are funneled out of school and into the juvenile justice system (Wilson, 2014). It is important to note that the students who are typically funneled into the juvenile justice system are disproportionately students of color.

When schools decided to go with the idea of zero tolerance, no one realized that the zero reject principal was not a first priority anymore. The zero-reject principle simply means that any individual with a disability who is recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) cannot be denied access to special education and necessary related services in the United States. No student with a disability can be denied a free, appropriate public education, no matter how severe the disability. Since suspensions and expulsions are “exclusionary discipline” policies that remove a student from the normal classroom setting because of a rule infraction, it goes against the zero-reject principle (Wilson, p. 2014).

Students who are suspended or expelled from school are at an increased risk of failing to graduate from high school and an increased risk of being involved in the criminal justice system. “A single suspension or expulsion from school doubles the risk for a student repeating a grade, itself a strong risk factor for dropping out of high school” (Mallett, 2016, p. 21). When students are suspended or expelled, students are not engaged in the educational system. They are missing classroom instruction and engagement. Students who aren’t engaged in school are not connected to the educational setting. Without the connection to school and a sense of belonging, students find other outlets, some of which can be negative. These negative outlets can get students caught up in the juvenile justice system.

There is no data that suggests that zero-tolerance policies or other harsh discipline policies make schools safer or boost academic achievement. However, research does suggest that zero-tolerance policies and harsh discipline policies keeps students from being connected from

school, puts them at a greater risk of participating or being involved in illegal behavior, increases poor academic achievement, increases dropout, and increases the likelihood of students entering the school-to-prison pipeline (Schiff, 2018).

While there are policies and procedures in place at the state and federal levels that are pushed down to school districts to reduce suspensions and expulsions, however, there are structures within the school system that require change. Change should begin with district superintendents and building principals(Owens, 2022). In order for change to occur within school systems it would require schools to address their individual bias and stop placing blame on individual teachers. Teachers don't create the systems, they just respond to the policies and procedures that are placed in front of them.

Gun-Free Schools Act

“The increased punitive environment within the juvenile courts, perceptions of growing school violence, the crack cocaine epidemic that had a devastating impact on many poor communities and worries about adolescent gangs were all factors that led Congress to enact the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994” (Mallett, 2016, p. 18). The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was an extension of zero tolerance policies in schools. The Gun-Free Schools Act posited that in order to receive federal funding, schools must have policies and procedures to expel a student for a full calendar year if a student brings a firearm or weapon to school or has it within any given school-zone limit. It goes on to state that schools must report students to the local law enforcement agency for having a gun at school or within a school zone. This Gun-Free Schools Act blurs the lines between office disciplinary referrals at school and the law. While the Gun-Free Schools Act was meant to require consequences or punishment for serious violations

involving weapons, they have frequently been applied to minor or nonviolent violations of rules such as tardiness and disorderly conduct (Heitzeg, 2009) For example, in Florida in 2001 a 10-year-old girl was expelled from school because her mother, who packed her lunch, placed a small paring knife in her lunch box for the sole purpose of cutting an apple at lunch. She cooperated with the school in immediately handing over the knife, yet she was expelled for “possession of a weapon.” (APA, 2008).

The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 required each state receiving federal funds to have a state law in effect requiring local educational agencies to expel, for at least one year, any student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school. The Gun-Free Act led to an increase in zero-tolerance policies and played a significant role in shaping disciplinary practices in school districts across the world. “Laws and grant opportunities incentivized exclusionary approaches to discipline” (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011, p. 6). School districts were provided funds to staff or hire law enforcement in schools. This action caused an increase in school arrests and schools became dependent on law enforcement in the building. Some schools began to rely on law enforcement to handle routine disciplinary matters. In a sense, law enforcement became the classroom management systems in some schools. “The presence of police officers increased student arrests on school grounds between 300 and 500% annually since the establishment of zero tolerance policies, most of the time for non-serious offenses, unruly behaviors, disobedience, or status offenses (Mallett, 2016, p. 20).

The focus of the educational system should be to provide rigorous academic instruction, behavior coaching, and life skills direction; yet, it is not happening in every public-school setting. School discipline is not evenly distributed and students of color are unfairly targeted.

Students of color living in urban areas are more likely to be punished and met with harsher disciplinary consequences.

Exclusionary Discipline

Even without strict zero tolerance policies, African American boys are subject to more exclusionary discipline practices than other groups (Rudd, 2014). It is important to dig deeper into this because it means that some systems are broken. Students are students wherever they go to school. It is impossible to suggest that white students don't get into trouble that would require a disciplinary referral. Why are African American boys more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than white students? This is the question that needs to be explored and answered. Walsh states that "white people are more likely to see behaviors in white students as a need for medical attention, but see the same behaviors in black students as a cause for punishment" (Walsh, 2017, p. 8). This harsh punishment impacts academic achievement. Middle school administrators and high school administrators should be forced to look at their practices and how they contribute to the fact that African American males are being suspended and expelled from school at high rates that funnel them into the school-to-prison pipeline.

It is important to note that when students are removed from the educational setting based on their disciplinary actions, students lose the connection to their education and they will ultimately fall behind. Currently, there is no real data to show that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions reduce school or classroom disruptions. This method does send a message to the student that they are not welcome in the educational setting. There is not any data to support removing students from school via out-of-school suspensions or expulsions to help improve the overall school climate either. What is known about suspensions and expulsions is that these

methods have lasting negative effects on student engagement, student belonging, student learning, and student outcomes.

School administrators at both the middle school and high school level need to begin to change systems within the educational school system. If nothing is done, students will continue to be suspended and expelled from school. Students will continue to be disengaged from school culture, climate, and outcomes. All of these are necessary for a student to excel academically at both the middle and high school levels.

Students have the ability to excel academically at both the middle and high school levels. In order for students to excel, they have to be present in school. Administrators at both the middle and high school levels need to implement alternatives to suspensions. If the goal is to keep students in school, why are so many students being suspended or expelled from school? Before students can begin to have a sense of belonging at the middle or high school level, there needs to be changes to current systems of practice put in place. Before students can be addressed, the administration and teaching staff must undergo professional development that will extend into professional learning. Administrators and teachers at both the middle and high school must receive training and time to reflect upon their systems and practices and how they impact the students in their classroom.

In order to stop the steady flow of students into the school-to-prison pipeline, school districts need to change systems and structures around student discipline. There needs to be more of a restorative approach to discipline where students are at the heart of the process. This means that no two students are treated in the same way. Students come with different needs, and the approach to help them should address their specific needs and situation. For this to happen, educators in the classroom must recognize that their students have different needs, and

instruction should be differentiated to meet the needs of all of the students in the classroom. This would require teachers to receive professional development that would extend to learning around trauma-informed teaching practices and restorative justice practices in the school and classroom environment. Schools should have a toolbox of practices, resources, and interventions that can be used to help students be successful in the school and classroom setting. These practices, resources, and interventions will keep students from being suspended or expelled from school and pulled back into an environment where the student will begin to feel accepted, understood, valued, seen, and respected.

We know that when students are suspended or expelled from the educational setting, their education is interrupted. It is important to stop the school-to-prison pipeline. This would be a step in the right direction of making sure that every student has an opportunity to succeed in school and beyond. School administrators and educators need to understand that students come from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The journey through the school-to-prison pipeline is punitive. According to Wald and Losen (2003), students who are caught up in the school-to-prison pipeline will be suspended for various reasons, placed in an alternative program reducing the chances of graduating and increasing the chances of dropping out of school altogether. (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 11).

There are things that can be done to stop the steady flow of students into juvenile detention centers. There should be appropriate behavioral interventions especially for students with disabilities and specific for individual students. Schools should offer counseling programs for students before and after suspension. Adequate re-entry programs can decrease the likelihood of students being suspended multiple times. These programs should require a parent or guardian

to be a part of the process. All vested stakeholders should be involved in every part of the process.

Once students are suspended, there should be opportunities for students to meet their educational goals. Long periods of suspension time contribute to students being academically behind in their schooling and decrease their sense of belonging. This makes it harder for students to want to come back into the educational setting. According to Wald and Losen (2003), with the positive interventions in place, the educational system will reduce the flow of students into the juvenile system. According to Wald and Losen (2003), it is time to end the school-to-prison pipeline and create opportunities for students to graduate from school without having contact with the judicial system (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 14). School officials need to move away from the zero-tolerance policy that pushes disruptive students out of the educational system. It is time to address the “racial disparities with compassion, care, knowledge, and determination” (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 14).

Instead of schools creating conditions for students to be disengaged in the classroom, school districts should advocate for better classroom management practices. Principals and teachers should be equipped with techniques for de-escalating and resolving conflicts and strengthening the relationships between students and their peers as well as between students and their teachers.

Mitigation of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

State and local school districts can mitigate the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline by addressing discipline in different ways. School officials need to understand that the punitive approach in schools contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. While research on restorative

practices used in the education system is still new, there should be a consideration to implement these programs. The implementation of sound restorative practices can produce positive outcomes in the classroom and will mitigate the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline. The authorization of a well-designed restorative practice plan will help to alleviate a problem that has spiraled out of control since the 21st century known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

State and local school districts need to come to the realization that there are “institutional practices that make it difficult for some students to graduate, such as zero-tolerance policies or the wait-to fail model often associated with special education” (Cramer et al., 2014, p. 461). The school-to-prison pipeline can begin as early as elementary school. If a student doesn’t feel engaged in their school environment, they will gradually become disengaged and pull away from the educational school setting. Students who aren’t engaged can experience academic and or behavioral problems.

Senate Bill 100

Senate Bill 100 was born out of a movement toward reforming student discipline that began in 2012 with Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE). That organization was concerned about the impact of exclusionary discipline on students, in particular students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students and ELL students. From there, the Campaign for Common Sense Discipline was created. This campaign led Senate Bill 100.

Senate Bill 100 overhauled student discipline procedures by requiring all Illinois school districts to make significant changes to the way they suspended or expelled students. The primary focus of Senate Bill 100 was to keep students in school and decrease exclusionary discipline. It is important to recognize that discipline is not a one size fits all approach. It is also

important to note that IDEA and Section 504 continue to apply to students with disabilities facing suspension or expulsion.

Senate Bill 100 impacted many school districts. Schools had to change their way of thinking about their exclusionary practices. Schools were encouraged to use non-exclusionary discipline measures prior to suspending students. Suspensions and expulsions are to be used for legitimate educational purposes. Finally, schools must offer interventions prior to exclusionary discipline, provide appropriate and available services during a long-term suspension, and finally, a re-engagement plan.

Many school districts had to change their zero tolerance policy approach to student discipline. Senate Bill 100 does not define zero tolerance policies but expressly prohibits them. School districts may be found in violation of this by implementing policies that require, or could lead to requiring exclusionary discipline actions after a certain number of infractions (3 strikes policies). School districts may not include an automatic suspension or expulsion for violation of certain school safety rules. Instead, suspensions and expulsion decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Senate Bill 100 does not define “appropriate and available behavioral and disciplinary interventions. Senate Bill 100 does not provide guidance on what exhausting such interventions would look like in practice. That determination can only be made by school officials. However, reasonable efforts must be made to resolve threats, address disruptions, and minimize the length of student exclusions. Student discipline policies should include interventions the school district intends to implement as part of the disciplinary process.

Senate Bill 100 does not define “appropriate and available support services”. Schools need to identify what appropriate services the school district has to offer students and include

those services in the student discipline policy. Appropriate and available support services can include: counseling or social work services, tutoring to facilitate make-up work, placement in alternative school or program, referrals to outside resources, online coursework, therapeutic recreation, rehabilitation counseling, community resources, and/or in-school suspension or other in-school alternative environments

School districts must create a policy to facilitate re-engagement of students returning from suspension, expulsions, or an alternative school setting. Scheduling a re-engagement meeting with the student and parents may be beneficial in order to ensure that the re-engagement plan is properly developed and implemented.

While SB100 is in place to mitigate the school-to-prison pipeline at both the middle or high school level, the state hasn't pushed down guidance for school districts to take into consideration when suspending or expelling students of color. It is up to school districts across the country to come up with ways to stop the flow or eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline in their particular school districts.

Many districts understand that suspending and expelling students is not the answer to building culture and climate. Suspending and expelling students does not help them to be engaged in the educational school setting. Suspending and expelling students does not increase student engagement, a sense of belonging, or increase test scores. In fact, school districts across the country are seeing that suspending and expelling students decreases student engagement, belonging, and achievement. The practice of suspending or expelling students from the educational school setting has shown to increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school. When students don't feel connected to their school, they will stop coming and school becomes less important to them. These consequences weaken the connection and engagement

between students and school. These consequences are meant to decrease the likelihood of the student committing undesirable behavior in the future. Students that are consistently suspended or expelled out of school, it increases the likelihood of the students reoffending. “Once involved with the juvenile courts, adolescents are significantly more likely to remain involved and to have recidivist outcomes, including detention and for some, incarceration” (Mallett, 2016, p. 21). Students who are repeat offenders in the juvenile justice system have a decreased chance of returning to school.

Restorative Practices

Restorative justice is a process of bringing the accused and the offended together in a positive manner in order to move forward together. It doesn't mean that all is forgiven, it means that the accused will be able to take ownership for their actions and together the accused and the offended can move forward in a positive light.

Restorative Justice responses to harm initially began in the criminal and juvenile justice system. In the educational setting restorative justice is used to build, maintain and repair relationships. Restorative justice is a tool that educators can use to decrease inappropriate behaviors inside of the classroom while holding students accountable. Restorative justice practices have become popular in most school districts in response to racial disparities in school discipline. Restorative justice practices are used to address harm and build positive culture in schools. These clusters of strategies are used to decrease the overuse of school disciplinary referrals, suspensions and expulsions, and referrals to the juvenile justice system. For this to work, educators, especially those who teach students of color in disadvantaged areas, must be prepared to meet their students where they are at the moment, understand the students in their

classroom, and get to know them and the community in which they live. School districts should not wait for school boards to come and save them, schools should be meeting students and families where they are and understanding the current world in which they live. Restorative justice practices are put in place to help students understand the reparations that need to be made, hold students accountable for their actions against persons or the community that they harmed, and include all invested stakeholders in the decision-making process to make sure everyone is in agreement with what must be done to repair the harm committed.

Discipline problems within the classroom often fester into office disciplinary referrals. Classroom instruction goes beyond reading, writing, and mathematics. Classroom teachers need to meet the social emotional needs of their students, not just the academic needs. In order to adequately address students' emotional needs and social skills, teachers must first come to understand that their own social and emotional needs have a great impact on how teacher-student relationships are developed within the classroom environment. Teachers who know how to manage their own social and emotional needs know how to keep their emotions in check. This knowledge allows them to see events from varying points of view and evaluate all possibilities before making a judgment or drawing a conclusion. The classroom setting should encompass social and emotional learning (SEL). Social and emotional learning is the process through which individuals enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks: Key social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision making. (Osher et al., 2012, p. 286). When a students' social and emotional learning is not addressed, these actions can lead to serious infractions that feed the school-to-prison pipeline.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline in schools can be done via thoughtfully designed curricula and interventions aimed at increasing not only feelings of safety and civility in the school, but also targeting social emotional learning more broadly (Osher et al., 2012). A restorative justice approach in public schools is necessary in dealing with students and discipline. District office leadership should be challenged with shouldering the task of creating a vision for students within the school district. Restorative Justice policies should be adopted instead of zero tolerance policies in order to enhance the school culture and climate within the school community. The capacity must be built for all students, educators, parents, and community members to become actively engaged in the efforts to build and implement sound restorative justice practices. A restorative justice approach would allow students to participate in the process and allow all invested stakeholders to find resolution instead of just handing out a punishment or consequence.

In the classroom, it is important for educators to create appropriate social and emotional conditions for learning for all students. This action will help to reduce office discipline referrals and can help to decrease the steady flow of students entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Students need to know that when they enter a school and or classroom that their emotional and physical safety needs are considered. Schools and classrooms that foster an environment where students are respected in turn have spaces of trust. Students need to feel connected to school. When students don't feel connected or have a trusted relationship with an adult, they participate in varying levels of risk taking behaviors and become disengaged from school. Connectedness involves adults who have the capacity to care about the students in their classroom. When students are connected they are engaged and challenged. Students must have educators who challenge them and have high expectations for them. This is a motivating factor for students in

the educational setting. Students need to feel that school and academics play a major role in their life goals. These conditions for learning reinforce each other. According to research, the lack of educator professional development and support to build these conditions and to respond positively rather than punitively to student misbehavior is widespread. Teachers who promote and facilitate social emotional learning in classrooms contribute to positive student outcomes across all grade levels (Osher et al, 2012, p. 289).

A restorative philosophy emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline, attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students, recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe learning environments (Schiff, 2018, p. 125).

Schiff (2018) conducted research on restorative justice practices and the school-to-prison pipeline and why it has come to light for school districts across the country. Schiff (2018) pointed out that zero tolerance policies have not had the intended effect of making schools safer or students more successful. Schiff (2018) went on to say that there is , “substantial racial disciplinary disparity between students of color and white students facing suspension and expulsions” (p. 122). It is important now more than ever to address restorative justice practices as it relates to school discipline and school climate. Restorative justice in schools should be used as an alternative approach to punitive discipline and exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions from school. It is the hope that these types of practices will significantly disrupt and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Before this can happen, school districts must address zero tolerance disciplinary codes.

Schiff (2018) states that, “Exclusionary practices are often applied arbitrarily, contribute to lost instructional time, limit understanding between families and schools, demonstrate poor use of school resources and lower academic achievement” (p. 124). This suggests that students who are suspended or expelled will likely be held back a grade, won’t graduate on time or at all, will become involved in the juvenile justice system, and it will increase their chances of suspension and expulsion.

Harsh disciplinary practices such as suspensions and expulsions have not shown to decrease unwanted behaviors in the educational setting. Instead, these types of punishments have broken relationships between students and staff. A restorative justice approach would allow the rule breakers to build and repair relationships and address the harm done to the victim, offenders, and community. Meaningful restorative justice practices in the educational setting would allow students to not simply take the punishment but would require them to take responsibility for their actions. Students who take responsibility for their actions “build empathy, earn redemption and rebuild their dignity through mature reparation of harm” (Schiff, 2018, p. 126).

School districts are now trying to integrate restorative justice practices into the educational setting now more than ever. The U. S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is in contact with school districts with high suspension and expulsion rates. Their main goal is to disrupt the key cause of students entering the school to prison pipeline. The OCR is pushing school districts to explore restorative justice strategies to address the high racial disparities in the discipline outcomes. While the OCR is pushing districts to do something about their discipline data, school districts are only willing to invest in one or two training sessions a year. In order to see positive changes, restorative justice practices need to be implemented with fidelity in schools.

Restorative justice practices are effective evidence based nonpunitive responses to school rules. Research shows that when restorative justice is implemented with fidelity, students remain in school and there is a decrease in the use of exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions. Restorative justice helps to promote a sense of community, belonging, respect, and trust and boosts student achievement and engagement in the educational setting. Failure to implement restorative justice in the educational setting will make it “become another well intended, incremental liberal intervention destined to maintain the legacy of institutional racial bias as expressed in the school-to-prison pipeline” (Schiff, 2018, p. 134).

Cruz et al. (2021) conducted a synthesis of existing research on restorative justice and the school-to-prison pipeline. This research examined the punitive measures that students of color experience and that are believed to contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of the punitive practices that take place in schools include exclusionary measures. Exclusionary measures include office discipline referrals, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the juvenile justice system. These exclusionary practices contribute to a host of negative outcomes such as a loss of instructional time, lowered academic outcomes, likelihood of truancy and/or dropout, reduced school-wide academic performance, and perceptions of school climate (Cruz et al, 2021).

There are a variety of programs that are implemented within public schools that are designed to aid schools and school districts in reducing exclusionary discipline practices. These include school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS), restorative justice, and professional development interventions for teachers around their culturally responsive practices. The research suggests that these programs aim to fix student behavior and teaches students how to exist within the school walls in the educational setting and does not look to

change existing structures to meet students where they are or support students' socioemotional needs.

SWPBIS is a universal screener used to improve discipline practices used in the educational setting. This is done through interventions and supports and data-based progress monitoring. According to Cruz et al. (2021), SWPBIS research has rarely disaggregated impact by race, gender, disability label, or other sociodemographic groups known to experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline. The authors reviewed four studies and found only one study that examined disproportionately disciplined student subgroups. The SWPBIS is a program that was meant to support all students. This program was never intended to support one particular student subgroup. This intervention program has historically been used as an all school approach to reducing identified behaviors.

School-based restorative justice aims to build mutual respect between students and staff and invites students to participate in the development of their school community. Through restorative justice students learn to problem-solve approaches to discipline and build supportive relationships. While in theory restorative justice practices are what is needed in the educational setting, there is little research to support this claim. Research has found that there are elements of restorative justice being implemented in schools, however it isn't being implemented with fidelity. Professional development that extends to professional learning is necessary in order to see a decrease in suspension and expulsion rates in the school educational setting.

According to the research surrounding SWPBIS and restorative justice have shown a reduction in exclusionary punishment. However, these programs have not shown to reduce disparities in such practices or marginalized groups of students.

Goldstein et al. (2021) conducted research on the implementation of the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program. This program was created to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. This study brought out the fact that zero-tolerance policies as well as harsh disciplinary practices in schools in the United States of America contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline, “with schools serving as a primary referral source to the juvenile justice system” (Goldstein et al., 2021, p. 166). Schools were referring students to school resource officers for minor infractions such as disruptions to the learning environment, disorderly conduct, disrespectful behavior, and verbal abuse. These behaviors do not endanger school safety for students or staff. “This criminalization of normative adolescent behavior disproportionately affects students of color and, by increasing rates of contact with police and/or arrest, it contributes to many negative short- and long-term consequences for youth” (Goldstein et al., 2021, p. 166). Students who have negative contact with police are disengaged with school, have poor academic performance, do not feel connected with school, do not participate in prosocial activities, and, in most cases, connected with peers who were delinquent as well.

In order to address the issue of high police referrals, the city of Philadelphia decided in 2014 to create a program to provide at-risk youth the services that they need and help them avoid negative consequences that come with being involved with the criminal juvenile justice system. This program was called the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program. This program was started after an internal audit that revealed that their local schools were the city’s largest police referral for youth. The School District of Philadelphia found that “student arrest rate was three to 25 times higher than the rate of most other Pennsylvania school districts” (Goldstein et al., 2021, p. 167). This program would allow youth and their families to receive a home visit from a Philadelphia Department of Human Services social worker who would assess their social service

needs and refer the youth and/or families to voluntary free services such as academic support, mentoring, and drug and alcohol counseling. All of these services would be free of charge and funded through the Department of Human Services.

The ultimate goal of the Diversions Program in Philadelphia was to reduce school-based arrest rates city wide. The Diversions Program wanted to reduce the number of school-based arrests by 50% within three years of the program's implementation while maintaining school safety in the process. The research suggested that by preventing entry into the juvenile justice system, students would be on the right trajectory and would reduce the likelihood of future arrest. Goldstein et al.'s (2021) evaluation of the Diversions Program and its effectiveness brought out several points that should be noted. The study looked at how well the program reduced the number of arrests in Philadelphia schools, how well the program could reduce or maintain the number of serious behavioral incidents in Philadelphia school, and how well this program reduced recidivism rates of youth arrested in Philadelphia schools and if that rate was comparable to the years prior to implementation of the Diversion Program.

Goldstein et al. (2021) went on to discuss the implementation of the Diversions Program in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia police department received de-identified data of 2,302 public school students. The students were selected based on student need or were arrested in Philadelphia Schools in the year prior to implementation. According to the findings, in the first five years of the Diversions Program, “the number of school-based arrests across the city declined annually, each year exceeding the targeted 50% reduction from the pre-Diversion Program school year and culminating in an 84% reduction in year five” (Goldstein, et al., 2021, p. 172). Second, the decline in school-based arrests was accompanied by a 34% reduction in serious behavioral incidents reported by Philadelphia schools from the year before the Diversion

Program implementation to year five of the program, suggesting that diverting you in lieu of arrest did not worsen school safety. (Goldstein, et al., 2021, p. 172). Finally, when looking at raw numbers and basic statistical comparison, youth diverted from arrest via this program had a lower rate of recidivism arrest throughout the two years following their initial incidents than students arrested for school-based offenses in the year prior to Diversion Program implementation.

According to the research done by Goldstein et al. (2021), the pre-arrest diversion program plays a vital role in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. The Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program was created to stop the steady flow of students in the school-to-prison pipeline. Students who voluntarily participate in this program receive community-based services for eligible students accused of minor school disciplinary offenses in lieu of arrest and prevent recidivism. This program will push students to stay on a positive trajectory as they find their way in life and prevent them from being funneled down the school-to-prison pipeline and offer students a chance of success.

The school-to-prison pipeline is problematic for the educational system. Students that are caught up in this system have been excluded from school and miss academic opportunities for growth that lead to graduation from high school. It is more important than ever for school districts to create interventions that meet students where they are while keeping students engaged in school. Out of school suspensions and other methods used to exclude students from the educational setting do not change the undesired behaviors but in fact widens the achievement gap and students miss out on curriculum mastery.

While out-of-school suspensions interrupt a students' education, it is important to note that there is a psychosocial impact as well. According to Baroni et al. (2016) there is a negative

relationship between the number of suspensions that a student receives and later involvement with the judicial system. Students that have negative interactions with law enforcement have negative outcomes such as court assigned interventions and possibly incarceration.

Student discipline policies, practices and interventions should fully address negative behaviors. School administrators should address negative behaviors “with awareness of and sensitivity to childhood trauma that may be affecting such behavior” (Baroni et al., 2016, p. 158). One intervention that considers a students’ prior trauma is called the Monarch Room. According to Baroni et al., students being repeatedly suspended is counterproductive. The Monarch Room is designed to manage distractions that may inhibit classroom learning but is not viewed by staff and students as a punishment, but rather as a support” (Baroni et al., 2016, 159). The Monarch Room is an alternative location inside of the educational setting used to support students. This intervention is managed by staff trained in sensory-integration, counseling, and trauma informed interventions. Students are referred or self refer when they are unable to refocus themselves inside of the classroom. Once inside of the Monarch Room, students are able to receive a host of intervention strategies such as problem solving, talk therapy and sensory-integration activities. These interventions help students understand how to de-escalate and regulate their emotions so that they can return to the classroom and be successful while inside of the classroom.

The trauma-informed Monarch Room addresses the student's needs in real time. Students can receive support when they exhibit disruptive behaviors in the classroom or need emotional support. The time spent in the Monarch Room varies from student to student. It is based on the intervention needed at the time of distress. The intervention can last anywhere from ten to twenty minutes. Students are able to return back into the classroom once they are able to demonstrate

that they are able to control their emotions and are ready to learn. All visits to the Monarch Room are documented and data is reviewed weekly by administration.

The research by Baroni et al. suggests that teachers support the concept of the Monarch Room in order to address school discipline issues. When the response to discipline is harsh, it pushes students out of the classroom and increases their chances of becoming involved in the judicial system.

While there have been some efforts to impact exclusionary discipline practices in schools, oftentimes off the shelf intervention programs do not necessarily meet the needs of students within a specific, local context. Because of this, it is important for educators to have a strong understanding of how to implement and evaluate their own locally grown intervention systems. One method for creating and implementing such change is through use of Improvement Science.

CHAPTER THREE

PLAN, DO, STUDY, ACT CYCLE

Improvement Science in Education

Improvement Science is characterized by short cycles of intervention and examination termed Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) also known as cycles of continuous improvement. Improvement Science integrates multiple components relevant to discipline reform in education, including determining why the problem exists, how to structure reform, and maintaining a user-centered approach (LeMahieu et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states that the PDSA framework “is a method used by those wishing to make ongoing programmatic decisions at their institutions or educational settings” (p.35).

PDSA Explained

Hinnant-Crawford (2020) indicates that PDSA cycles can be used in a school to plan for systematic change rather than simply implementing something and seeing what happens. PDSA is an ongoing, iterative process that when done well, builds upon previous work and never truly ends. The PDSA cycle is depicted in Figure 1.

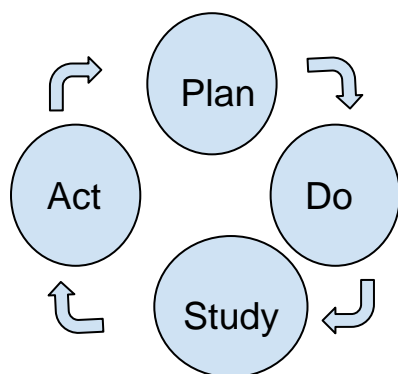


Figure 1. Depiction of the PDSA Cycle

PDSA cycles are familiar in both education and business. For example, the individual or group problem-solving process has been used since the 1990's to assist school-based assistance teams in developing academic or behavioral intervention plans for struggling students. Many schools and districts require such problem solving plans, along with a specified timeline for data collection, before a student will be considered for specialized supports such as school-based mental health services or a special education service. In the business world, PDSA cycles were commonly referred to as Deming cycles or the Deming wheel, named after Edward Deming, an American mathematician and physicist best known for quality control in engineering and manufacturing in the mid 20th century (Deming Institute, 2023). Regardless of if it is called a Deming wheel, problem-solving process, or PDSA cycle, this specific type of continuous improvement is now done in medicine, education, non-profit, and business sectors. Each phase of the PDSA cycle is described below.

Plan

Depending on the source material, there are many ideas, steps, and processes that can take place during the first phase of the PDSA cycle, but broadly speaking, this is the phase where

planning, usually for some sort of change or intervention, takes place. Constraining the topic to education specifically, Hinnant-Crawford (2020) indicates that the planning phase includes ideas such as putting together a team, determining what is to be accomplished, and developing hypotheses for why current practice is not meeting the needs of the organization.

Do

This phase of the cycle is where action takes place. According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020) this phase is a “combination of implementation and documentation of what is happening.” (p.168). It is during this phase that plans are executed and data on the outcome of interest can be collected. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) also notes that to many, PDSA cycles are largely quantitative endeavors but in order to really do them well, qualitative data should be considered and the role of participant-observer should be considered as well.

Study

The “Study” phase of a PDSA cycle provides an opportunity to reflect on what took place during the previous two phases. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) suggests the researcher and/or team engage in reflections such as “Did this go as we expected? What happened that was unexpected? What conditions could have influenced our outcome?” (p169). It is during this phase that any pre-post data are typically analyzed in order to determine if a change was made. It is also important to reflect on the type and quality of data to determine if different sources of information should be added or changed during the next cycle of improvement.

Act

This phase of the process is akin to a discussion section in a research article that discusses next steps, implications, and future directions for research. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) suggests that there are five actions to consider during this phase: “adopt, adapt, expand, abandon, or test against other conditions” (p. 170). Documentation of learning is important during this phase as it can help to inform the planning phase of the next cycle.

It is essential to repeat short-term cycles of “Plan, Do, Study, Act” to allow for frequent adjustments (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This would ensure that a school or school district isn’t locked into the initial plan. Going forward with repeating the cycles allows schools and school districts to continue to revise the plan. In the case of my study in particular, revision of the plan allows for stakeholders to begin to understand the effectiveness of the plan that is initiated over time to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline.

The implementation of improvement science helps educators better understand the problem, in this case, the school-to-prison pipeline and the effects that it has on any school systems across the United States. Improvement Science assists educators in making appropriate conclusions about students through repeated cycles of the “Plan, Do, Study, Act” model. The understanding gained from the PDSA cycles inform intervention development and with repeated cycles, begin to decrease the school-to-prison pipeline.

The key component to reforming the structures and systems that keep the school-to-prison pipeline alive, is to consistently use the PDSA cycles. Administrators as well as teachers should have a bank of interventions to use in the educational setting that would decrease the need for students to be suspended or expelled from school. Interventions that place priority on the

relationship between teachers and students of color and their social and emotional well-being is valuable for both the student and the teacher. Schools and school districts must perform a needs assessment on the students in which they serve. The problem of practice must first be identified, reform must be designed to meet the needs of the population, and finally it must be executed using the “Plan, Do, Study, Act” cycles. This process must be on repeat until the intended results are achieved.

Schools should have identified meeting times that allow teams to meet to review all of the “Plan, Do, Study, Act” cycles. Generally, cycles should last anywhere from four to six weeks to ensure that enough data is collected and allow time for the particular intervention to run its course. The “Plan” phase is never complete. The team should have the flexibility to make changes based on the data that is collected at the end of the four to six week phase. Teams can run cycles several times until the intended results are seen. Teams must be aware that the interventions that are established for the students are meant to change the undesired behavior and increase student achievement and engagement in the classroom.

Improvement Science, PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act), and continuous improvement cycles can look different in every school district. There isn't any research that clearly shows how the implementation of these practices will reduce the School-to-Prison pipeline. Moving forward, schools need to begin to implement the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles to improve student engagement and achievement while reducing the number of students that are suspended or expelled from the educational school system. Proper implementation of Improvement Science, PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act), and continuous improvement can have positive and lasting effects on the educational system. The next sections present a PDSA case at a middle school.

Huntley Middle School - Planning Phase

I took a new job as the Principal of Huntley Middle School (HMS) in DeKalb, IL for the 2022-2023 school year. As a result, my original PDSA implementation plan that was to take place at Kennedy Middle School, where I was previously the Principal, had to be put on hold as HMS is a different school in a different community with different characteristics. In order to understand the community, I first looked at Illinois Report Card data.

School Demographics

An important aspect of the planning phase is to understand the context in which the PDSA cycle will occur. According to the Illinois Report Card for Huntley Middle School, there are 918 students assigned to HMS. There are 359 White students, 215 Black students, 267 Hispanic students, 61 Two or more races, 12 Asian, and 4 American Indian/Pacific Islander. The Illinois Report Card shows that 56.1% of the students enrolled at Huntley Middle School are low income and eligible to receive free or reduced priced lunches, live in substitute care or whose families receive public assistance. The percentage of students that have an IEP at Huntley Middle School is 16%. This data can be broken down to show students with IEP's by demographics: 35% Black, 24% Hispanic, 35% White, 6% Two or more races, and 1% Indian. Huntley Middle School is trending with the state when it comes to student attendance. The state is at 90.8% and Huntley Middle School is at 89.9%. However, when examining chronic absenteeism, students who miss 10% or more of school days per year either with or without a valid excuse, the data can be alarming. According to the Illinois Report Card for Huntley Middle School, chronic absenteeism is broken down by demographics. The data shows that 39.1% are

White, 23.4% are Black, 29.1% are Hispanic, 1.3% are Asian, 6.6% are Two or more races and .5% are American Indian/Pacific Islander. When examining chronically truant students, students who miss 5% or more of school days per year without a valid excuse, it shows that 17.3% are White, 56.7% are Black, 25.5% are Hispanic, and 0.5% are Two or more races/Asian/American Indian/Pacific Islander.

Prior Year Discipline Data

Early in my tenure as HMS Principal, I asked to see discipline data from the 2021-2022 school year. Little did I know that this would turn out to be a difficult task for me. First, discipline referrals are written out on a triplicate form. I was quite surprised that office discipline referrals were not in digital form. Second, the coding of student discipline infractions was not done in a uniform manner. For example, a fight could mean a number of things like pushing, hitting, horseplay, and play fighting. It is very difficult to find correct data because the coding isn't uniform. Third, in order to get any data, I have to reach out to someone in the district office to help me get the information that I need. School data is not easily accessible. The district is currently working to improve this system to have a uniform way of coding discipline infractions and retrieving data at the building level.

When it became evident that it would be nearly impossible to obtain the discipline data from last school year, I made other plans to collect information about how to best meet the needs of our struggling students. Below I lay out several steps I have taken between the start of the school year and the end of the first semester. These are not necessarily presented in sequential order as most of these things were taking place simultaneously, as tends to be the case in a fast-paced school environment.

Data Collection from Teachers

As part of the planning phase, as a new principal it was important for me to understand teacher viewpoints on what was working well with respect to student interventions and discipline, and what their perceptions were as far as needed improvements. To that end, from September 17 to October 11, 2022 teachers completed a survey that asked the following questions:

1. What is a possible alternative to suspension that you think could work here at HMS that would benefit our students?
2. What are we doing now that doesn't work for our students?
3. Do you have another suggestion for something that you would like to add?

A total of 35 out of 61 teachers completed the survey. Responses were all open-ended and each question was examined to determine if a theme was present. The findings are presented below.

Question 1: What is a possible alternative to suspension that you think could work here at HMS that would benefit our students?

For the first question, three main themes emerged from the teachers' responses. The first theme is that there should be additional times and spaces for detentions for students. The second theme was that there should be some sort of restorative give-back for students. The third theme was that there should be some sort of Tier 2 intervention for the students.

Theme 1: Detention

Eleven responses from teachers indicate that they think some sort of detention is a viable alternative route to suspension for students. For example, one teacher indicated, “After school detentions, somewhere in the length of 30-45 minutes.... if necessary after school detentions should be served on half days where the length of those should be until 2:30.” Similarly, another respondent wrote, “After school and Saturday detention.” Another example response in favor of detentions was, “Years ago, we had Saturday suspension. Where kids would have to give up their weekend (fun time), to sit at school and reflect on their bad choices.”

Theme 2: Restorative Practices

Fifteen responses from teachers indicate that they think restorative practices would be a viable alternative to suspension for students. Example responses from teachers include, “Doing work around the school, helping other students that are in need, seating [sic] with students at lunch that may not have someone to sit with.” Another response was, “Restitution; not necessarily monetary, but the student must restore or improve the school environment.” The thought with this example is that if a student vandalizes or damages any part of the school, they must restore it back to its original state. Another example of a response that supported restorative practices was, “The student, parent, and team determine an activity that could help repair any harm caused, such as writing a letter to the other individuals involved or helping in a different grade’s classroom by assisting the teacher and younger students for a period or two.”

Theme 3: Tier 2 Interventions

The results from the survey garnered five responses around the need for specific tier 2 interventions that would be a viable alternative to suspension for students. An example response in support of tier 2 interventions would include, “We need a social skills curriculum! Punishing behavior without teaching a replacement behavior is not helping the students learn anything.” Another laser focused response was, “Teachers should be brought into the conversations when students are having issues in a particular setting. We need to teach students how to be the best they can be and not just punish them.” Another example of a response from a teacher in support of tier 2 interventions said, “There needs to be one-on-one counseling going on that was laser focused on the problem that got them there.”

Theme 4: Other Interventions

The results from the survey also brought out six other interventions that could be used as an alternative to out of school suspension. One teacher talked about a crisis room where students “process with a social worker and then spend the rest of the day or multiple days in a crisis room getting support throughout the day from staff if support is needed”. Another teacher suggested that parents are called in lieu of out of school suspensions. This teacher stated that “the best alternative to suspension is to call parents immediately when there is a problem with a kid”. The idea of having a social skill curriculum that students would receive came up as another intervention that would be more beneficial than out of school suspensions. This teacher stated that, “We need to go back to the basics, it may seem elementary but kids need direct instruction in social skills.” It seems as though kids have forgotten how to interact with each other. Another

intervention that was offered as an alternative to suspension was the use of mentorship. A teacher stated that, “If we can get people to volunteer to mentor a student, I think that could be an alternative to suspension.”. Finally, giving back to the school or community was another alternative to suspension. A teacher stated that students could “assist custodial staff with clean-up, lunch clean-up, cleaning hallways and classrooms.”

Question 2: What are we doing now that doesn't work for our students here at HMS?

Teachers shared many views on what is not working well for the students at Huntley Middle School. There were ten overarching themes that bubbled to the top of the list. It was very interesting to see that many of the teachers felt the same way.

It is very clear from the teachers' responses that students are lacking social skills. A teacher responded by saying, “The “Why Try” curriculum is good in theory but we are not teaching students how to get along with each other.” While there is a curriculum that is provided for students, it is not meeting the needs of the student population.

The in-school suspension room is called “Crows Landing” at Huntley Middle School. The in-school room is meant to serve as an alternative to suspension. The in-school room is a consequence used to keep students in the building. A teacher stated that, “There are too many days of in-school suspension for students which takes away from in class learning.” Many teachers feel that giving a student an in-school suspension is overused. Students don't care about missing classes and would rather be in the in-school room.

Out-of-school suspensions are used for more egregious infractions. When students are suspended they are missing valuable classroom instruction. A teacher stated that, “Students at Huntley Middle School sometimes enjoy being suspended as they aren't in class having to get work done.” “I feel like there are many alternatives that we can put into place in order to reduce

the time students are out of class.” We know that when students aren’t in class, they aren’t learning. We also know that when students aren’t in school, they are missing valuable opportunities to make connections with either their peers or staff in the building. Out-of-school suspensions break the connections that students have with school.

Teachers want to have their students in class. When students are missing from classes, teachers miss the opportunity to connect with them. Teachers are finding that it is difficult to contact all of the parents and build relationships with all of their students because of the behaviors that are happening in the classroom. A teacher stated that, “We don’t have enough time to personally contact all the parents with good news and struggles the students have unless we phone after contract hours.” The connection that teachers need to have with students is important for student success. If students don’t have any connections to their classroom teachers or the school, they will be okay with not coming to school at all.

While there are identified rules and consequences for student misbehavior, there are inconsistencies in how those behaviors are addressed. One teacher stated that, “We are allowing the same behaviors over and over again and expecting a different outcome.” The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results. It is clear that behaviors are being addressed, however, the consequences are not changing the student misbehavior.

Question 3: Do you have another suggestion or something that you would like to add?

One suggestion that was repeated a number of times was the use of restorative justice in the classroom. Teachers understand that this professional development would need to be more than a one time meeting. Professional development around restorative justice would need to be seen as a professional learning opportunity. This is something that would need to be embedded in the culture and climate in the building. A teacher suggested the use of an alternative place for

students to go for various reasons. A teacher stated, “Having an alternative place for students to go when things are overwhelming for them on a daily basis.” The teacher went on to say, “Also having a place to go if a student cannot be successful in the classroom.”

Finally, it is important to note that teachers like the use of the in-school room for students, they just don’t like how the room is being used. A teacher stated, “Being in-school should come with an automatic counselor check in to work through why they ended up in the in-school room and to prevent future misbehavior.

Quarter 1 Discipline Data

Even though I was not able to obtain last school year’s data, I was able to examine discipline data for the first quarter of this school year (2022-2023). The first thing to consider is that the way in which this information is provided to me as the principal is not easy to understand nor am I able to have this information at my fingertips, both of which makes responding quickly to student needs next to impossible. Nevertheless, here is what I learned from quarter one discipline data.

Huntley Middle School had 137 discipline incidents. Of those discipline incidents, there are 91 students that have discipline referrals. In 6th grade 37 students have discipline incidents, in 7th grade 46 students have discipline incidents, and in 8th grade 54 students have discipline incidents. In looking at the data for African American males, there are 45 discipline incidents at Huntley Middle School. In 6th grade there were 17 referrals amongst 8 students, 7 in 7th grade amongst 4 students, and 21 in 8th grade amongst 15 students.

Advisory Committee - Student Services Team

In addition to collecting information directly from teachers about what they felt was working and what could be done differently at HMS, I utilized the Student Services Support Team as a kind of steering committee for discussing our tiered intervention supports. This was an existing team, I did not create it. However, I wanted to utilize the expertise of the team in ways the school could better meet the needs of our students, especially students who may be subject to falling into the STPP.

The Student Services Support Team meets every Friday morning. The members on this team include three grade level specific (6th, 7th, & 8th) counselors, one floater counselor, two social workers, one school psychologist, two assistant principals, and one building principal. This team discusses students and their specific needs. This team provides tier 1 interventions for all students in the building. The tier 1 and tier 2 interventions are designed around student data received from discipline referrals, grade level team meetings, and parent meetings. The goal of the committee is to make sure students are receiving the interventions and support that they need to be successful in the least restrictive environment.

The Student Services Support Team and I looked at discipline data for all grade levels. We wanted to make sure that we were laser focused matching the appropriate interventions to the specific student need. In looking at the data and discussing students across all grade levels, it became clear that African American male students needed the most support. African American male students needed support in self-regulation. Members of the Student Services Support Team talked about the increase in meeting with African American male students about self-regulation. African American male students were being referred to the counseling team as a way for the

students to calm themselves down. The team discuss how the African American male students needed support in understanding and regulating their emotions. It was discussed that students would benefit from having an African American male mentor. Our African American male students can't be what they can't see. Since they didn't have African American male mentors in their presence during the school day, we wanted to make sure that this type of support would be provided for them.

Conclusions to the Planning Phase

The purpose of the planning phase was to take stock of what was already happening at HMS prior to my arrival, examine existing discipline data, collect new information from teachers regarding their perceptions, and hear from the existing team regarding their perceptions. While the planning phase never really stops in a school, for the purposes of this paper, the data and information presented above is what constitutes the planning phase for what the school plans to do next.

Do/Implementation Phase

Staff Professional Development

As a result of the information gathered during the teacher survey in addition to discussions with the Advisory Committee, it was determined that staff would benefit from professional development on state policy regarding disrupting the STPP as well as on what steps can be taken at HMS to assist our most vulnerable students.

Senate Bill 100 Education

On October 5, 2022, all staff members at Huntley Middle School received professional development on Senate Bill 100. This professional development centered around an overview of Senate Bill 100, the impact of zero tolerance policies, interventions that can be used inside and outside of the classroom, appropriate and available support services, and what a re-engagement plan looks like for students returning to school from suspension, expulsion, or an alternative school setting.

MTSS and Restorative Practices Education

On November 2, 2022, all staff members at Huntley Middle School received professional development on MTSS and Restorative Practices from a district administrator. This professional development made it possible for 64 teachers to participate in this activity to see what interventions are available at Huntley Middle School at Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3.

The professional development started with helping teachers understand the need for MTSS around student behaviors. MTSS for behavior is a systematic and data-driven framework that helps schools and districts build their capacity to implement or to advance their practices in establishing an equity-based support system for inclusive instruction and improve academic, behavior and social-emotional outcomes for all students.

Teachers got in grade level groups to discuss what interventions are in place for students at each tier. The grade level groups consisted of 6-Orange, 6-Black, 7-Orange, 7-Black, 8-Orange, 8-Black, Specials/Electives, and Teaching Assistants. Each group received post-it notes that were to be used to write their interventions on. There was a triangle drawn on a big sheet of

paper that showed all three tiers. The triangle was divided in half to show “Academic” on one side and “SEL” (socio-emotional learning) on the other side.

Tier 1 supports and interventions consists of the Green Team. The Green Team plans school-wide and class-wide support for all students in the building. It is the expectation that there is school-wide teaching, acknowledgement, data and communication to all stakeholders at this level.

Tier 2 supports and interventions consists of the Yellow Team. The Yellow Team uses student outcomes and processes data to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. In Tier 2, there are CICO (check-in, check-out) for many students. There are different groups designed for this level. There is a problem solving group, pro-social group, and an executive functioning group for identified students. Finally, there are many mentoring groups that come into the building to meet with students on a weekly basis.

Tier 3 supports and interventions are more laser focused to meet the needs of individual students in the building. At this level there is more student centered planning. Teams use student outcomes and process data based on need. Students that are identified for needing Tier 3 supports will have a behavior intervention plan in place.

This professional development generated a lot of discussion from the staff. Everyone is clear about the levels of support that is needed at each of tiers. In some discussion groups it became clear that there needs to be more available interventions at Tier 1 and Tier 2.

Shop Talk Intervention

The idea of conducting a “Shop Talk” came up at a student support services meeting during the planning phase of the PDSA cycle. For ease of reading, all of the information

regarding the Shop Talk is contained below. However, all of what was done prior to the Shop Talk taking place was technically done in the planning phase of the PDSA cycle.

During a team meeting in the fall semester, the Advisory Team was looking to come up with out-of-box interventions to meet the needs of our male students of color. As a team, we were looking to address the need for student belonging and self regulation. The idea behind conducting a Shop Talk was that success would be seen through a decrease in inappropriate school behaviors, attendance (unexcused absences) and an increase in positive grades (on-track status...students failing two or more classes) for these particular students.

In envisioning the Shop Talk, mentors will provide on-going communication and conversations about self-regulation (students controlling their emotions and taking accountability). Through grade level meetings and concerns from counselors, it became clear that African American males needed help with regulating their emotions, being in control of themselves and taking accountability for their actions. We wanted to create an environment where our African American male students could interact with positive African American males from the community. The first “Shop Talk” took place on December 15, 2022 from 12-2 pm.

“Shop Talk” comes from the idea of a barbershop or beauty shop. In the barbershop and the beauty shop, people are free to discuss whatever topic comes to their mind. These places can serve as a meeting place for the community. Barbers and beauticians share their wisdom and knowledge with their clients. These places are therapeutic because it offers the opportunity to release whatever thought or emotion is bottled up inside. According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC, 2016), “barber shops have served as special places among African Americans. They have been places not only to get hair care services but locations where black people could be vulnerable and talk about issues of importance in their

community. There were spaces where customers played games such as chess, cards, and dominoes, while having conversations about local gossip, politics, and community affairs.” African American films often feature the barbershop in movies such as *Coming to America* (1988), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Barbershop* (2002). The barbershop space allows one to hear opposing points of view in an open format. *Urban Geography* (2010) suggests that barbershops were a significant social and cultural institution for a community. Community leadership within the shop accounts for much of its success, and its continued ability to draw in the community. It also allows one to hear opposing points of view. As such, the intended outcome of the HMS shop talk was to build another level of intervention while partnering with the community. This intervention will allow the targeted population to build connections with people that look like them in the community. It is my hope that these connections will extend to a healthy relationship between the student and the adult.

At HMS, there were five keynote speakers of the “Shop Talk”. A short biography of each speaker is listed below, all of whom are strong African American pillars in the community.

Detective Menelek Shah: NIU Detective/Police Officer that looks for opportunities to bridge the gap between the community and policing. Detective Shah provides education to the community around social justice rights. He mentors many students in the community.

Dr. George J. Mitchell: Local pastor of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in DeKalb. Dr. Mitchell provides opportunities to bring the church outside of the four walls of the building. He is very community service and social justice driven.

Dr. David Seymour: Works in the counseling department at Northern Illinois University. While Dr. Seymour lives locally, he is a pastor at Logan Street Missionary Baptist Church in Batavia, Illinois. He mentors male students from varying levels.

Daveyon Bradley: Local mentor to students that are involved in the SIMBA/SIMSA (Safe in my brothers arms/Safe in my sisters arms) program. Daveyon plans and participates in summer camping outings with students. Daveyon is also active in a jail ministry program where he visits the local jails weekly. Here is where he is able to mentor incarcerated adult males into changing their lives around.

Chris Mitchell: Is the Associate Director for the Center for Black Studies at Northern Illinois University. Mr. Mitchell works with students at the collegiate level in preparing themselves for life beyond college. He also mentors African American male students in college through a “barber shop” format and he is very close to completing his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at NIU where he studied the implementation of the “barber shop” from a self-determination theory lens for his research.

While the “Shop Talk” was open to all, the target group of participants was centered around African American male students that attend Huntley Middle School who have one or more disciplinary referrals, one or more unexcused absences, and two or more F’s. As a school we have a theme called “Checking the B.A.G.” (**B**ehavior, **A**ttendance, **G**rades). These three flags show on-track status for students. Students that are low in two or more of the areas will be considered off-track for graduation. The counselors and the administrative team will reach out to the targeted students and their parents/guardians about being involved in the “Shop Talk”.

“Shop Talk” was considered a tier three intervention used to target African American male students that have one or more disciplinary referrals, one or more unexcused absences, and two or more F’s. This intervention was meant to create mentorship opportunities for identified students. The “Shop Talk” was also to serve as a safe space for students to share and learn about

themselves. Students should be able to engage in meaningful conversations with the mentors that will extend into meaningful relationships outside of school.

The “Shop Talks” took place at Huntley Middle School in December 2022. The school served as a safe space for students as this is the home school that they attend. At school they saw familiar faces from the school as well as from the community in which they live. The “Shop Talks” took place in a classroom where students interact with their peers everyday so it was a familiar setting for them.

The “Shop Talk” forum began with five African American males from the community listed above introducing themselves and then giving a 20 minute presentation of their identified focus. The five men focused conversations around self-regulation, fatherlessness, How do I make it in this world as a black man, Who Am I?, and what it means to be a man. All of these topics could be considered as the key ingredients to the make-up of a man, in this case, the African American man. After the brief presentation, participants were able to meet with the keynote speaker that they identified with the most. This time was considered the meet and greet of the “Shop Talk”. In the corner of the room there was a licensed barber cutting hair during the experience in order to simulate the actual barbershop community experience. Because of the possibility that some of the topics of discussion could bring up trauma, there were licensed counselors and social workers there to meet with students if necessary. While mentors were given five focus conversations around self-regulation, fatherlessness, How do I make it in this world as a black man, Who Am I?, and what it means to be a black man, the mentors were given the space to ask or discuss topics from their learned experiences as African American males. Mentors had the freedom to allow conversations to happen organically with the students in the shop talk.

When students arrived in the classroom at Huntley Middle School to experience the “Shop Talk”, they had the opportunity to engage with their peers. While they were engaging with their peers, they had access to a catered lunch of pizza and wings with the mentors. This gave everyone the opportunity to begin to feel comfortable around each other. During the “Shop Talk” students that returned their permission slip received a free haircut. Once the “Shop Talk” was complete, students were emailed a post “Shop Talk” survey to complete with either the principal or grade level counselors.

The Shop Talk began with students eating and socializing with the mentors and getting to know each other on a personal level. Mentors began with introducing themselves and sharing something personal about themselves. All 26 students had an opportunity to share their name and something personal about themselves.

Dr. Joseph Mitchell explained the ground rules of “Shop Talk” and how students needed to govern themselves and be respectful of themselves and others. The mentors started with the following ground rules. 1. Be respectful of yourself and others, and 2. Be responsible for yourself. Dr. Joseph Mitchell explained the African call and response to the students. When the mentors said “AGO” (respectfully ask for your permission), the students then responded with “AME” (respectfully give you your permission). This was practiced a few times. Finally, the students were introduced to the African word, Ashe, which means, “I agree”.

Daveyon Bradley led the icebreaker. Daveyon explained what the students needed to do for the ice-breaker, which included music and rhyme. All of the students appeared eager to participate. The students were heard saying, “I’m going to win this”, and “I am the best rapper in here”. The mentors then had the students get into a circle. The mentors made a beat and students and had to rhyme to a beat and song titled “In the classroom” which the students knew from the

popular show on MTV called “Wildin Out”. There were students that were hesitant about participating at first, in the end all students participated in the icebreaker. While students were interacting with the mentors, there was a barber in the corner cutting students hair.

Chris Mitchell led the next activity. Chris explained the barbershop atmosphere. What goes on in the barbershop, stays in the barbershop. An explanation of the rights of passage of a black man was explained. In the barbershop, that is where black men were seen by other black men. The barbershop is the special place where we are able to share and grow. The barbershop is a staple and place of refuge for black men. Historically, the barbershop served as a special place for African Americans. They not only got their hair done but they could talk about issues of importance in the community. This was their opportunity to be open and honest. This was a safe space. He explained that their voice mattered. Be respectful and acknowledge everyone in the room.

A form was distributed called “About Me”. Students got the opportunity to share their thoughts about themselves. Topics that come up from the discussion form were: Friendships, loyalty, grades, family, careers, etc.

Chris Mitchell talked about growing up without a father. Seventeen of the twenty-six students in the Shop Talk have been negatively impacted by the absence of their father. Students discussed growing up without a father figure in their lives. Students were noticeably silent when the discussion about the absence of their fathers began. Questions posed to the students during this part of the Shop Talk included, “How did it make you feel when a parent didn’t show up?” Student responses included: sad, weak, depressed, alone, not wanted, not loved, felt suicidal thoughts, and not seen were some of the responses from students. David Seymour spoke about fatherlessness and his personal experiences. Several students became emotional about not having

their father around. One student said, “that is why I do what I do because I don’t care. Why should I care, he doesn’t care about me”. The room was silent for a moment after this comment. Chris Mitchell walked over to the student and said, “You matter to me and I want to see you succeed”.

Detective Menelek Shah transitioned the students to discuss the B.A.G. (behavior, attendance, grades). The discussion around the B.A.G. began with behavior. Detective Menelek Shah asked the students, “How many of you have gotten two or more disciplinary referrals and sent to the office?” All of the students in the classroom raised their hands. All of the students looked around the room and began laughing at each other. Detective Menelek Shah asked the students, “What are some of the reasons that you get a referral or sent to the office?” Some of the responses were: The teacher do too much, The teacher gets on my nerves or makes me mad, One of my friends makes me upset, I don’t feel like doing any work, Someone says something crazy to me, I’m not in the mood so everything makes me mad. Detective Menelek Shah asked the students, “Who controls you?” All of the students responded in saying, “No one controls me, I control myself.” Detective Menelek Shah asked another question, “If you control yourself, why do you let people get you upset so that you have a referral and have to be removed from the classroom?” It is important to note that the room was silent and the students were just looking at each other without a response. Detective Menelek Shah told the students that they needed to learn how to regulate their own emotions or there would be consequences that would have lifelong effects on their lives. Detective Menelek Shah went on to tell the students about his career as a police officer and how he has seen many young African American males funnel through the judicial system. Detective Menelek Shah said, “If you can’t learn to regulate your emotions and get your anger in check, you will end up doing something out of character that will

end you either in prison or in the cemetery.” The room was silent at this point. Detective Menelek Shah said, “Our black boys aren’t going to Penn State they are going to the state penn in record numbers.” “We are going to keep you all from being a statistic.”

The discussion around the B.A.G. continued with attendance. Detective Menelek Shah asked the students to raise their hands if they had missed more than ten days of school. All students in the classroom raised their hands. Detective Shah asked them why they missed so many days and there were several different responses: we went to Chicago, I forgot to set my alarm, I didn’t feel like going to school, I took off for my birthday and my momma said that I didn’t have to come. Detective Shah then asked the question, “How many of you are failing two or more classes? All of the students raised their hands. As the students looked around, they began to laugh at each other. The other mentors joined in the conversation to inform the students that they would never be successful in school if they didn’t show up. Chris Mitchell explained to the students that they were failing themselves by not showing up for school. “You miss instruction and learning that is taking place inside of the classroom when you don’t show up for school.” Detective Shah asked the students, “What are some respectable jobs or careers that you would like to pursue?” Most students said sports. “When you think about success, how many times do you see black men as being successful?” Students gave varying responses, “I see successful black men that are...basketball players, rappers, football players, and dancers.” It is important to note that none of the students saw black men in a professional career outside of sports and music.

The Shop Talk wrapped up the session with discussion about the B.A.G. (behavior, attendance, and grades). The mentors decided that they would run an incentive with the students around behavior referrals. Of the 375 disciplinary referrals written during 1st semester, 76% of the referrals were for students of color. The mentors decided that they would surprise the

students with lunch of their choice if they didn't receive an office referral in the next 30 days. Several students asked if they could pick anything they wanted and all of the mentors agreed that they could pick anything within reason. They could only select a lunch item, lobster and steak were not acceptable lunch options. It was decided that students that didn't receive an office referral by the next Shop Talk session on January 31st, would receive a surprise lunch. The students were visibly excited and wanted to beat the challenge. As the mentors wrapped up the session, students began to walk to the classroom door. As the students exited the room, each mentor personally shook each student's hand and told them to enjoy the remainder of the day.

Study Phase of the PDSA Cycle

Pre-Post Data Collection

The data collected prior to the event included behavior, attendance and grades, in addition to a short survey on belongingness. The pre-belongingness survey was given one week prior to the shop talk event and the post-belongingness survey was given one week after the shop talk event. These are important data points that influence belongingness. This will allow me to see where the students begin and where they end. The Belongingness survey will allow me to see what the students think of themselves at Huntley Middle School and allow me to make adjustments based on the students' perceptions.

In order to understand the population and the needs of the building, it is important to first discuss the demographics of the building. The makeup of the student population include: 39.1% are White, 23.4% are Black, 29.1% are Hispanic, 1.3% are Asian, 6.6% are Two or more races, and .5% are American Indian/Pacific Islander. These percentages are important as we look at the

behavior data for the 1st Semester for the entire school. There were 375 office disciplinary referrals written for the first semester. The office disciplinary referrals account for 67 students that make up 71% of the referrals written. All of these students have two or more referrals in the system. Of the 67 students, it is important to note that 51 students were African American students. In the interest of being laser focused on the data, it is necessary to break down the data by grade level. In 6th grade, there were 116 office disciplinary referrals written during the 1st semester. There were 19 students that accounted for 70.7% of the referrals written. Of the 19 students, 12 of the students are African American.

In 7th grade, there were 136 office disciplinary referrals written during the 1st semester. There were 24 students that accounted for 77.2% of the referrals written. Of the 24 students, 18 were African American. In 8th grade, there were 123 office disciplinary referrals written during the 1st semester. There were 24 students that accounted for 65% of the referrals written. Of the 24 students, 21 were students African American.

While it is important to highlight and acknowledge the discipline in the building, it is vital to understand if students feel a sense of belonging to the building. Students that were selected to participate in the “Shop Talk” were given a Belongingness survey one week prior to the date of the event. Each student was allowed to fill out the Belongingness survey in a one-on-one setting in order for the students not to feel distracted or encouraged to fill out the survey in a particular way. Each grade level counselor and the building principal called down the students to the library to complete the survey.

The survey was a free online student belongingness survey from Solution Tree, first published in 2013 (Solution Tree, 2013). On the survey, there were 25 questions that the students

had to answer. The students were able to respond to the questions with the following answers:

Do not agree, Agree, and Strongly agree.

After students attended the “Shop Talk” students were given the post Belongingness survey to complete one week after the event. This survey was given in the same manner as the initial Belongingness survey. Students were called down to the library so that they could complete the survey in a one-on-one setting so that students wouldn’t feel distracted or encouraged to fill out the survey in a particular way. The grade level counselors and the building principal called the students down to the library to complete the survey. Like the initial survey, students answered the same 25 questions. The students responded to the questions with the following answers: Do not agree, Agree, and Strongly agree.

The initial belongingness survey was given prior to students attending the “Shop Talk”. The follow-up survey was given after students attended the “Shop Talk”. Table 1 shows the survey results before and after the Shop Talk.

The post “Shop Talk” Belongingness Survey yielded some positive results. For the question, “I have at least one good friend at Huntley Middle School”, the responses went from 88% Agree/Strongly Agree to 100% Agree/Strongly Agree. This increase means that all of the students have at least one good friend in school. Peer relationships are very important at the middle school level. The next question that gained some positive results is, “My school is a place where people care about each other. The responses for this question went from 80% Agree/Strongly Agree to 94% Agree/Strongly Agree. In order for students to feel a sense of belonging to the school, they need to feel that there are people that care about them. Students do not care what you know until they know that you care about them. The next question that showed a positive gain was, “I feel like I am an important part of my school”. The responses for this

Table 1

Pre and Post Belongingness Survey Results

Question	Pre Shop Talk - % Agree/Strongly Agree	Post Shop Talk - % Agree/Strongly Agree
I have at least one good friend at Huntley Middle School	88%	100%
I have at least one good friend outside of Huntley Middle School	92%	94%
My school is a place where people care about each other.	80%	94%
I feel that I really belong in my school and classrooms.	88%	88%
My teachers really care about me and are concerned when I am absent.	92%	88%
My teachers help me understand what I need to learn and how to be successful inside of the classroom.	92%	94%
My school feels like a big happy family.	65%	53%
My classrooms feel like big happy families.	69%	53%
I feel like I am an important part of my school.	50%	76%
I feel like I am an important part of my classrooms.	65%	71%
My teachers encourage me to join clubs and activities in the school.	65%	76%
My teachers encourage me to develop my interests and talents.	88%	94%
My school has a large number of clubs and activities that I can participate in.	88%	94%
My school encourages me to explore all sorts of career opportunities for after I finish school.	80%	88%
I feel like I have a lot of choices in what and how I learn.	80%	82%

Table continued on the next page

Table 1 (continued)

Question	Pre Shop Talk - % Agree/Strongly Agree	Post Shop Talk - % Agree/Strongly Agree
I feel like everyone at my school encourages me to stay in school, graduate, and go on to college or career training.	88%	94%
I feel supported and respected in my school and classrooms.	80%	71%
I have at least two trusted adults in the building that I can go to whenever I have a problem.	84%	88%
All of my teachers know my name.	100%	94%
At least two of my teachers know something personal about me.	34%	53%
If I walked into class upset, my teachers would be concerned about me.	92%	88%
I am excited about going to my classes.	57%	53%
My teachers are respectful towards me.	88%	100%
It is important for me to do well in school.	96%	100%
Would you like a way to connect with other positive African American males around your age at Huntley Middle School?	46%	88%

question went from 50% Agree/Strongly Agree to 76% Agree/Strongly Agree. This question yielded positive results. These results are saying that students are beginning to feel like they are important to the school and that they matter. I believe that when students feel that they matter in a school system, they will begin to show up. The next question that yielded a positive gain was, “At least two of my teachers know something personal about me”. The responses for this question went from 34% Agree/Strongly Agree to 53% Agree/Strongly Agree. This is a pleasant increase for the students. This gain means that students are starting to interact more with their teachers. Students are trusting their teachers and telling them personal information about themselves. Whether students are initiating this or teachers, it has yielded positive results for the

students. The final question from the Belongingness Survey that gave positive results was, “Would you like a way to connect with other positive African American males around your age at Huntley Middle School?”. The responses for this question went from 46% Agree/Strongly Agree to 88% Agree/Strongly Agree. It seems that students were hesitant to build relationships or connect with positive peers. After the “Shop Talk” it seems as though students enjoyed the connection. Students were able to connect with mentors/peers that looked like them. While they are all very different, they are all viewed the same.

Act Phase of the PDSA Cycle

It is during the Act phase of the PDSA cycle where reflection and revision happen. It is important to reflect on what went well during the interventions implemented, especially the Shop Talk intervention, as well as reflect upon what adjustments may need to be made moving forward.

Shop Talk Reflections

This cycle for the first “Shop Talk” was amazing and the students and mentors really enjoyed their time together. After the first meeting, all of the student participants were excited and asking when this would happen again for them. They went out and told their friends about it and I had several students asking if they could participate in the “Shop Talk”. I believe that this is the first time that these students have been in a setting where everyone looked like them. In the “Shop Talk” students didn’t have to “code switch”. Students were able to communicate with each other as well as the mentors in a manner that made them feel comfortable. The “Shop Talk” became their judgment-free zone.

In reflecting about whether the “Shop Talk” worked, I am split down the middle. I would have to say yes and no. Yes, the “Shop Talk” worked because it allowed African American male students to be in the presence of males that look like them. They were able to participate in discussions around topics that hit home to them such as fatherlessness. They were able to think about their thinking and get real-life responses from the mentors. The mentors were patient with the students because they were once on the other side; young African American males trying to navigate in a world that doesn’t fully understand them.

In order for the “Shop Talk” to be effective within a regular school day, students need a space similar to the “Shop Talk” where they can be able to refocus and get back into the classroom setting. The mentors aren’t in the building everyday and it is hard for students to hold themselves accountable without that constant reminder. In a perfect world, I would have a space where students could go to learn coping strategies, restorative practices and calming techniques that will benefit them at school but also throughout their lives. The person that would be in charge of the room would just need to be a full-time employed teacher that possesses knowledge of SEL, mindfulness, belonging and restorative practices.

Education is about addressing the whole child. When a students’ social-emotional needs are met, then they are ready to learn in the classroom. Students need a restorative school that takes a non-punitive, restorative approach to resolving conflict and preventing harm. Restorative approaches enable those who have been harmed to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, and for those responsible to acknowledge this impact and take steps to put it right. It is important for our students to learn to identify their emotions and learn strategies for self regulations. Students who are not proficient in demonstrating self-regulation will learn strategies and begin practicing new skills on a regular basis.

In order to get this type of space for students, there will need to be a staff member assigned and trained for this task. This would be a Board of Education approval. Moving forward, a presentation to the Board of Education would be the next step. However, it is important to get teachers involved in the process to help them understand the students that they serve. Teachers need to be aware of how to engage our students in the classroom as well as respond to behaviors.

The “Belongingness Survey” results allowed me to see that students need positive interactions with people that look like them. The post “Belongingness Survey” yielded many positive responses. Based on those survey results, students involved in the “Shop Talk” have become engaged and connected to the school. Students have increased friendships, feel that people in the building care about them, feel like they are an important part of the school, feel that teachers know something personal about them, and want to connect with peers that look like them. While this is just a starting point, continued interactions with these students will help them have positive gains in the B.A.G. (behavior, attendance, and grades). These results mean that this is the perfect opportunity to create professional development opportunities for teachers in the areas of culturally relevant teaching practices and restorative justice. This professional development will extend to professional learning will create an environment where all students begin to feel seen and included.

The “Shop Talk” PDSA cycle allowed me to make informed decisions about this intervention. I will continue with the current “Shop Talk” format as is however, I will expand the intervention to meet a larger number of students. In order to be intentional about meeting the needs of all of our students while meeting students where they are, there needs to be a space within the school day for this type of intervention to happen. This would be a space where

students can learn coping strategies, restorative practices and calming techniques that will benefit them at school but also throughout their lives. The person in this space must possess knowledge in SEL, mindfulness, and restorative practices.

A future PDSA cycle would be necessary to improve on what is already happening with the “Shop Talk”. To build on what is happening with the twenty-six students that are already involved in the the “Shop Talk”, it would be necessary to continue to track their behavior, attendance and grades. Instead of a monthly check-in, students would get a weekly check-in with a grade level counselor to track their progress and sense of belonging. It would nice if their check-in person was a reflection of themselves, however, we will have to work with the current staff employed. Their check-in person makes a connection with the student and discuss their behavior, attendance, and grades. This check-in person would also work with them on coping strategies, restorative practices, and calming techniques. This person would also be the students’ go to person in time of distress within the school. Their job would be to refocus the student to get them back on track and into the classroom. Every four to six weeks, the student services support team and administration would meet to discuss the progress of each student. Students would be rotated in and or out of the program depending on the progress of each individual student. It is important to note that teachers would need to be involved in this process as well. Information would be collected from them and shared at the progress meetings. Teachers would also need to know where to send a particular student in time of need or distress.

The Need for Greater Staff Involvement

On January 18, 2023, there was a planning meeting with the Regional Office of Education to discuss the needs of the building. The needs of the building are in line with the

school's established School Improvement Plan that was written during the previous school year. It was identified that teachers needed professional development around culturally relevant teaching practices and restorative justice.

It was decided that a committee would be formed to develop curriculum around the novel, *Looking Both Ways* by Jason Reynolds. This initiative would be called, "One School, One Book". All students in the building would get a book and as a school we would all be reading it at the same time. Curriculum would be developed around this book for students in all core content area classes. Students will be able to see themselves in the book and have culturally relevant discussions and conversations with teachers and peers.

The Regional Office of Education is creating professional development that would extend into professional learning around restorative justice practices in the classroom. There would be six teachers trained and staff meetings would be used to train teachers. The training for teachers would be monthly as this is a big lift for the building.

All of this work is in line with the work that needs to happen for our African American male students that are the furthest away from achievement and belonging. When our African American students begin to feel that they are in a place where they see themselves and people actually care about them, they will show up for us.

Concluding Remarks

The work to create a sense of belonging for our African American male students is a task that can be accomplished. Our students deserve to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Our students deserve to see a reflection of themselves in the classroom. This is important for their development. African American male students can't be what they can't see. As educators,

we need to find ways to help African American male students to trust the process of learning and create a real sense of belonging. Once we plant them in the right soil, they will grow.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

As I reflect upon my dissertation journey, I can see how my ideas and thoughts have shifted. Prior to my dissertation research, I was busy exploring restorative justice and restorative teaching practices in the classroom. It was important for me to help provide an equitable education for all students. The criminalization of students of color continues to happen in schools across the nation. The school-to-prison needs to be stopped because it harms students, particularly, students of color. Once a student is funneled into the juvenile justice system, it is not easy for them to get out. This research shifted my exploration to try to truly understand the school-to-prison pipeline and what needs to happen within the four walls of the school setting.

I have come to understand that my job as an educator is to develop independent thinkers. Punitive consequences push students away from the educational school and create feelings of distrust towards administration and teachers. Students of color are being removed from the educational school setting for disciplinary reasons. It is possible that many students of color could have avoided being suspended and expelled if a restorative justice program considered their perspective of their wrong doing. School systems have failed many students of color for decades. Because this is all true, I know that I must continue to be laser focused in understanding that systems need to change in or to stop the flow of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Process Reflection

The title for my dissertation is SHOP TALK: DECREASING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS. The purpose of my research is to create interventions for students of color to increase belongingness within the school setting and decrease the flow of students of color into the school-to-prison pipeline.

My doctoral journey began in Rockford Public Schools where I was the principal of a middle school with high trauma and high suspension and expulsion rates. It was during my time at this school that I knew that something needed to change. There were too many students being suspended and expelled from school. Once students were on the suspension track, they usually weren't engaged in the educational process. While there were many supports in place for students, there wasn't a real support system for teachers. It was clear to me that teachers didn't know how to meet the needs of students coming into the school with high trauma. Unknowingly, teachers were a trigger for students in the building. Teachers have an expectation of how the classroom should operate on a daily basis. These expectations weren't meeting the students where they were. The needs of the students weren't met and the needs of the teachers weren't met. Students continued to be suspended for their behaviors and teachers weren't understanding of the population in which they served.

At the beginning of the 22/23 school year, I became the principal of a middle school in DeKalb Public Schools. As the new building principal, I began the new year observing and listening. I started my listening sessions with teachers. They were my eyes and ears into this new building and could tell me the good and the bad. After I met with the teachers and staff, it became clear to me that there were systems and structures that were either broken or non-

existent. Some of the things that teachers talked about was the lack of effective interventions and supports, minimal professional development, resistance from teachers, and no real restorative justice opportunities for the students.

I decided that I needed to fully understand the needs of the classroom teachers. I sent a survey to the teachers titled, "Alternative to Suspension". In this survey I asked three specific questions. I asked: "What is a possible alternative to suspension that you think could work here that would benefit our students?", "Where are we doing now that doesn't work for our students?", and "Do you have another suggestion or something that you would like to add?" It was clear to me that teachers wanted consistency for staff and students. Teachers wanted students to be held accountable for their actions. Teachers wanted students to learn from their mistakes and consequences. The teachers also felt like they haven't received professional development around the areas of restorative justice and teaching culturally relevant literature in the classroom.

I met with the student support services team. This team consists of four counselors, two social workers, and two assistant principals. In speaking with members of the student support services team, it became crystal clear that nothing was being done to fully support the students of color. The data showed that students of color had problems with self-regulation based on teacher input and discipline referrals sent to the office.

While meeting with the student support services team, it was clear that our students of color were being sent to the office and/or suspended in high numbers. During this meeting, we identified 27 African American male students that had three or more behavior referrals, five or more unexcused absences, and failing two or more classes. All of the 27 students that were identified fell into all three of these categories. These students were off track and the furthest

away from achievement. It was decided that something needed to be done for our African American male students.

In the African American community, there are safe spaces where people of color can go and discuss whatever topics come to mind. Those spaces include, but are not limited to, the beauty shop, the barber shop, and church. While no one is an expert in these spaces, everyone feels welcome to join in and share their experiences or offer support or advice. It is in these spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging. This is the type of environment that I needed to create for my African American male students who were being pushed out in large numbers.

I decided to create a barber shop experience for the 27 African American male students in my building. I reached out to five African American males from the community. I asked them if they wanted to be a part of the Barber Shop experience for 27 African American male students. All of the mentors wanted to help out and were eager to change lives. It was then decided that the name of the mentoring program for our African American males would be called “Shop Talk”: A place where students go to grow.

Once the mentors were identified, a parent letter went home about the program. Prior to the students participating in the “Shop Talk”, they were given a belongingness survey that consisted of 26 questions. I wanted to get a feel for how the students felt prior to the mentoring program. All of the students took the survey in a one-to-one setting with either the principal or grade level counselor. Majority of the students wanted the survey to be read to them. This created an environment where students didn’t feel rushed to just answer the question. I didn’t want their reading level to be a factor in this survey. Wanted all students to fully understand the question that they were answering.

The day of the “Shop Talk”, students were excited. It is important to note that all 26 students were present on the day of the event. The “Shop Talk” was scheduled for two hours at the end of the day. When students got to the location of the “Shop Talk”, students were greeted by the mentors and a catered lunch. The students and mentors ate together and while quickly getting to know each other. Once they were done eating, the mentors started an ice breaker for the students. It is important for me to point out that there was a barber in the corner of the room cutting the students hair for free. Students received a permission slip prior to the event. Students had to receive parent permission before they could receive a haircut. After the ice breaker, different mentors would talk and do exercises with the students. All of the mentors circled around the B.A.G. (Behavior, attendance, and Grades). There were many moments where students were laughing but there were also moments of seriousness. Before leaving the “Shop Talk”, each mentor personally shook the hand of each student. It is important to note that each of them said something personal to them.

Two weeks after the “Shop Talk”, students filled out the post “Shop Talk” belongingness survey. Students took the survey in the same manner that they did the initial survey. Students took the survey one-on-one with either a grade level counselor or the principal. Again, I didn’t want students to feel rushed in the process. I wanted students to take their time and answer the question. I also didn’t want reading comprehension to be a factor so the survey was read to students that needed this accommodation.

In order for the “Shop Talk” to work, there are a few things that need to happen. The “Shop Talk” would need to happen on a consistent basis for students. There needs to be accountability checks for students that are in the program. Also, teachers need to be a part of the process. For this to work there would need to be a clear vision and commitment from staff and

administration, there would need to be staff buy-in of the program, and professional development around restorative justice practices and teaching culturally relevant materials.

Final Remarks

This current study began around the disproportionate use of exclusionary disciplinary practices for students of color, specifically African American males, and how students are being funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline. This research has offered a new understanding that African American male students are missing their reflection in schools. African American male students deserve to see a reflection of themselves in schools. This is important for their development. African American male students can't be what they can't see. As I reflect on King's prophetic warning as he sat imprisoned in body, but not in mind, in a Birmingham jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly". Our decision to turn a blind eye to justice affects us all. It is important for us all to act. African American male students deserve support, empathy and to feel like they belong in schools. Current practices need to be tailor-fit to meet their needs and ensure academic and behavioral success of our students of color, specifically African American male students. Our students deserve justice and we are all responsible for being the champions for justice.

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