

The Effect of Discipline Reform Plans on Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes in Minnesota

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The Effect of Discipline Reform Plans on Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes in Minnesota

Matthew A. Linick, Alicia N. Garcia, and Hannah Dunn Grandpre

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In 2017 the Minnesota Department of Human Rights identified 43 local education agencies in the state as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for their use of exclusionary discipline practices (suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions) at higher rates for American Indian and Black students and students in special education than for White students and students not in special education as well as overall use. The department agreed not to pursue legal action against any identified local education agency that created and implemented a plan to reform its discipline practices. This study examined the use of exclusionary discipline practices by Minnesota local education agencies from 2014/15 through 2018/19 and the extent to which the creation of discipline reform plans by identified local education agencies was associated with changes in discipline outcomes. The study found that creating a discipline reform plan was not associated with a statistically significant change in exclusionary discipline actions experienced by students.

Why this study?

Students across the country are losing valuable instruction time as a consequence of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom (exclusionary discipline actions), which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable student populations (see box 1 for definitions of key terms). In the 2015/16 school year students across the United States lost more than 11 million days of instruction because of exclusionary discipline actions (Losen & Ramirez, 2020). Researchers examining discipline actions have argued that suspensions and expulsions are used too frequently in response to nonviolent student behavior (Steinberg & Lacoce, 2017), such as violating school uniform regulations or refusing to turn off a cell phone (Watanabe, 2013).

Suspensions and expulsions have been assigned disproportionately to students of racial/ethnic minority backgrounds and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Osher et al., 2010). Multiple studies have shown that Black students, Hispanic students, and students in special education programs are more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students and students not in special education (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Finn & Servoss, 2014; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Porowski et al., 2014). In 2014 the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released a data snapshot showing that in 2011 students with disabilities received suspensions at twice the rate of students without a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The Office for Civil Rights also reported that in 2011, Black students represented only 15 percent of the student population across the United States, yet they represented 44 percent of students suspended more than once and 36 percent of students expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Experiences with exclusionary discipline have been similar for students in Minnesota. In 2015/16 American Indian students in the state were 10 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students, and Black students were 8 times more likely to be suspended or expelled. In addition, students with disabilities were twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as students without a disability (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2018).

For additional information, including technical methods and supporting analyses, access the report appendixes at <https://go.usa.gov/xFzWy>.

Box 1. Key terms

Discipline reform plans. Plans to reform discipline practices created by 41 of the 43 local education agencies (both traditional school districts and charter networks) identified by the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) in 2017 as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for inequity in the use of exclusionary discipline actions. The local education agencies worked with MDHR and the Minnesota Department of Education to create the discipline reform plans in 2017/18 for implementation starting in 2018/19. Two other local education agencies were also identified but did not initially agree to create discipline reform plans.

Discipline rate/exclusionary discipline action rate. The number of suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions per 100 students.

Exclusionary discipline actions. Discipline actions that remove students from the classroom, including suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions. All references to discipline actions in this report apply to exclusionary discipline actions. **Suspensions** prohibit a student from attending school for a period of 1–10 school days. **Exclusions** prohibit a student from attending school for more than 10 days but not longer than the remainder of the current school year. **Expulsions** prohibit a student from attending school for up to 12 months from the date the student is expelled, meaning that an expulsion can carry over from one school year to the next.

Identified local education agencies. The 43 traditional school districts and charter networks that were identified by MDHR in 2017 as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for their use of inequitable exclusionary discipline practices.

Local education agency. A traditional school district or a charter network.

Local education agencies with a discipline reform plan. The 41 of the 43 traditional school districts and charter networks that were identified in 2017 by MDHR as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act and that created a discipline reform plan in 2017/18 for implementation in 2018/19.

Minnesota Human Rights Act. A state law prohibiting discrimination in Minnesota. The law identifies several protected classes, including race/ethnicity and disability (Minn. Stat. § 363A.01, 2020).

In 2017 the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR), as part of its commitment to ensuring equity, identified 43 local education agencies as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for their inequitable use of exclusionary discipline practices. MDHR identified these 43 local education agencies based on the following criteria:

- Overall suspension and expulsion rates.
- Suspension and expulsion rates of all racial/ethnic minority students.
- Suspension and expulsion rates of American Indian and Black students.
- Suspension and expulsion rates of students in special education programs.
- Rate of suspensions and expulsions determined by MDHR to be assigned for a subjective infraction (actions and behaviors such as disobedience) rather than an objective infraction (actions and behavior such as bringing a weapon to school or fighting; Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2018).

Of the 43 identified local education agencies, 41 agreed to create a plan to reform discipline practices for implementation beginning in the 2018/19 school year,¹ and MDHR agreed not to pursue legal action against these local education agencies. The 41 local education agencies created plans that included the following (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2018):

- Faithfully implement and measure the effectiveness of strategies such as restorative justice, positive behavioral intervention, and Innocent Classroom (a program that provides professional development to teachers to address racial bias).

1. Two local education agencies did not initially agree to the requirements outlined by the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. As a result, they faced legal action from the state. During the course of this legal action, one local education agency agreed to create and implement a discipline reform plan. This study includes only the 41 local education agencies that initially entered into agreements with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights.

- Collaborate with other identified local education agencies to develop best practices to reduce exclusionary discipline actions and implement cultural competency and corrective action strategies.
- Develop meaningful ways for students, parents, teachers, and the broader community to engage and give input on discipline reform.
- Develop a process to collect and analyze data from student discipline referrals to understand the challenges that students face, the needs of teachers, and where implicit bias exists.
- Limit the role of police liaison officers in school buildings to legal and safety matters rather than student misbehavior.
- Analyze current policies and practices on student discipline.
- Report progress to MDHR twice each year for three years.

Leaders at MDHR requested assistance from the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest to better understand the effect of the creation of a discipline reform plan on student discipline outcomes. MDHR can use this information to decide whether to continue or modify the current approach to addressing the inequitable use of exclusionary discipline. In addition, to help leaders at MDHR understand how the experiences of the identified local education agencies with discipline reform plans might apply to other local education agencies in the state, this study describes the characteristics of local education agencies that created a discipline reform plan and trends in exclusionary discipline action rates. Finally, this study provides information about the discipline reform strategies included in the discipline reform plans, which leaders at MDHR and the Minnesota Department of Education can use to inform and support local education agencies in the design of future discipline reform plans. As interest in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline grows nationwide, this information might also be useful to education agency leaders in other states who seek to create discipline reform policies and to guide the content and scope of school district discipline reform plans.

Research questions

This study sought to understand trends in exclusionary discipline actions before 2017, when MDHR identified the local education agencies that were in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for their inequitable use of exclusionary discipline practices, as well as the changes in 2018/19, the school year following the creation of the discipline reform plans in 41 local education agencies. The study examined the use of exclusionary discipline actions by Minnesota local education agencies over the course of five school years, 2014/15–2018/19, and the extent to which the creation of discipline reform plans by the local education agencies identified by MDHR was associated with changes in student discipline outcomes.

The study examined the following research questions:

1. What were the characteristics of the 41 local education agencies that created a discipline reform plan and of all local education agencies in Minnesota in 2018/19?
2. From 2014/15 to 2018/19 did the rate of discipline actions differ between the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans and other local education agencies in Minnesota? Did these differences vary by students' race/ethnicity and special education status?
3. Was identification by MDHR and the creation of a discipline reform plan in 2017/18 associated with changes in student discipline outcomes in 2018/19?
4. What reforms were included in the discipline reform plans created by 41 of the local education agencies identified by MDHR, and how did the planned reforms differ across these local education agencies?²

2. Analyses of the components of the discipline reform plans revealed that although the discipline reform plans had many components in common, not many plans had precisely the same "bundle" of components. Twenty of the 41 plans had unique bundles of reform

Data sources, sample, and methods used in the study are described briefly in box 2 and in detail in appendix A.

Box 2. Data sources, sample, and methods

Data sources. This study used a combination of administrative data received from the Minnesota Department of Education and publicly available data from the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) website and the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.). Appendix A includes a full list of the data elements provided, data sources, and variables used in the study.

The Minnesota Department of Education provided the following data:

- Data on the characteristics of K–12 students in all local education agencies in the state from 2014/15 to 2018/19, including a unique student identification number; demographic characteristics (gender; race/ethnicity; eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, a measure of economic disadvantage; special education status; English learner student status; and grade level); and academic achievement (standardized test scores in math and English language arts).
- Records for all discipline incidents reported to the Minnesota Department of Education from 2014/15 to 2018/19, including student identification number and type of exclusionary discipline action (suspension, exclusion, or expulsion).
- Data on the characteristics of local education agencies, including whether they were a traditional district or charter network and their total student enrollment.

The study team downloaded the discipline reform plans for each of the 41 each local education agencies with a plan from the MDHR website (<https://mn.gov/mdhr/news-community/reports/sedata.jsp>).

The study team obtained publicly available data on local education agencies' locale (town, suburb, city, or rural) from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Samples and methods. For research question 1 about the characteristics of local education agencies with discipline reform plans and all Minnesota local education agencies, the study team used data from the 2018/19 school year, including observations on 840,012 unique students in 491 local education agencies in Minnesota; 330,091 of the students were in the 41 identified local education agencies with discipline reform plans. These numbers exclude students with missing demographic data and students attending schools outside of traditional districts or charter networks. The study team compared key characteristics (average student characteristics, local education agency type, and locale) of local education agencies with discipline reform plans with key characteristics of all local education agencies in Minnesota. Differences of 5 percentage points or greater were considered meaningful.

For research question 2 about exclusionary discipline action rates of local education agencies with discipline reform plans and all other local education agencies in Minnesota, the study team used data from 2014/15 through 2018/19, with observations on 1,174,713 unique students in 510 local education agencies in Minnesota; 495,172 of the students were in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans. These numbers exclude students with missing demographic data and students attending schools outside of traditional districts or charter networks. The sample also excluded students in schools in two identified local education agencies that did not initially enter into an agreement to implement a discipline reform plan. Rates of discipline actions for students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were calculated by year and separately for American Indian and Black students, all racial/ethnic minority students, White students, students in special education, and students not in special education.

For research question 3 on the effect of creating a discipline reform plan on student discipline outcomes, the study team used data from 2014/15 through 2018/19, including observations on 708,651 students in 82 local education agencies; 495,172 of the students were in the 41 local education agencies identified by MDHR that created a discipline reform plan, and 243,113 students were in the 41 comparison local education agencies that were not identified by MDHR as in violation of the state's Human Rights Act).¹ The study team examined the effect of creating a discipline reform plan on two student discipline outcomes in 2018/19: any exclusionary discipline action (a binary indicator of whether a student experienced a suspension, exclusion, or expulsion) and the total number of exclusionary discipline actions per student per year (a count of the number of times a student experienced a

components. Of the remaining 21 plans 18 had bundles of components that were the same across two local education agency plans, and one bundle was the same across three plans. This lack of consistency meant that there was insufficient statistical power to measure potential effects associated with specific bundles of components.

suspension, exclusion, or expulsion). The study team used statistical procedures to adjust for student and local education agency characteristics (see table A1 in appendix A). At the student level these statistical procedures adjusted for student background characteristics and for whether a student experienced a discipline action in the prior school year (see table A1). At the local education agency level these statistical procedures adjusted for type of local education agency (traditional district or charter network), student enrollment, student background characteristics aggregated to the local education agency level, and locale. These analyses also accounted for prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions. To check the robustness of the findings, the study team also analyzed the data using alternative models (see tables B6 and B7 in appendix B).

Additional information about the samples used to answer research questions 1–3 is in table A2 in appendix A.

For research question 4 on the content of the discipline reform plans, two study team members reviewed the publicly available discipline reform plans created by each local education agency, as well as all available updates (which are shared with MDHR each year in February and September), to identify the reforms that the 41 local education agencies included in their discipline reform plans. Then, the team conducted content analyses to determine whether local education agencies included similar sets of reforms.

Note

1. The number of students with observations for the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans and the number of students with observations for the comparison local education agencies do not sum to the total number of students with observations because of intradistrict mobility. Some students moved between the two groups during the study period and thus appear once in the data for local education agencies with discipline reform plans and once in the comparison local education agencies. These students also appear once in the overall student count.

Findings

This section presents the main findings for Minnesota students in the 2014/15–2018/19 school years. Additional findings and supplemental analyses are in appendix B.

Local education agencies with discipline reform plans had a larger percentage of Black students and students eligible for the National School Lunch Program than the average Minnesota local education agency

Students who attended schools in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were more likely than all students in the state to be from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. In local education agencies with discipline reform plans, 46 percent of students were eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 39 percent of all students in the state (table 1). In addition, 21 percent of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were Black, compared with 12 percent of students in the state, and 48 percent of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were White, compared with 64 percent of students in the state.

Local education agencies with discipline reform plans were more likely to be located in cities and suburbs and less likely to be located in towns and rural areas than the average Minnesota local education agency, and they had higher average enrollment

Of local education agencies with discipline reform plans, 37 percent were in cities, compared with 17 percent of all local education agencies in the state, and 41 percent were in suburbs, compared with 15 percent of all local education agencies in the state (see table 1). Only 10 percent of local education agencies with discipline reform plans were in towns, compared with 20 percent of local education agencies in the state, and 12 percent of local education agencies with discipline reform plans were in rural areas, compared with 48 percent of all local education agencies in the state. Reflecting the more urban and suburban locales, local education agencies with discipline reform plans had higher average student enrollments (8,051) than did all local education agencies in the state (1,771; see table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of the characteristics of local education agencies with discipline reform plans and the characteristics of all local education agencies in Minnesota, 2018/19

Characteristic	Local education agencies with discipline reform plans (n = 41)	All Minnesota local education agencies (n = 491)
Student characteristics aggregated to the local education agency level		
Average standardized test score in math	654	662
Average standardized test score in English language arts	650	656
Percent female students	49	49
Percent American Indian students	3	2
Percent Asian students	11	7
Percent Black students	21	12
Percent Hispanic students	12	10
Percent Multiracial students	6	5
Percent Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students	<1	<1
Percent White students	48	64
Percent of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program	46	39
Percent of students in special education	16	16
Percent of students who were English learner students	14	9
Percent of students in elementary grades	45	45
Percent of students in middle grades	22	23
Percent of students in high school grades	33	32
Percent of students with exclusionary discipline actions in previous year	4	3
Local education agency characteristics		
Average student enrollment	8,051	1,771
Number of charter schools	20	33
Number of traditional school districts	21	458
Percent of agencies in a city locale	37	17
Percent of agencies in a suburban locale	41	15
Percent of agencies in a town locale	10	20
Percent of agencies in a rural locale	12	48

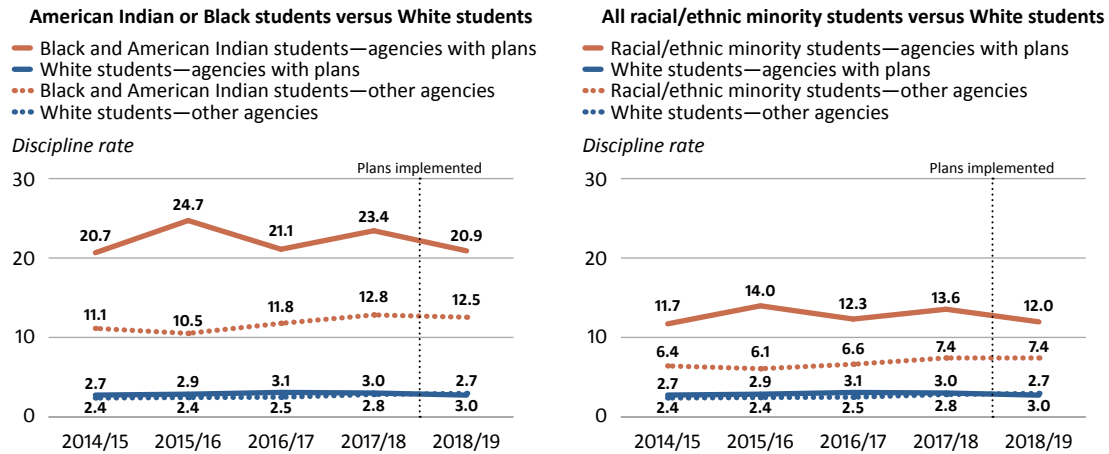
Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Differences in exclusionary discipline action rates by race/ethnicity were larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies

From 2014/15 (before the creation of discipline reform plans) to 2018/19 (after the creation of discipline reform plans), the rates at which students experienced exclusionary discipline actions were higher in local education agencies with discipline reform plans (7.8 exclusionary discipline actions per 100 students) than in other local education agencies (3.6 discipline actions; see table B2 in appendix B). The higher rates of discipline actions in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were driven by higher rates of discipline actions for racial/ethnic minority students. White students experienced discipline actions at similar rates across local education agencies with discipline reform plans and other local education agencies. However, American Indian and Black students and all racial/ethnic minority students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans experienced discipline actions at a much higher rate than their counterparts in other local education agencies (figure 1).

There were annual fluctuations in the discipline action rate for American Indian and Black students and for all racial/ethnic minority students over the five years of the study. However, the changes were small and, for both

Figure 1. Differences in exclusionary discipline action rates by race/ethnicity were larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies, 2014/15–2018/19



Note: Discipline rate is the number of suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions per 100 students and is unadjusted. The 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans created the plans in 2017/18 and implemented them in 2018/19. The sample of students in all local education agencies consisted of 1,174,713 unique students in 510 local education agencies in Minnesota over the five-year period, of which 495,172 students were in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

American Indian and Black students and for all racial/ethnic minority students, the discipline action rate in local education agencies with discipline reform plans was almost identical in 2014/15 and 2018/19 (see figure 1).

In 2018/19 the discipline action rate decreased slightly for students in special education in local education agencies with discipline reform plans; however, the difference in discipline action rates between students in special education and students not in special education remained larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies

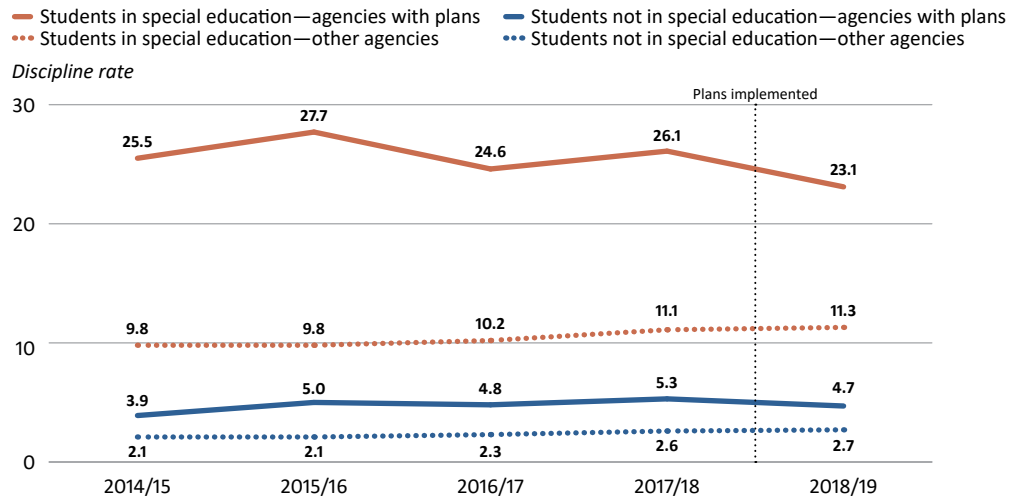
Similar to the patterns seen for race/ethnicity from 2014/15 to 2018/19, students in special education experienced exclusionary discipline actions at a higher rate in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies (figure 2). However, students not in special education experienced exclusionary discipline actions at similar rates in local education agencies with discipline reform plans and in other local education agencies.

The exclusionary discipline action rate for students in special education decreased slightly (by 3.0 actions per 100 students) in local education agencies with a discipline reform plan in 2018/19. There was also a slight downward trend in the discipline rate over 2015/16–2018/19 for students in special education in local education agencies with a discipline reform plan: the discipline action rate decreased from a high of 27.7 discipline actions per 100 students in 2015/16 to 23.1 discipline actions per 100 students in 2018/19 (see figure 2).

Creating a discipline reform plan was not associated with a statistically significant decline in exclusionary disciplinary actions in 2018/19, after student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for

From 2014/15 to 2017/18 there was an increase in the average percentage of students experiencing any exclusionary discipline action both in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans and in the 41 comparison local education agencies.

Figure 2. Differences in exclusionary discipline action rates by special education status were larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies, 2014/15–2018/19

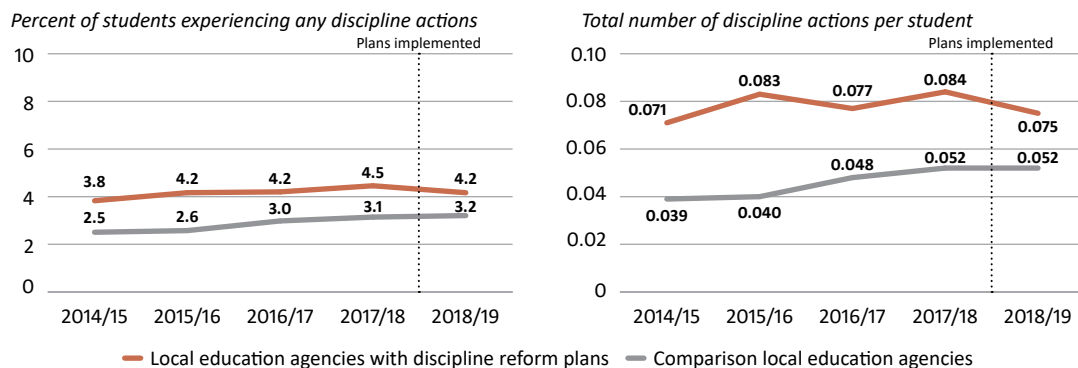


Note: The sample of students in all local education agencies consisted of 1,174,713 unique students in 510 local education agencies in Minnesota, of which 495,172 students were in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans over the five-year period. The discipline rate is the number of suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions per 100 students and is unadjusted. Local education agencies with discipline reform plans created the discipline reform plans in 2017/18 and implemented the plans in 2018/19.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

However, the percentage of students experiencing any exclusionary discipline actions decreased from 2017/18 (when the discipline reform plans were created) to 2018/19 (when the plans were implemented) in local education agencies with a discipline reform plan, while increasing for students in comparison local education agencies (figure 3). On average, without adjustment for student and local education agency characteristics, 4.5 percent of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans experienced any discipline action in 2017/18 and 4.2 percent in 2018/19. In comparison local education agencies, 3.1 percent of students experienced discipline actions in 2017/18 and 3.2 percent in 2018/19.

Figure 3. Creating a discipline reform plan was not associated with a statistically significant decrease in exclusionary discipline actions experienced by students, 2014/15–2018/19



Note: The sample of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans and comparison local education agencies consisted of 708,651 unique students in 82 local education agencies in Minnesota, of which 495,172 were in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans over the five-year period. Percentages and total number of discipline actions per student are unadjusted. Local education agencies with discipline reform plans created the plans in 2017/18 and implemented them in 2018/19.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

After student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for, the probability of experiencing exclusionary discipline actions did not differ for students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans and for students in comparison local education agencies (see table B5 in appendix B). These estimates lack precision: after student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for, students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans had a predicted probability of between 1.5 percent and 2.7 percent of experiencing a discipline action, whereas students in comparison local education agencies had a predicted probability of between 1.6 percent and 2.4 percent (see table B5).

Similar unadjusted trends were observed for the total number of exclusionary discipline actions per student. Students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans experienced 0.084 discipline actions per student on average in 2017/18 and 0.075 in 2018/19. Students in comparison local education agencies experienced 0.052 discipline actions per student on average in both 2017/18 and 2018/19 (see figure 3).

However, after student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for, the change in discipline actions per student did not differ for local education agencies with discipline reform plans and comparison local education agencies on average. These estimates lack precision; the estimated effect of creating a discipline reform plan is likely somewhere between a 0.71 reduction in the average number of discipline actions per student and a 0.51 increase in the average number of discipline actions per student (see table B6).

Local education agencies' discipline reform plans varied in specificity and content

Local education agencies included a wide range of reforms in their discipline reform plans, such as implicit bias training, discipline referral process reforms, and trauma-informed practices (see table 2 for a description of all identified reform components). Each local education agency's discipline reform plan included at least 7 and up to 18 reform components (figure 4). Implicit bias training was the most common reform, appearing in all 41 plans, followed by community engagement, which appeared in 38 plans. Providing professional development on the discipline referral process was the least common reform, appearing in 8 plans.

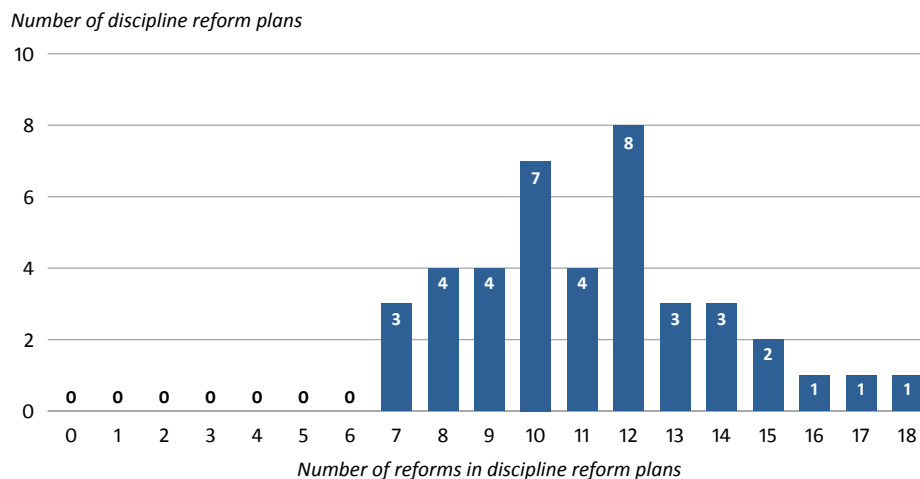
Not only did the reforms included in the plans vary, but so did the level of detail about each reform and its implementation. Following the submission of these plans in spring 2017/18, local education agencies were required to submit progress updates to MDHR every six months. The updates provided information about how local education agencies were implementing the plans. The level of detail in each update differed across local education agencies, in part because there was no template for the plans. For example, one local education agency reported the dates of professional development and shared detailed information about the successes and challenges of the professional development sessions. Another local education agency wrote that it intended to provide professional development on the same topic but offered no additional detail. Absent a uniform reporting system, it was difficult to examine differences in the components of the discipline reform plans across local education agencies or to understand their progress toward implementing their proposed reforms.

Table 2. Reform plan components included in local education agencies’ discipline reform plans, 2018/19

Component	Percent of plans	Definition
Implicit bias training	100	Any mention of professional development aimed at teaching local education agency leaders or school staff about implicit bias.
Community engagement	93	Any mention of engaging community members, from soliciting feedback and questions from the community (for example, through surveys or community meetings) to inviting them to be partners in creating local education agency policy.
Relationship building	90	Any mention of professional development aimed at improving relationships at school, including relationships among students, staff, and the broader community.
Cultural competence	83	Any mention of professional development aimed at improving the cultural competence of district leaders or school staff.
Positive schoolwide interventions	83	Any mention of positive behavioral interventions and schoolwide approaches to behavior management, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports management system.
Trauma-informed practices	73	Any mention of professional development that addresses childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences.
Oversight	71	Any mention of agencies reviewing their oversight policy (for example, establishing an oversight committee to review suspensions and expulsions).
Policy changes	68	Any mention of agencies reviewing policies not otherwise mentioned, such as revisions to the School Resource Officer policy.
Socioemotional learning professional development	61	Any mention of professional development about socioemotional learning.
Crisis prevention	44	Any mention of professional development aimed at preventing crises, including mentions of deescalation techniques and suicide prevention.
Dissemination	44	Any mention of distributing materials regarding discipline policies (for example, the code of conduct) to students and parents.
Referral process changes	43	Any mention of agencies reviewing or updating their policy for discipline referrals.
Antibullying	42	Any mention of the prevention of bullying or cyberbullying, best practices around antibullying, or data collection and reporting around bullying.
Support for identified students	34	Any mention of schools working one on one with students who have been suspended or had other identified behavioral issues to address the issue (for example, creating an action plan with the student).
Curriculum changes	32	Any mention of incorporating curriculum into lessons that could reduce behavioral issues, such as mindfulness strategies for students or changes that make curriculum more culturally inclusive.
Budget	27	Any mention of reallocating budgetary resources, such as reallocating funds to support professional development.
Discipline referral process professional development	20	Any mention of professional development aimed at clarifying referral decisionmaking and processes.

Source: Authors’ analysis of discipline reform plans published on the Minnesota Department of Human Rights’ website.

Figure 4. The number of reforms in each discipline reform plan varied across local education agencies, ranging from 7 to 18, 2018/19



Source: Authors’ analysis of discipline reform plans published on the Minnesota Department of Human Rights’ website.

Limitations

The study has three limitations. First, the ability to draw conclusions about any relationship between creation of a discipline reform plan and changes in student discipline outcomes depended on comparing local education agencies that were similar except for plan implementation. That was not possible. All the large urban local education agencies in Minnesota were identified by MDHR as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act. Although each of these local education agencies was “matched” to a comparison local education agency, the matched local education agencies were necessarily smaller and less urban. Therefore, differences in outcomes between large local education agencies and their comparison matches might have been related to unmeasured factors rather than to the creation of a discipline reform plan. The lack of true comparison agencies biases estimates of the relationship between the student discipline outcomes observed and implementation of discipline reform plans. Descriptive data about the prevalence of exclusionary discipline actions for agencies with discipline reform plans and agencies without them were unaffected by this limitation.

A second limitation was the lack of consistent, high-quality, and reliable exclusionary discipline action data. Although the processes for data reporting from local education agencies are defined, definitions and details were not consistent across local education agencies. This variation makes it difficult to ensure accurate cross-district comparisons. Similarly, MDHR did not provide specific instructions for implementation reporting for the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans. Some participating agencies provided detailed information about their implementation efforts, whereas others merely stated that a plan component was implemented. As a result, while the study team was able to describe agencies’ intended reforms, it was not able to examine implementation of those reforms.

Finally, only one year of data (2018/19) after the creation of the discipline reform plans was available to examine the effect of being identified by MDHR and creating a discipline reform plan. Due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study team was not able to obtain data for the 2019/20 school year. Additional years of data are needed to more fully understand the relationship between the creation of a discipline reform plan and changes in discipline outcomes.

Implications

Additional research and improvements in data related to student discipline outcomes and the creation and implementation of discipline reform plans are needed to determine whether the identification of local education agencies by MDHR and the use of discipline reform plans are effective for reducing inequity in student discipline actions. Although the analyses suggested a slight decrease in the percentage of students experiencing exclusionary discipline actions in local education agencies with a discipline reform plan relative to comparison local education agencies, the findings were not statistically significant. Regardless of whether discipline reform plans had any positive effects, large racial/ethnic gaps in discipline actions persisted. As long as inequities persist, educators should explore new policies and strategies to substantially reduce racial/ethnic gaps in exclusionary discipline actions.

For future research to be successful, data collection processes related to discipline actions and the creation and implementation of discipline reform plans need improvement. Specifically, a uniform process for reporting discipline actions across local education agencies is needed. In addition, if MDHR continues to identify local education agencies and require them to create discipline reform plans, improvements in implementation reporting are also needed. For example, more detailed information is needed to understand the level and fidelity of implementation for each intervention or activity in local education agencies’ discipline reform plans. Without this information, it will not be possible to isolate the effects of specific interventions or sets of interventions on discipline outcomes. Consequently, providing future support for identified local education agencies will be difficult due to the lack of

evidence indicating the most effective improvement strategies. In contrast, with these data in hand MDHR could commission more rigorous follow-up studies with additional years of data to determine whether creating a discipline reform plan leads to a meaningful reduction in discipline actions.

While MDHR and the Minnesota Department of Education are making decisions about future research, leaders in both departments might want to consider providing additional guidance to identified local education agencies about the types and numbers of reforms to include in their discipline reform plans. The 41 discipline reform plans examined in this study included a wide range of reforms; one local education agency included as many as 18 reforms. Research has shown that the greatest change in behavior is associated with a moderate number of interventions (Wilson et al., 2015). To avoid taking on too many reforms, local education agencies should prioritize evidence-based reforms, which can be identified through evidence clearinghouses such as the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>). Introducing reforms such as new professional development programs for teachers and administrators can be time intensive and costly. Local education agency leaders can use information about the effectiveness of the discipline reforms to ensure that the reforms selected are supported by evidence.

Finally, if the identification process continues and data are collected systemically on the identification process and the implementation of reform plans, additional research on the effectiveness of specific interventions in Minnesota local education agencies could be beneficial. MDHR and the Minnesota Department of Education could consider designing a study that would provide additional information about the types of discipline reform plans that are proving most effective in identified local education agencies. This information could be shared with local education agencies that have not been identified for discipline reform but that have demonstrated higher than usual rates of exclusionary discipline practices and differences in the use of discipline across student groups, including groups defined by race/ethnicity and special education status.

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REL 2021–115

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