

# Challenges and Opportunities for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline in SE Seattle Public Schools

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## CHAPTER 1: DISPROPORTIONALITY AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

In 1848 Horace Mann famously called public education the “great equalizer of the conditions of men.” For nearly another century his statement applied only to white men; however, the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation forced the expansion of the school system. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 codified the prohibition of “discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Justice 2013), extending the reach of Mann’s vision and informing the best of our national visions for public education ever since. The realities of efforts across the United States to equalize education, and as a result life outcomes, however, have fallen far short of these visions. Decades of academic achievement gaps between African-American and white students in particular are testament to the structural inequality that remains at many levels.

One aspect of racial inequality in schools, and an arguable contributor to racial disparities in academic achievement, is the disproportionate use of suspensions and expulsions, known as “exclusionary discipline policies,” on African-American and other minority students. Termed the “disciplinary gap,” this trend has grown steadily since the 1970s. An increasing number of minority students across the nation have lost access to public education as a result, violating public education’s basic principle of inclusion. At the national level, African-American students are 3.5 times more likely to be excluded from school as a form of discipline than their white counterparts (OCR 2012b). This national concern is reflected locally to varying degrees. At the state level, students of color in Washington are 1.5 times more likely to be long-term suspended than their white peers, and African-American students in particular are more than

twice as likely (Washington Appleseed and Team Child 2012).<sup>1</sup> At the local level, the trend is more pronounced. In Seattle Public Schools, African-American students are 4.7 times as likely to be excluded<sup>2</sup> as their white peers. American Indian students are 4.3 times as likely and Hispanic students are 2.1 times as likely (SPS 2012). As such, the national conversation on keeping students in school is particularly relevant in Seattle.

This study was conducted in response to the Southeast Seattle Education Coalition's desire to better understand exclusionary practices among the 20 schools in Southeast Seattle that it advocates for. SESEC was created in 2010 by leaders of community-based organizations to respond to the achievement gap at the local level. Its mission is "To rally communities of color and allies to improve Southeast Seattle Schools so that all students succeed and all families are empowered" (SESEC 2012). This study is informed by both SESEC's desire to clarify its advocacy agenda on this issue and the conversations in the SE community surrounding education and achievement. It is intended to describe the use of exclusionary discipline in Southeast Seattle schools, highlight areas of concern or success, and offer avenues for advocacy. Furthermore, it aligns with SESEC's focus on issues of race, educational inequity, and the desire to problem-solve from within the community.

In addition to informing SESEC's work, this study seeks to contribute to a building body of literature on reducing exclusion in diverse urban schools. Increasing awareness of the disciplinary gap has prompted conversation across the country about strategies to close it.

Some schools have changed attitudes toward exclusionary policies and have reduced their

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<sup>1</sup> Due to complications in collecting data at the state level, the Washington Apple/Team Child report focuses solely on long-term suspensions, expulsions, and emergency expulsions in order to identify the educational and economic impact of many missed days of school for students. Short-term suspensions are much more common, but likely reflect patterns of long-term suspensions.

<sup>2</sup> "Exclusion" here refers to a total of short-term suspensions, long-term suspensions, and expulsions.

number of suspensions significantly, despite strict district policies that rely heavily upon exclusion. These schools stand as potential models for more inclusive, racially neutral educational policies. While existing studies on behavior management are useful and may form a basis for understanding how education might be improved, they can only point the way. Much of the literature is tested in traditional classroom settings, without the challenges that many urban schools face. Many scholars call for local level work to better understand the specific context for policy recommendations (Gregory, Skiba, Noguera 2010; Peterson et al. 2001; Krezmein, Leone, and Achilles 2006). This study considers this literature on how to reduce exclusionary discipline more generally and attempts to reconcile it within the context of Southeast Seattle. It accounts for Southeast's cultural and geographic specificity, as home to the most diverse zip code in the nation, with high concentrations of immigrant and refugee populations and children who qualify for free and reduced lunch.<sup>3</sup>

This study seeks to identify what works within the local context, answering the question: What have some schools done to achieve demonstrated drops within the context of strict district policies mandating suspensions and expulsions under certain circumstances? It utilizes a two-pronged approach in order to do so: a quantitative analysis of the use of exclusionary discipline in Southeast Seattle schools, followed by a qualitative analysis informed by local practitioners' understanding of their own community and its resources. By better understanding the use of exclusionary discipline in Southeast Seattle and what some schools have done to reduce exclusionary discipline in dramatic ways, this study suggests what local

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<sup>3</sup> 71 percent of students in SE Seattle qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), compared to the district average of 42 percent (SESEC 2012).

schools can do to reduce suspension rates in the context of district zero-tolerance policies to keep children in school and divert them from the school-to-prison pipeline.

This study concludes that the use of exclusionary discipline is pervasive in Southeast Seattle and disproportionately affects African-American and American Indian students most severely. It finds that improvements that are being made can be credited to schools and strong administrative prioritization of the issue. Schools that have reduced both the number of exclusions and their disproportionality are guided by school-wide commitment to such reductions, set clear expectations for students and all staff, and promote a multi-tiered series of interventions for dealing with challenging behaviors. While some change can be made at the school level, schools are constrained in their efforts by district zero-tolerance policies and a dearth of resources to properly respond to highly challenging behaviors.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *The Rise of Exclusionary Discipline*

Exclusionary policies have been on the rise for decades. The advent of the federal Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994 was followed by the promotion of zero-tolerance policies that mandate suspension for a variety of broad offenses that range from bringing a weapon to school to bullying to more general “misconduct.” This last category has been broadly applied for a number of grievances, including serious criminal offenses, but also for violations of school dress codes, tardiness, and even giving hugs. The most basic purpose of such policies is the isolation of dangerous students to ensure school safety. However, despite attempts to prescribe their use, there is great inconsistency in how they are applied in circumstances with varying degrees of severity. In fact, nationwide very few of the offenses for which students are excluded from school fall under the category of “serious and dangerous,” or involving drugs or weapons (Rausch and Skiba 2006). Leone et al. found that 95 percent of incidents that led to suspension fell into the categories of “disruptive behavior and other” or non-violent behaviors (2000). Such broad categories allow room for great subjectivity from school to school, with varying definitions of misbehavior. Nationwide most suspensions are being used as punitive forms for behavior management, going beyond their original intent. Instead of using suspension as last-resort methods to isolate dangerous students, the practice has extended to minor offenses and contributed to the exclusion of more and more students each year.

This broadening of suspension policy as a catch-all for behavior management has resulted in the inflation of the national suspension rate to almost twice that of 1973 (Losen and Skiba 2010). Exclusionary policies contributed to the suspension of 3.25 million children

enrolled in K-12 across the nation in 2006, effectively excluding 7 percent of the K-12 population from schools (Losen 2011). While removal from schools should not necessarily be taken off the table, it appears that exclusionary discipline is being used far more widely than it should, and perhaps inappropriately, the majority of the time. Considering the concerns with academic achievement that are presented across the nation, excluding children who need the most from schools is an unlikely remedy to increasing academic gains and could in fact serve as an additional barrier to attaining achievement goals.

The trends described here affect minority students the most as they experience disproportionately higher rates of suspension and expulsion. Disproportionality is well documented in the academic literature and is generally referred to as the “disciplinary gap.” At the national level, students from African-American families are most affected by the disproportionality. They are 2.19 (elementary) to 3.78 (middle) times as likely to be referred to the office for problem behavior as their white peers (Skiba et al. 2011). Gaps have also been identified among Hispanic and Native American students, who receive higher shares of these exclusionary forms of discipline (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010).

The basic assumptions around the use of exclusionary discipline as a form of punitive punishment to deter misbehavior are highly questioned in the literature. The consensus is that this widely accepted practice is ineffective. The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force examined its benefits and concludes that “there are surprisingly few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero tolerance approach to school discipline, and the data that are available tend to contradict those assumptions” (2008: 852). Daniel Losen takes on several of the underlying assumptions behind punitive disciplinary techniques. He

concludes that: suspensions do not reflect more misbehavior (a line of logic that blames the student for disciplinary outcomes), families are often not equipped or able to provide the attention students need when they are sent home (and can often be the root of the problem), removing disruptive children from the classroom does not lead to better academic results for remaining students, and exclusion does not serve as a deterrent for future misbehavior (2011). Tobin, Sugai, and Colvin support the latter finding, concluding that suspension actually acts as a reinforcer and predictor of future suspensions rather than a deterrent (1996). The vast majority of studies serve to dispute the assumption that exclusionary policies are effective demonstrate that such policies are outdated, incapable of preparing students for life beyond the classroom, and in dire need of reform.

### *Unintended Consequences*

Much of the literature concerns the unintended consequences of such disciplinary policies at various levels. One of the primary concerns among scholars is the consequence of their exclusionary nature. Perhaps the most direct consequence is the loss of valuable hours in the classroom that could be spent learning or dealing with the issue that demanded the school's attention. But indirect consequences also matter. When children are suspended families take on a large burden; they often have no recourse for childcare or supervision because of the nature of inflexible jobs, leaving the suspended child alone when they most need adult attention. Furthermore, suspensions are perceived as rejections, causing the child to lose their bond and change their attitudes about the school (Losen and Skiba 2010). According to Tobin, Sugai, and Colvin, "the vision of inclusive schools is lost" (1996) and a pattern begins

that can predict future suspensions and criminal activity. Thus, such policies have serious implications at both the individual and family levels.

Additional indirect consequences of punitive discipline in schools have ramifications not only at the individual or family levels, but at the societal level as well. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on School Health issued a statement in 2003, noting that suspension and expulsion "may exacerbate academic deterioration, and when students are provided with no immediate educational alternative, student alienation, delinquency, crime, and substance abuse may ensue" (Taras et al. 2003). Wald and Losen found correlations between suspensions and violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide attempts, and emotional distress (2003). Sherbo-Huggins (2010) furthers these findings, concluding that educational exclusion may lead to even longer-term social outcomes by linking low education levels to unemployment, substance abuse, dependence on public assistance, imprisonment, and exclusion from civic life. Skiba et al. (2002) found significant correlations between suspensions, dropout rates, and student perceptions of racial discrimination among minority students in urban schools. Thus, it is widely agreed that increasing the chances of these negative life outcomes and creating negative perceptions of schools as places where some students do not belong harms both students and their communities.

Part of the widely practiced punitive approach embodied in exclusionary discipline is the increase of police presence and involvement in school discipline and the criminalization of school code violations, resulting in what has been termed the "school-to-prison pipeline" and deemed "one of the most urgent civil rights challenges we face" (Archer 2010: 868). Wald and Losen (2003) link racial disproportionality in school discipline to similar disproportionality in

juvenile crime, and even further down the road to disproportionality in jails. Weisburd, Groff, and Morris (2011) note that increased policing can lead to the labeling and stigmatizing of youth. Building upon the argument that more suspensions reflects discrimination, Wald and Losen assert that many schools practice “preventive detention, a policy that excludes students from school for their perceived potential to be dangerous rather than for any overt act they may have committed” (2003: 13). The punitive nature of preventive detention and other exclusionary disciplinary policies transforms schools from places of growth or learning to an extension of the criminal justice system. Where opportunities for correcting behavior are presented and important social lessons could be taught, they are ignored and even denied.

Finally, exclusionary disciplinary policies pose serious ethical challenges. Exclusion denies the basic right to a public education and disproportionality furthers educational inequity, positing the discipline gap as a civil rights issue. Michelle Alexander (2010) traces the roots of disproportionality in the criminal justice system to national drug policies that have targeted minorities since the 1980s and calls the increased focus on crime a redesigned system of social control that serves as an extension of Jim Crow, legally excluding a large minority population from participation in society. She warns against the overly optimistic classification of America as a “colorblind” society and argues instead that racial discrimination persists through a criminal justice system that locks African Americans into an “inferior position by law and custom” (p. 12). While her argument is largely focused upon the mass incarceration of African-American adults more generally, it is relevant to the discussion on the discipline gap as she notes that youth are increasingly targeted and identified by the criminal justice system at a young age through schools, marking the way for the school-to-prison pipeline. Alexander’s

identification of these covert racial biases and structural hurdles informs the existence of the disciplinary gap.

While Alexander provides a broader context for understanding the existence of the gap, other scholars make more direct connections between the discipline gap and educational and inequity. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clark, and Curran (2004) view school discrimination as a logical extension of inequities found throughout society. Skiba et al. (2002) test the idea that African-American students might actually engage in increased levels of misbehavior compared to their peers in other racial groups, which would explain and legitimize the gap's presence. Based upon their review of the literature surrounding student misbehavior, however, they conclude that such is not the case and disproportionality is, in fact, discriminatory. Daniel Losen, in alignment with Alexander, uses disparate impact theory to better understand the discriminatory roots of exclusionary policies, describing "a method of discipline that is racially neutral on its face but has a discriminatory effect" (2011: 13).

Carla Monroe (2009) continues this line of thought by using Cultural-Ecological Theory to explain stereotypes of African-American students, arguing that it stems from their role as "caste minorities," (Ogbu 1978) which places them in an underclass position and informs their relationships and interactions with others. According to Monroe, this position can manifest itself in disciplinary problems, poor perceptions of academics, and discounting one's own ability to achieve. She states, "Mapping cultural behaviors onto lines of inequity, power, and privilege has led some scholars to conclude that variations between home and school frameworks create channels of marginalization for many students and ripen conditions for failure" (2009: 325). This said, the ability to change perceptions of students is hindered by great structural barriers

that inform deep-rooted stereotypes. Thus, there is a solid body of work that points to structural inequity as the foundation for the discipline gap; it is a reflection of both social and educational inequity, presenting a significant ethical problem for society.

### *Alternatives to Punitive Discipline*

Most child development literature denies the efficacy of punitive approaches to discipline, finding fundamental flaws with its rationale and the assumption that it will correct misbehavior. The scholarly literature overwhelmingly opposes punitive discipline and instead promotes the use of positive behavior intervention models and programs to teach appropriate social and conflict resolution skills. It overwhelmingly supports prevention strategies over punitive discipline. This body of literature offers possible alternatives to suspension and expulsion in the attempt to answer: What can be done to diminish disproportionality and increase educational equity?

One type of study asks what a “good school” looks like. Mayer and Leone looked at school measures of violence and disruption in what they called “secure building” schools that used physical (locks, metal detectors, etc.) and personnel-based (police, guards) security measures to enforce the rules. They found that such structures prompted more school disorder, while “system of law” schools that emphasize student understanding of rules were less disorderly. Other studies call for universal or school-wide prevention strategies, including changes in school attitudes and culture to support positive behavior, an increase in activities and clubs, the introduction of mediation techniques for resolving conflict, and the establishment of mentoring programs. Good schools would also have access to mental health professionals to provide individual and small group support for those who most need it and

decrease the need for exclusionary discipline (Taras et al.; Losen 2011; Leone et al. 2000). Osher et al. (2010) encourage the development of student assets: decision-making abilities, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and self-management. Promoting positive school attitudes and connections is important at all levels, from the administration to teachers and staff, and even the physical environment. Punitive strategies have no place within the new definition of a “good school.”

Other studies offer the value of specific programs or curriculums to improve behavior. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) receive a good deal of attention in the literature and are widely recommended (Fenning and Rose 2007; Osher et al. 2010; Losen 2011; Leone et al. 2000). PBIS is defined as: a preventative, multi-tiered framework for the implementation of “evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students” (OSEP 2013). The first level of behavior intervention is school-wide, targeting all students, staff, and settings. The second level focuses on specializes groups of students with at-risk behaviors. The third and final level provided specialized and individualized systems for high-risk students. Tobin and Vincent studied the implementation of PBIS in relation to changes in disproportionality and found that elements of the program did reduce disproportionality in their sample (2011). Waasdorp, Phillip, and Leaf also discovered that school-wide PBIS improved school climate and lowered teacher reported incidents of bullying and peer rejection (2012).

Restorative justice is another approach that some schools have begun to employ as an alternative to punitive discipline. Restorative justice, in its most authentic representation, presents a school-wide shift from the traditional punitive approach that deals with behavior

after they happen. It introduces a new philosophy of expectations surrounding behavior that focuses on relationships and community building. It is a preventive strategy that focuses on the individual to promote social and emotional learning (soft life skills) and reinforce school citizenship (Varnham 2005). Whereas the traditional model focuses on the misbehavior itself and on punishing the perpetrator—a passive experience that requires no effort on behalf of the student in question—restorative justice requires the participation of all stakeholders involved, seeks to rectify the harm for both the victim and the offender, and focuses on the importance of strengthening the community. It sees the community through a family model (inherently inclusionary, not exclusionary) that retains its members and nourishes their growth in all areas: social, emotional, *and* academic. It also focuses on the expressing the values of the community, as noted by Karp and Breslin (2001):

Schools as an institution at the societal level and as communities at the micro level are a cornerstone for youth socialization and the social control of delinquent behavior. Restorative and community justice programs in the school setting prioritize activities that try to reduce delinquency and find just solutions to delinquent behavior. Moreover, they try to build community capacity—to respond to problem behavior without resorting to the criminal justice system and to create a safe and supportive learning environment that effectively expresses the values of the culture (p. 249-50).

This model of inclusion is especially important for communities with high minority populations, where schools may be viewed as structures where they simply do not belong (Bradford 2013).

Present in all of these models and prescriptions is a notable change in understanding the role of the school. They view it quite differently from the punitive model: serving not only the academic needs of the child, but additionally supporting the socio-emotional growth that allows learning to take place. There is strong support for an increase in mental health and counseling services to deal with the root causes of misbehavior—a clear shift from the

criminalization of misbehavior promoted by the punitive model. In line with this shift, Morris and Howard argue for in-school suspension over traditional out-of-school-suspension, identifying an individualized and therapeutic model as a most effective design to target disruptive behavior (2003). There is strong support for continued inclusion of “misbehaving” students in schools and the expansion of the capacity for schools to appropriately serve their needs.

Complicating these findings is the express concentration on academic achievement in defining quality schools. While the research points to the construction of positive educational climates to improve achievement, high stakes for funding and autonomy in the era of No Child Left Behind drive focus on the immediacy of realizing academic goals, which seems more immediately connected to directing resources to tutoring programs, new curriculums, or honing in on teaching methods. Changing the climate of a school is challenged by its less visible connection to achievement, the investment of time and resources in implementation, the dedication of administrators and staff to such a change in philosophy, and the difficult nature of changing well-established patterns of behavior.

### *Targeting Disproportionality in Schools*

An important part of trying to solve the problem of disproportionality is to know at what level it originates. This focus is considered by several scholars who look at both the teacher and administrative levels to determine where some bias might lie, as in the case with preventive detention. In his study, Josh Kinsler finds that upon being referred to the principal for disciplinary measures, black and white students are treated equally, resulting in similar rates of

suspension or expulsion (2011). This indicates that the problem may not rest with the administration, but with teachers—those making the referrals. Bradshaw et al. posed the hypothesis that perhaps racial misalignment between students and teachers might account for increased disciplinary disproportionality. They found that it did not; when controlling for teacher ethnicity, black students were still referred at higher rates (2010). This study establishes that teachers determine who is referred for suspension and thus the focus for improvement should be at this level.

A number of studies underscore the significance of teacher training in various regards. Some of the suggestions for training include guidance in adopting “unambiguous behavioral expectations,” familiarity with how to properly use incentives and consequences, and the creation of positive experiences to promote student learning and school attachment (Leone et al. 2000). More general proactive classroom management techniques are important to strengthening a teacher’s ability to handle conflict, and special education training may be helpful for dealing with students with learning delays or behavioral issues who do not meet the criteria for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Skiba et al. found in studies on teacher preparation that teachers feel most underprepared in the area of classroom management and would be open to learning new strategies (2002). Aside from general classroom management strategies, however, is the equally important emphasis on cultural competence, particularly in urban schools. Skiba et al. suggests that some white teachers experience cultural discontinuity and may fall into misunderstandings about their students, especially black males (ibid). It follows that teachers should be both be made aware of the bias (Losen 2011) and trained to recognize stereotypes as fundamental strategies to furthering the goal of reducing

disproportionality. This focus on culture and race is particularly important in the context of highly diverse urban schools.

### *Inequity in Seattle Public Schools*

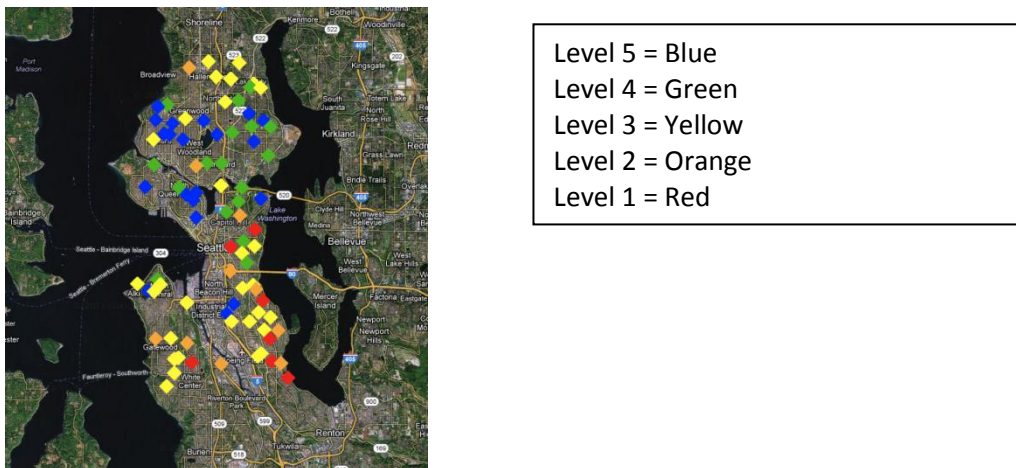
Seattle Public Schools encompasses over 90 schools throughout the City of Seattle, and serves over 48,000 students, making it the largest school district in the State of Washington. To keep track of achievement, it rates schools based on the attainment of academic achievement goals, school growth toward these goals over time, and the ability to do so without gaps for students who qualify for free and reduced lunches.<sup>4</sup> While overall district statistics show student achievement improving each year, a closer look reveals a sharp geographic division where high-achieving schools are concentrated in the northeast and northwest parts of the district. Figure 1 shows the division of schools by level for the 2010-11 school year and highlights the fact that most of the schools in southeast Seattle are levels 1-3. In fact, 95% of the 19 public schools in SE Seattle are ranked Level 3 or below (SPS 2012). Four of them are listed on the state's list of "persistently lowest-achieving schools" (OSPI 2012b). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "Achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (NAEP 2012). Despite decades of attempts to close this gap, it remains

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<sup>4</sup> Schools that score the highest are assigned Level 5 categorization, meaning that they have High Overall Absolute Performance with no Free and Reduced Price Lunch Achievement Gap. Level 4 means High Overall Absolute Performance with Free and Reduced Price Lunch Achievement Gap. Level 3 means Low or Medium-Low Overall Absolute Performance and High Overall Growth Performance or Medium-High Overall Absolute Performance. Level 2 means Medium-Low Overall Absolute Performance and Low-to-Medium Overall Growth Performance. The poorest-performing schools are assigned Level 1 categorization, meaning that they have Low Overall Absolute Performance and Low-to-Medium Overall Growth Performance. It is assumed for that Level 3 and below schools present Free and Reduced Price Lunch Achievement Gaps.

both a national and local concern (Quaid 2009; Armario 2011). Seattle falls in line with the national achievement gap between white and African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students (SPS 2011).

Figure 1. School Segmentation in Seattle Public Schools, 2010-2011



Source: SESEC 2012.

Southeast Seattle stands out for its diversity, which contributes to both strengths and challenges. It is home to the most diverse zip code in the nation (98011), with 60 different languages spoken, and high immigrant and minority populations. Consequently, schools face many unique challenges to serving children and their families, including lower incomes and education levels, alternative family structures, differing cultural assumptions about education, and fewer opportunities to engage learning resources outside of school. Hands and Hubbard (2011) argue that school structure can present challenges to lower-income urban neighborhoods. Such is the case in SE Seattle. Given the region's cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, schools that are aligned to middle class expectations and values present a structural challenge to effectively serving the community where they reside. Nonetheless, schools in SE are held to one set of district standards that spans the entire city.

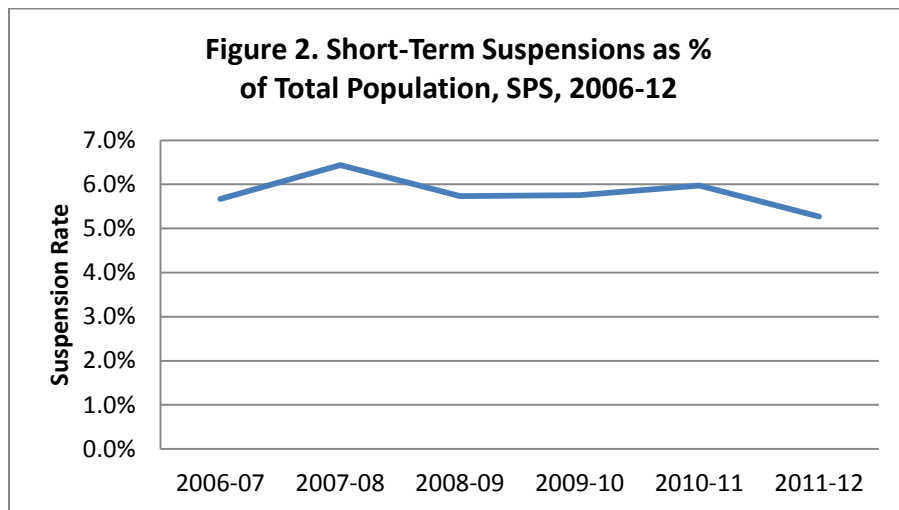
Seattle Public Schools has detailed prescriptions for discipline for teachers and administrators to follow, with zero-tolerance policies that outline 35 ways to be immediately suspended for “exceptional misconduct” (SPS 2012). However, suspension and expulsion rates vary widely from school to school throughout the district, indicating the subjectivity with which they are imposed. In SE Seattle specifically there are great extremes, from Beacon Hill Elementary which had 5 suspensions in 2011-12 (1.1% of its average enrollment), to Aki Kurose Middle School, where 25.9% of its average school population was suspended last year (SPS 2012)—pointing to a diversity of practices to study from which we might learn.

## CHAPTER 3: THE DISCIPLINE GAP IN SOUTHEAST SEATTLE

This chapter examines overall trends in disciplinary exclusion across Seattle Public Schools and compares them to those in Southeast Seattle to identify how SE students experience exclusion compared to their peers across the district. It then looks at school level data for SE schools to identify schools for further analysis in the qualitative portion of this study.

### *Seattle Public Schools*

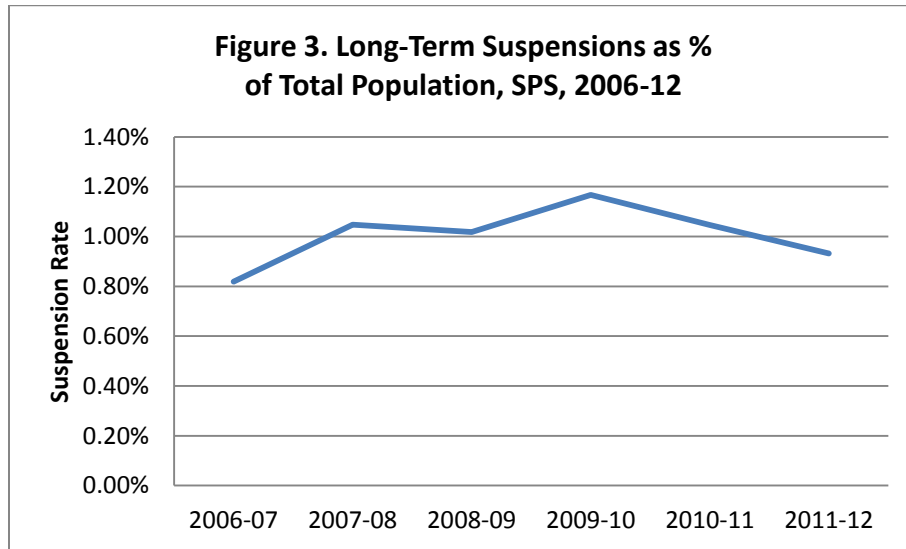
Basic trends in exclusion data have been relatively steady at the district level in recent years, indicating no substantive shifts in suspensions and some reduction in expulsions. At the state level, 42,062 students were suspended or expelled in Washington in the 2011-12 school year (OSPI 2012a). Seattle Public Schools made up 4.92 percent of the statewide total with 2,378 suspensions and 12 expulsions (OSPI 2013). This is slightly above the state average of



Sources: SISO 2006-2012; DoTS 2012.

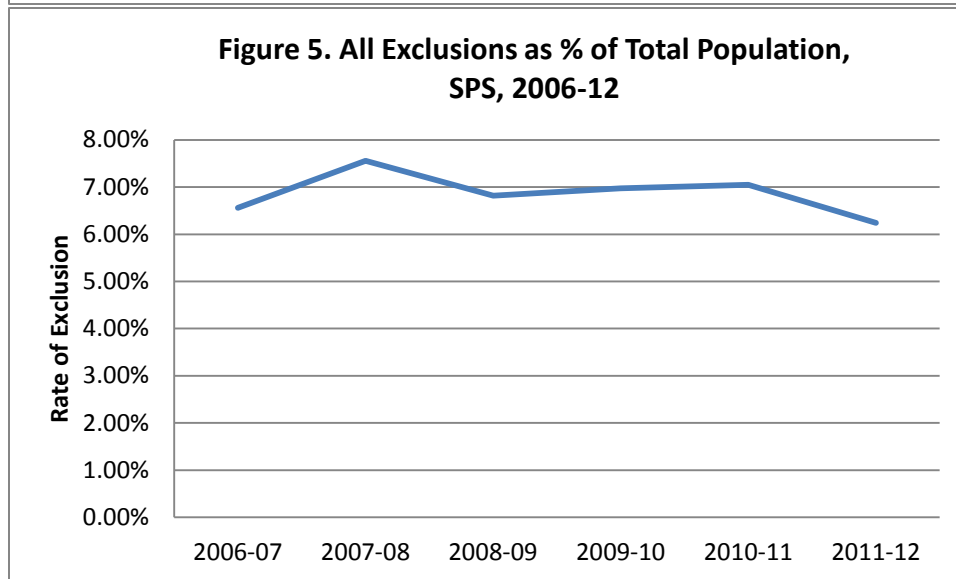
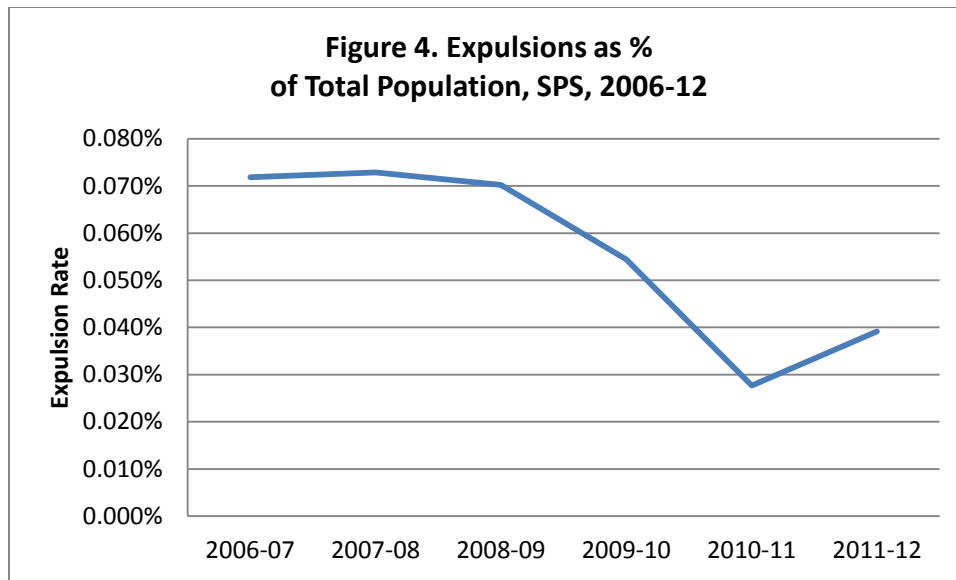
4.08 percent. Within the district, 6.2 percent of the student population received some form of exclusionary discipline in the same year. Trends in Seattle Public Schools from 2006 through

2012 indicate a steady use of exclusionary discipline, with slight variations from year to year. The 6-year span indicates a very slight reduction in the use of short-term suspensions in the



Sources: SISO 2006-2012; DoTS 2012.

district, a two-year decline in long-term suspensions, and a long-term decline in expulsions (with the exception of the 2011-12 school year). The decline in expulsions since 2008 indicates changing attitudes in the district toward the use of expulsions, demonstrating their importance in changing the nature of what is acceptable at the school level. In the last school year, short-term suspensions throughout the district dropped 0.7%, long-term suspensions dropped slightly by 0.12% from the year before, and expulsions rose very slightly by 0.011% after a long period of decline. After aggregating the data to include all forms of exclusionary discipline, it is evident that the district has maintained a relatively steady rate of disciplinary exclusion across the last six years, with less than one percent in reductions in the last year.

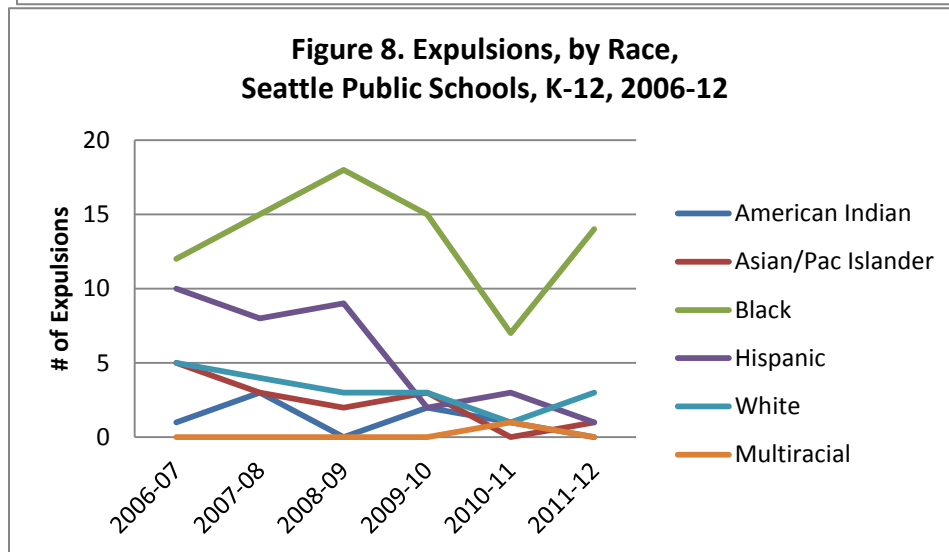
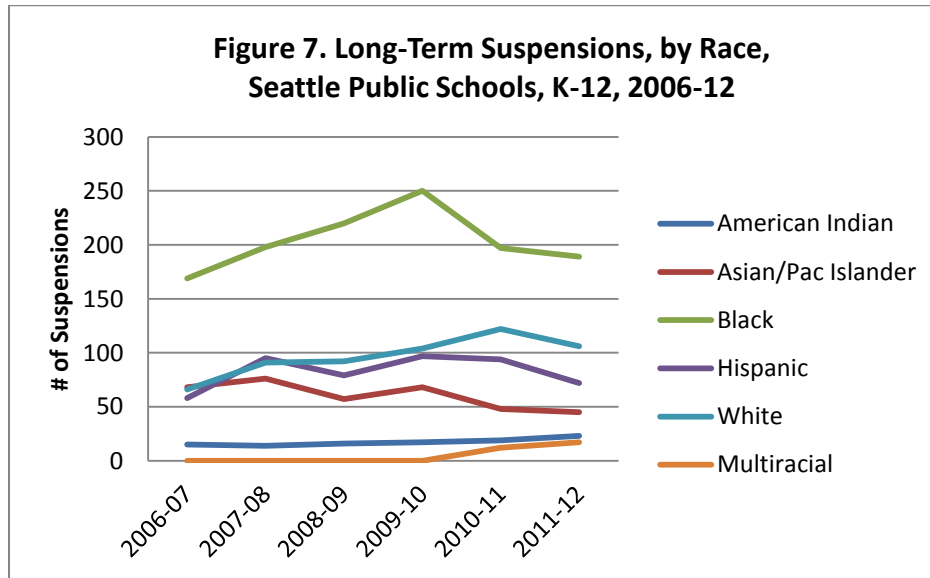


Sources: SISO 2006-2012; DoTS 2012.

In terms of disproportionality,<sup>5</sup> African-American students received the highest rate of exclusion in all forms of exclusionary discipline for the 2011-12 school year across the district. A breakdown of the district’s population by race compared with the breakdown of exclusions by

<sup>5</sup> Disproportionality is determined by using risk ratios. The target population’s risk of receiving exclusionary discipline (# suspended/total target population) is divided by the majority’s (white) risk (# suspended/total white population). The result is the risk ratio: 1 means the target population would be just as likely as their white counterparts to be suspended. Less than 1 indicates the target population would be less likely to be suspended than their white peers. More than 1 is the number of times more likely the target population is to be suspended than their white peers.

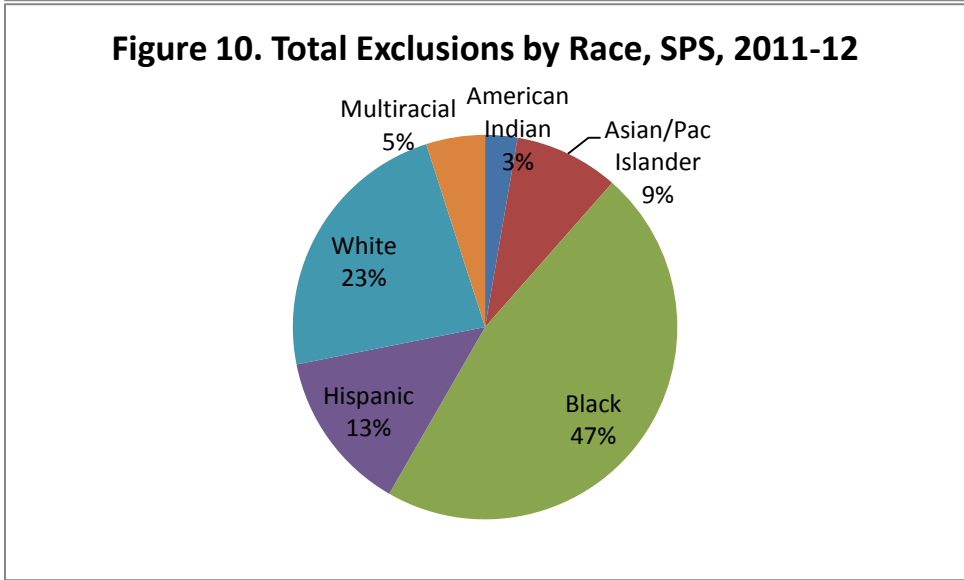
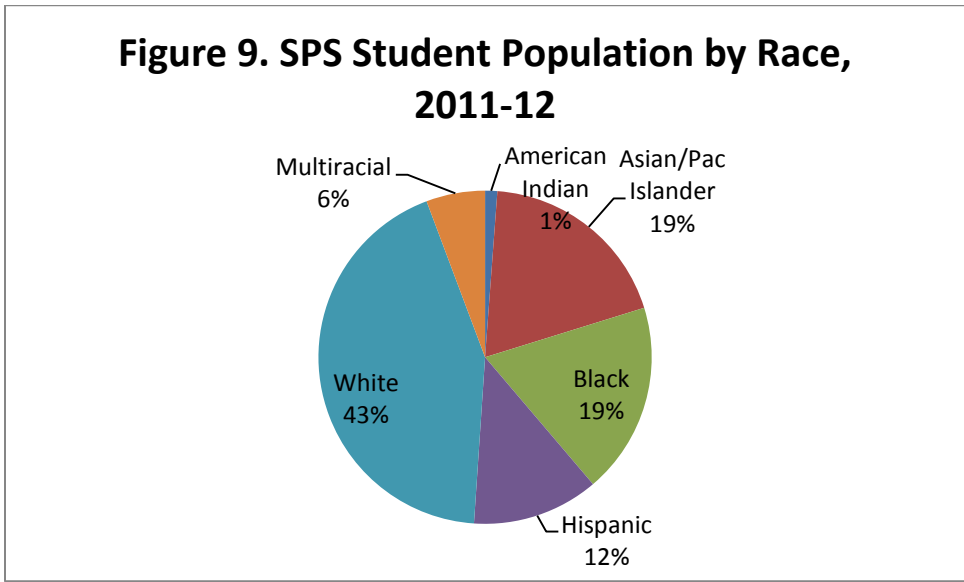
race depicts the disparity in exclusionary discipline. It shows African-American students totaling 19 percent of the population, but receiving 47 percent of the exclusions. White students are



Sources: SISO 2006-2012; DoTS 2012.

underrepresented, as 43 percent of the population, receiving 23 percent of the exclusions, as are Asian/Pacific Islander students, who total 19 percent of the population, but only 9 percent of the exclusions. In terms of measuring disproportionality, African-American students were 4.7 times more likely to be excluded from school than their white counterparts in the 2011-12

school year. American Indian students were similarly excluded, with a disproportionality ratio of 4.3. Hispanic students were 2.1 times as likely as white students to receive exclusionary



Source: DoTS 2012.

discipline. Some of the disproportionality data for specific types of discipline are especially high, with African-American students being 4.8 times as likely to receive a short-term suspension, 4.1 times as likely to be long-term suspended, and 10.9 times as likely to be expelled. American Indian students are 3.7 times as likely as their white peers to be short-term suspended and 8

times as likely to be long-term suspended. Hispanic students are 2.1 times as likely to be short-term suspended and 2.4 times as likely to be long-term suspended. Disproportionality is clearly a major problem in Seattle Public Schools, exceeding both national and state averages.

Table 1. Disproportionality in Discipline by Type, Seattle Public Schools, 2011-12				
	Short-Term Suspensions	Long-Term Suspensions	Expulsions	Total Exclusions
American Indian	3.7	8	0	4.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.8	1	0.8	0.9
Black	4.8	4.1	10.9	4.7
Hispanic	2.1	2.4	1.2	2.1
White	1	1	1	1
Multiracial	1.7	1.2	0	1.6

Sources: SISO 2006-2012; DoTS 2012.

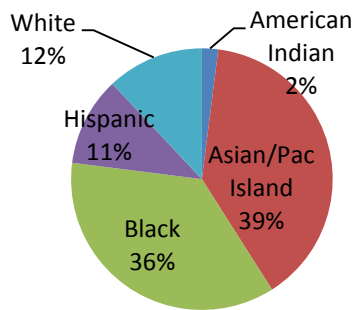
*Southeast Seattle*

At the regional level, 734 students received some form of suspension in the 2011-12 school year and one student was expelled. The regional suspension rate is 7.3 percent of the average student population, higher than the district average of 6.2 percent. Disproportionality in Southeast Seattle is lower in its middle schools and higher in its high schools. Data from the Office for Civil Rights from 2009 shows that African-American students made up only 36 percent of the regional school population in 2009, but accounted for 69 percent of the region’s suspensions.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Asian/Pacific Islander, white, American Indian, and Hispanic students were underrepresented in the discipline data considering the size of their population.

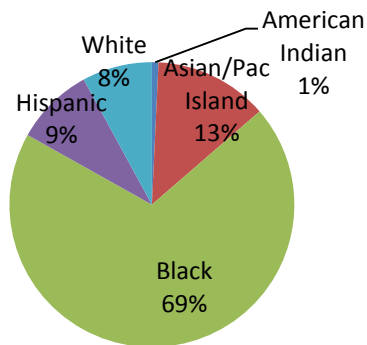
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<sup>6</sup> 2009 was the last time OCR published school-level discipline data.

**Figure 11. SE Seattle School Population by Race, 2009**



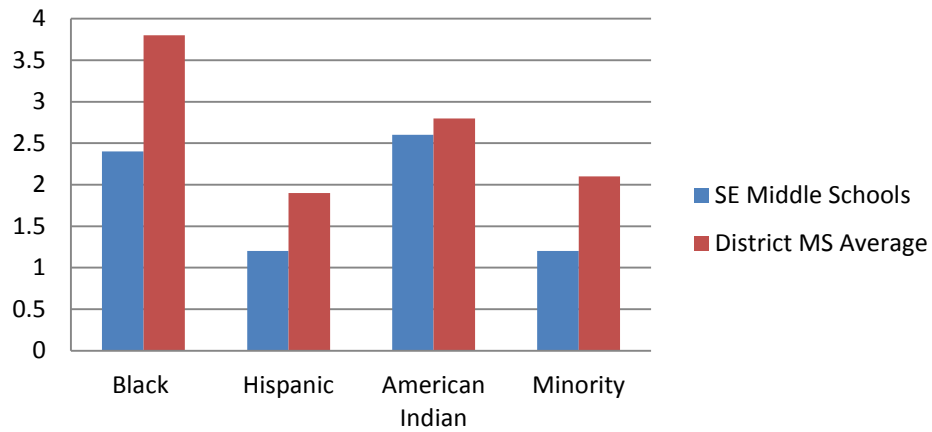
**Figure 12. SE Seattle Schools: Overall Suspension Distribution by Race, 2009**



Source: OCR 2012a.

Southeast middle schools exhibit less disproportionality than the district middle school average for black, Hispanic, American Indian, and minority students more generally. They have an average disproportionality of 2.4 for African-American students and 2.6 for American Indian students, but Hispanic and minority students more generally are disciplined at nearly comparable rates to their white peers (1.2 for both). Southeast high schools, however, have more disproportionality than the district high school average for African-American (4.7), American Indian (8.7), and minority students more generally (2.5). Only Hispanic students are below the high school average at 1.7.

**Figure 13. Disproportionality by Race,  
District Average/SE Middle Schools, 2011-12**

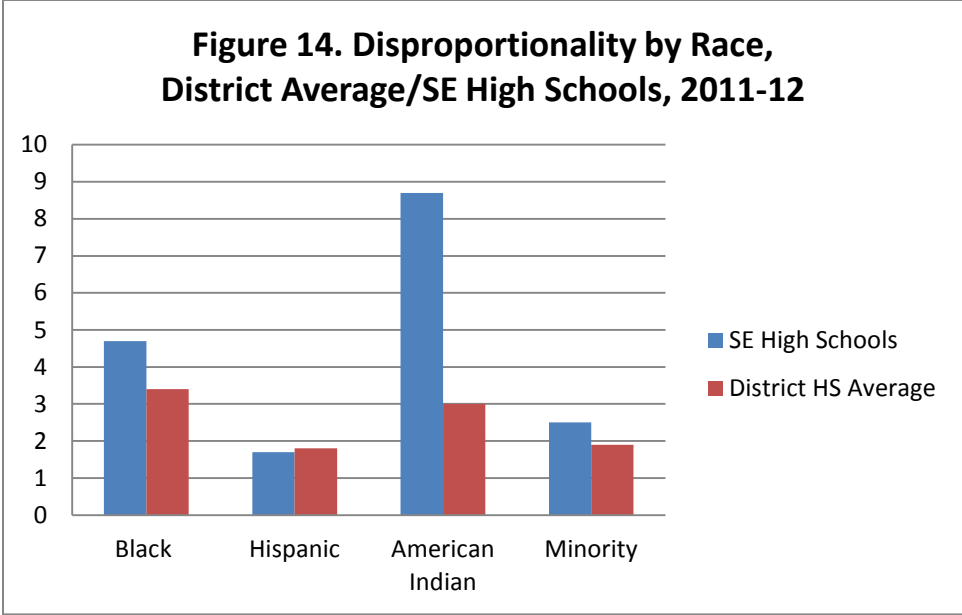


Source: SPS 2013c.

**Table 2. Disproportionality Among SE High Schools, 2011-12**

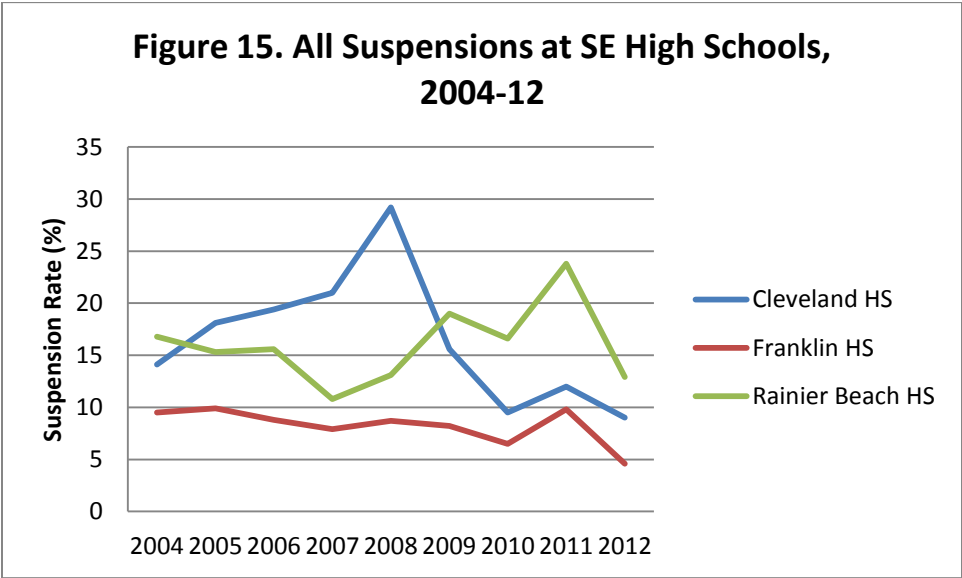
	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Total Minority
Cleveland HS	5.7	2.5	9.6	3.5
Franklin HS	4.2	1.4	11	4.5
Rainier Beach HS	4.2	1.2	0	12
<b>SE High Schools</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>
District HS Average	3.4	1.8	3	1.9
District Average	4.7	2.1	4.3	2.5
<b>Disproportionality Among SE Middle Schools, 2011-12</b>				
Aki Kurose MS	2.1	1.1	2.3	1.2
Mercer MS	2.4	1.3	2.5	1.1
<b>SE Middle Schools</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>1.2</b>
District MS Average	3.8	1.9	2.8	2.1
District Average	4.7	2.1	4.3	2.5

Source: SPS 2013c.



Source: SPS 2013c.

Patterns in suspensions reveal great variety at the school level from year to year. Among SE high schools, Cleveland has experienced drops since 2008, with the exception of 2011, where it experienced a slight increase, then a drop in 2012. Franklin has maintained relatively



Sources: SISO 2004-2012; DoTS 2012.

low suspension rates (below 10% of total enrollment) from 2004 to 2012, with a sharp drop to 4.6 percent in 2012. Rainier Beach has had the most inconsistent suspension rate among the three high schools, but experienced a sharp drop from 23.8 percent in 2011 to 12.9 percent in

Table 3. High School Suspensions as % of Average Enrollment, Highest to Lowest, 2011-2012	
<b>Rainier Beach</b>	<b>12.9</b>
Chief Sealth International	11.5
Garfield	11.1
West Seattle	10.7
<b>Cleveland</b>	<b>9.0</b>
<i>District Average</i>	<i>6.9</i>
Center School	6.6
Nathan Hale	5.6
Ballard	5.4
<b>Franklin</b>	<b>4.6</b>
Ingraham	3.5
Roosevelt	2.1
Nova	0.3

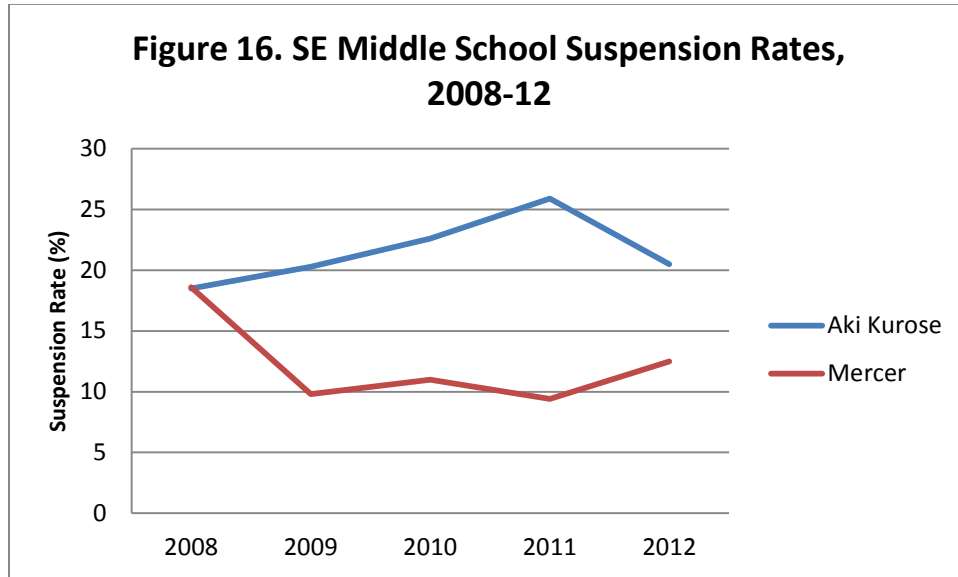
Source: DoTS 2012.

2012. Despite this significant drop, Rainier Beach remains the high school with the highest suspension rate in the district, far above the average across district high schools of 6.9 percent. Cleveland’s rate is also higher than the high school average for 2012 at 9 percent. Only Franklin has managed to remain below this district average.

At the middle school level, both Aki Kurose and Mercer began the 2008-2012 period with similar rates (18.5% and 18.6%, respectively). Since then, Aki Kurose’s suspension rate rose steadily until 2011, when it dropped from 25.9 to 20.5 percent in 2012. Mercer’s rate plunged in 2009 and hovered around 10 percent since, until last year when it experienced a slight rise to

12.5 percent. Aki Kurose retains the highest suspension rate among district middle schools.

Both Mercer and Aki are above the average among district middle schools of 12.3 percent.

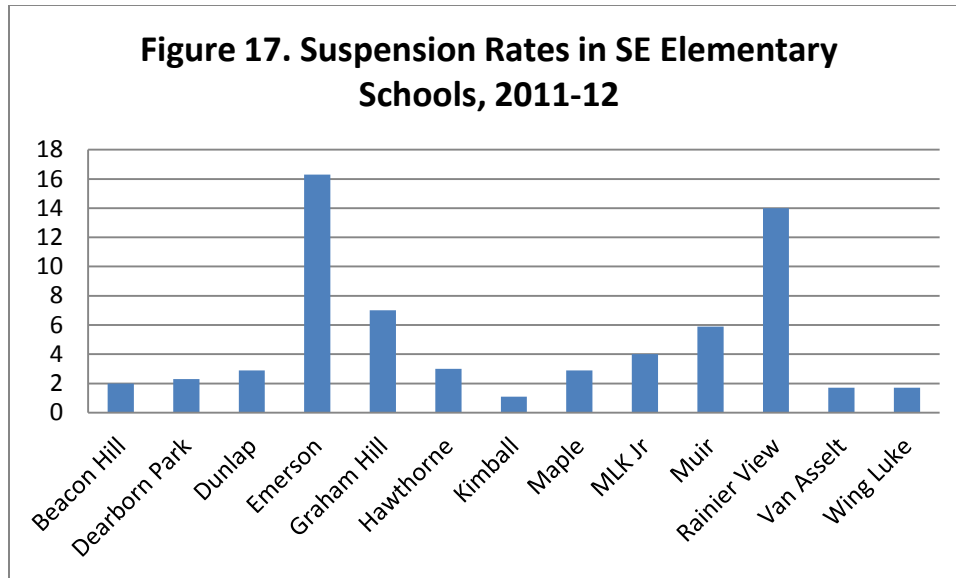


Sources: SISO 2004-2012, DoTS 2012.

<b>Aki Kurose</b>	20.5
Denny	17.3
McClure	15.6
Madison	14.6
<b>Mercer</b>	12.5
<b><i>District Average</i></b>	<b><i>12.3</i></b>
Washington	10.4
Whitman	10.0
Eckstein	8.7
Hamilton International	7.6

Source: DoTS 2012.

As a whole, elementary schools tend to present much lower rates of exclusionary discipline than high schools or middle schools. Among SE elementary schools two in particular stand out with exceptionally high suspension rates (the highest in the district): Emerson at 16.3



Source: DoTS 2012.

<b>Emerson</b>	16.3
<b>Rainier View</b>	14.0
<b>Graham Hill</b>	7.0
<b>Muir</b>	5.9
<b>MLK Jr</b>	4.0
<b>Hawthorne</b>	3.0
<b>Dunlap</b>	2.9
<b>Maple</b>	2.9
<i>District Average</i>	<i>2.7</i>
<b>Dearborn Park</b>	2.3
<b>Beacon Hill</b>	2.0
<b>Van Asselt</b>	1.7
<b>Wing Luke</b>	1.7
<b>Kimball</b>	1.1

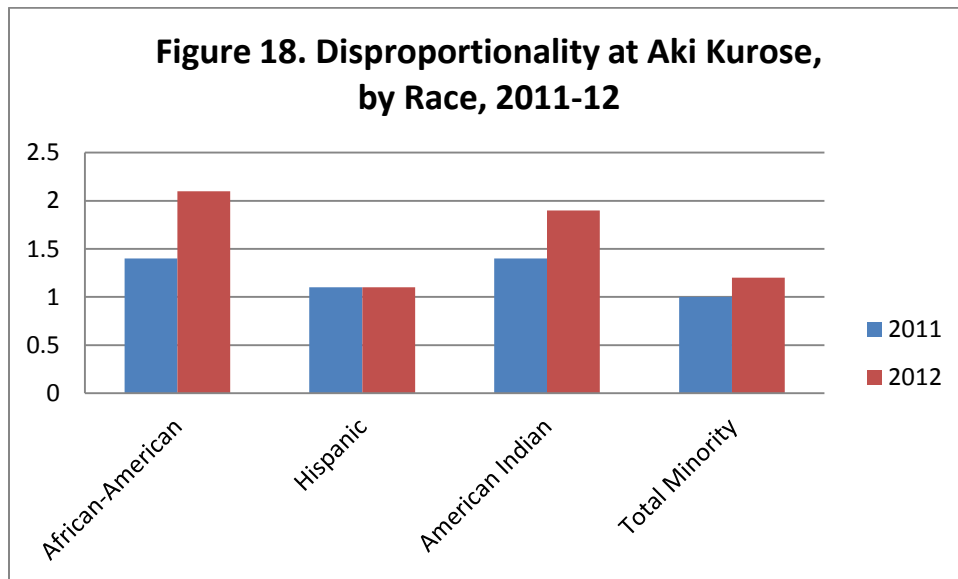
Source: DoTS 2012.

percent and Rainier View at 14 percent. Eight of Southeast Seattle’s 13 elementaries are above the average among district elementary schools: Emerson, Rainier View, Graham Hill, Muir, MLK

Jr., Hawthorne, Dunlap, and Maple. Four schools—Beacon Hill, Van Asselt, Wing Luke, and Kimball—have managed to keep their suspension rates at or below 2 percent.

*School-Level Analysis*

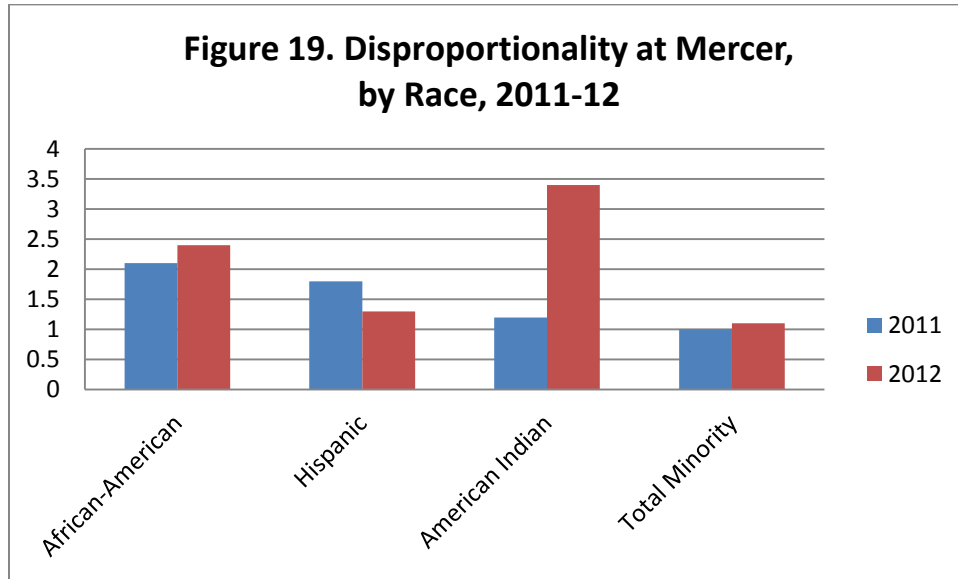
These trends in suspension data were compared to school-level disproportionality data to determine which schools would be chosen for the qualitative portion of this study. Focus was intentionally placed on the high school and middle school levels due to suggestions in the literature that suspensions at this level are most likely to indicate long-term consequences (Losen and Skiba 2010) and are therefore most significant. Overall the two Southeast middle schools present less disproportionality than the district averages. Aki Kurose experienced a



Source: SPS 2013c.

drop in its number of suspensions along with slight rises in disproportionality from 2011 to 2012. African-American students rose from 1.4 (only slightly more likely to be disciplined than white students) to 2.1 times as likely over the course of the year. American Indian students experienced a slight rise from 1.4 to 1.9. Hispanic students remained even with white students

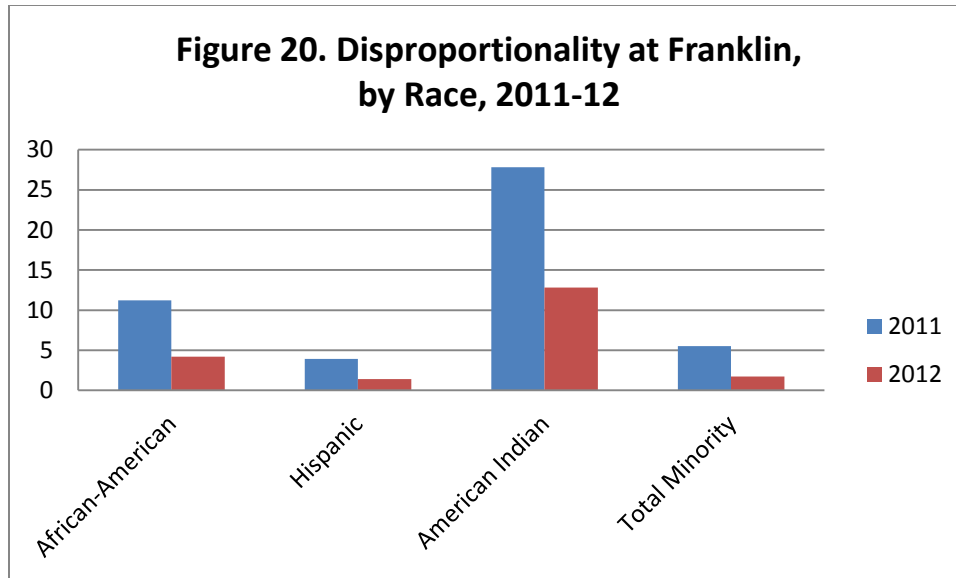
at 1.1, and ratios for all minority students rose very slightly from 1 to 1.2. At Mercer Middle School African-American students became slightly more likely to be excluded from school over the year, from 2.1 to 2.4 times in 2012. There was a large increase in disproportionality for



Source: SPS 2013c.

American Indian students, from 1.2 to 3.4. Total minority exclusions, however were almost exactly proportionate with white students at 1.1. These two Southeast middle schools have lower disproportionalities than other schools, despite higher numbers of suspensions, which is typical for these grade and age levels, as reflected in the literature.

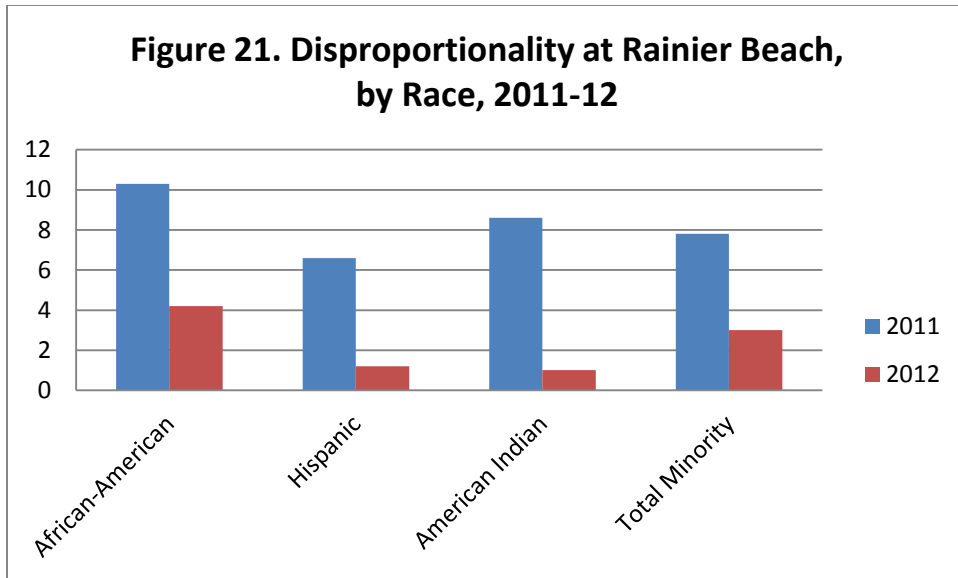
All three Southeast high schools—Franklin, Rainier Beach, and Cleveland—experienced drops in their suspension rates from 2011 to 2012. A further look at the data indicates that Rainier Beach and Franklin also experienced sharp drops in disproportionality. Franklin has maintained a low suspension rate over time while also achieving significant drops in disproportionality from 2011 to 2012, from 11.2 to 4.2 for African-American students. It also saw drops for Hispanic students, from 3.9 to 1.4, for American Indian students from 27.8 to



Source: SPS 2013c.

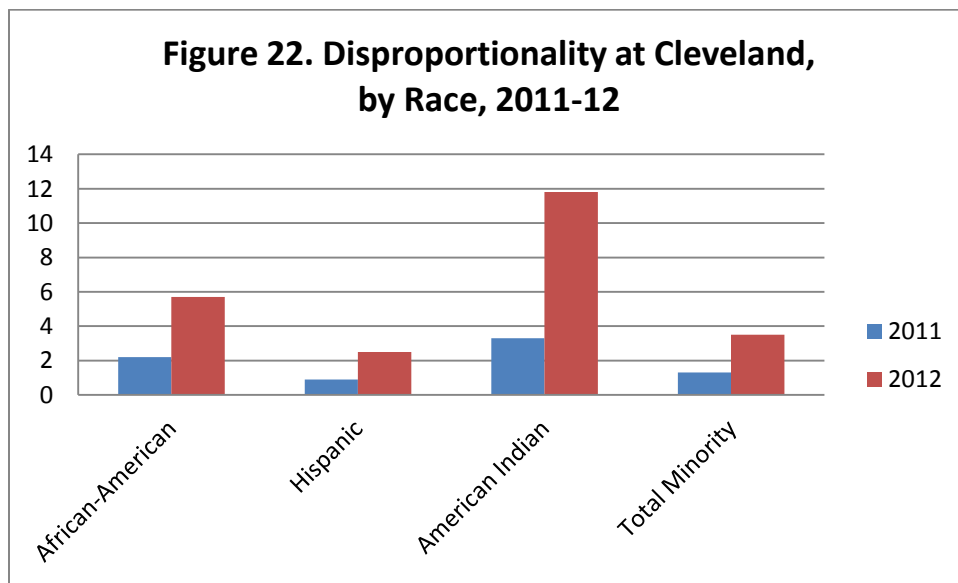
12.8, and for all minority students from 5.5 to 1.7. Despite these drops, it retains high disproportionalities for African-American (although below the district average) and American Indian students (much higher than the district average).

Rainier Beach experienced drops in disproportionality from 10.3 to 4.2 for African-American students and from 6.6 to 1.2 for Hispanic students from 2011 to 2012. Overall disproportionality among minority students was reduced from 7.8 to 3.0. Rainier Beach has dropped below district-wide levels of disproportionality for African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students. While continuing to exhibit significant disproportionality, these drops indicate that something has changed at both Rainier Beach and Franklin high schools to prohibit the excessive use of exclusionary discipline.



Source: SPS 2013c.

Cleveland was the only high school that—despite lower numbers of suspensions—experienced increases in disproportionality for African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students, remaining above the district average. In 2011, African-American students were 2.2 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers. By 2012 they were 5.7 times more



Source: SPS 2013c.

likely. Hispanic suspensions also rose from .9 (slightly underrepresented) to 2.5. American Indian students rose from 3.3 to 11.8, and the risk for the total minority population rose from 1.3 (nearly even with white peers) to 3.5.

Based on this analysis, and in the effort to present schools that had experienced significant changes in both the number of suspensions *and* disproportionality, Rainier Beach and Cleveland were chosen for the qualitative portion of this study. By choosing two schools that exhibit successes in reducing net exclusions but different outcomes in terms of disproportionality, we can better understand what may work by identifying commonalities and where room for improvement may lie by identifying differences. They offer two very different cases to study school-based efforts to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and offer insight on alternative strategies at the local level within the context of the same district policy.

## CHAPTER 4: EXAMINING LOCAL EFFORTS TO REDUCE EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

In order to determine what changes were taking place locally to reduce the number of and/or disproportionality of exclusions at Rainier Beach and Cleveland high schools, six in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders who are involved with discipline at various levels: district personnel, school administrators and staff, parents, advocates, and service providers from community-based organizations from January to May 2013.<sup>7</sup> They were asked several questions: To what did they attribute drops in suspension rates and/or disproportionality? What changes in policy or attitudes were taking place within the district, school administrations, or among teachers and staff? What role did community-based organizations play in achieving these drops? Schools were asked how aware they were of their own disproportionality rates and what behavior management programs and conflict intervention strategies they used to mitigate challenging behaviors when they surfaced. Finally, they were asked about the scope of any changes that were taking place. How pervasive were the changes? Who was involved? How committed were school employees to new policies or plans for improvement? In addition to these interviews, participant observations were conducted at relevant advocacy trainings, community meetings, district meetings, and local on-line forums, and local media was reviewed to put the histories behind the schools into the context of the study.

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<sup>7</sup> Participants in in-depth interviews included Bernardo Ruiz, School & Family Partnership Program Manager & Equity and Race District Lead; Sarah Talbot, Vice-Principal, RBHS; Lois Brewer, Service Learning Manager, CHS; Tara Davis, RBHS; Nicholas Bradford, restorative justice practitioner/trainer; and Rita Green, President, RBHS PTSA.

### *School-Level Changes*

Responses to the above questions along with the variability in suspension data from school to school confirm that any progress being made in the district is taking place at the school level. While the district provides schools with data and highlights improvements it would like to see, how schools reach those targets is left up to their own discretion. While this means that principals can experiment with different levels and methods of intervention, it also means that some schools may be doing very little to achieve reductions in disproportionality or number of suspensions.

Several conclusions can be made about what schools can do to successfully reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and racial disproportionality. Efforts appear to be most successful when a school has strong administrative leadership that wants to address the discipline issue, making it a purposeful school-wide goal based upon clear behavioral expectations. At Rainier Beach High School a new principal arrived two years ago determined to reduce racial disparities at the school. He understood the complexity of the issue and its implications for the community, and targeted disproportionality as a significant part of his efforts. His philosophy around discipline is that schools bear the responsibility to teach students how to stay in class. He formed a strong administrative leadership team that made it possible to promote school-wide efforts to set high behavioral expectations of students across the board. At Cleveland High School the issue is also recognized by the administration as a fundamental part of improving achievement. However, its organization into separate academies—headed by two principals in charge of each academy and one main principal for the entire school—poses a challenge to implementation. While the principal establishes her disciplinary philosophy and goals for the

entire school, the separation of the two academies means two different methods of implementation to reach those goals and unclear expectations for both students and staff. This inconsistency challenges the coherence of strategies to improve behavior management school-wide.

The depth of a school's commitment to reducing exclusions and disproportionality appears to be a considerable factor in determining success. Recognition of the problem at the administrative level is one huge step that can reduce the number of exclusions as students are referred to the office for discipline, but transferring that depth of understanding to an entire staff can be challenging. Staff buy-in was one area where there were major discrepancies between the two schools. Cleveland High School experienced more difficulty than Rainier Beach in achieving buy-in from its staff. In the last school year they received six hours of professional development on the use of restorative justice to mitigate and prevent conflict in the classroom. While most staff attended and reported favorable impressions of the strategy, some older or more traditional teachers expressed aversion to changing their classroom management style.<sup>8</sup> A few felt it was an attack—that they were being called racist when the conversation turned to the role of stereotypes in determining disciplinary action. Furthermore, some teachers did not attend the training, nor did instructional assistants, security guards, or CBO partners, who were not invited. This lack of unity across the school could have influenced the depth at which the message was received. One trainer who helped conduct the workshops noted that the restorative justice techniques were not presented as the school's official policy to deal with

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<sup>8</sup> Part of this is due to the many changes experienced within the school in the last several years, first with the division of the school into distinct academies, then with its transition to a STEM school, the extension of the school day, and its classification as a district choice school. With so many experiments in improving achievement, teachers could feel that this was just another in a series of district experiments. It may be difficult to get excited about yet another revolutionary new idea after experimenting with so many over the years.

conflict, but rather as an optional tool for behavior management. It was also presented as an option for once the student had been removed from class, straying from its intent as a prevention strategy. Having received inconsistent messages from the administration in the past, teachers were unclear about the administration's role in the process and questioned its support of the strategy more generally. The combination of these factors shows that clear administrative support as a school-wide strategy is essential and the lack thereof may contribute to a more shallow reception of the intended message.

At Rainier Beach, by contrast, professional development trainings have been much more varied, ranging from the implementation of PBIS to workshops on cultural competency to address underlying racism, trauma recognition, restorative justice, and new teaching techniques—all in the attempt to unify the tone in all classrooms across the board. All teachers are required to teach and practice alternative behavior management in their classrooms and to report changes in student behavior as part of a school-wide prevention strategy. The school's relatively young staff has been highly receptive to the changes and is excited to be part of them, recognizing that they need additional resources to deal with the challenging behaviors they see in their classrooms. They acknowledge that removing a student from class has repercussions down the road, damaging their relationships with students and making their job more difficult upon the student's return. They are further supported by multi-tiered systems of support that include weekly meetings among interventionists to discuss discipline issues.

Another major distinction between the two schools is the origin of the strategies that they chose to pursue. In the case of Rainier Beach the impetus clearly came from the principal as one of his top priorities upon his arrival, representing an internal response to the problem. In

Cleveland's case, the district and the City of Seattle's Race and Equity Round Table proposed the restorative justice strategy to the school, with the hope of conducting a pilot study at the school that might inform district discipline policy. This external origin might also impact the level of administrative buy-in and therefore the effectiveness of Cleveland's strategy.

Both schools have strong partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to respond to both academic (tutoring) and non-academic needs, including health services, mentoring, counseling and mental health services, case management, gang prevention, substance abuse, and youth development programs. These organizations play significant roles in both schools' ability to address work that is traditionally outside the scope of the school, which can be exhibited in challenging behaviors. Both high schools use partnerships to assess incoming ninth-grade students and identify and respond to problems or risks as they arise, providing a basis to track them throughout their high school years. Rainier Beach currently has funding to provide this service to all ninth graders. Cleveland has this service for about 40 percent of its ninth grade population, which is provided by a variety of organizations. Both schools noted that these partnerships were dependent upon funding, which varies from year to year and comes from outside sources—not the district. Both schools employ additional case workers, social workers, and counselors and noted that these staff members were essential to their ability to serve students and prevent or respond to behavioral challenges. Many of these services are also funded by schools through grants or other funding sources, restricting their capacity to properly serve students. The capacity to make school-level changes in exclusion, then, goes beyond the classroom and into the community.

Parent involvement in school decision-making processes is another powerful tool for reducing exclusion at the school level. Parents represent important community-specific stakeholders and can influence decisions made by both the district and the school. Both Cleveland and Rainier Beach have School-Family Partnership Coordinators, employed by the district as part its Family Action Engagement Teams (FEAT) program to promote parent participation and student achievement. In addition, Rainier Beach has a very active Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA), which has served in a variety of capacities to make progress toward reducing exclusions. PTSA members have been active in the interviewing process, providing an additional voice to ensure that teachers and administrators who are hired to work at the school are a proper match for the community where they will be working. They have also worked to identify and remove teachers who have abnormally high numbers of student office referrals, and called attention to staff when culturally sensitive issues arise. Finally, the Rainier Beach PTSA has gone beyond the traditional bake sale model to secure \$1 million for the school from state funds for urban schools. Strong parent participation can help a school account for the context where that school resides and thereby support reductions in exclusionary discipline. Taking the needs of individual schools and the families they serve into consideration is a fundamental part of finding solutions to reduce exclusions.

While it is evident that schools can make some progress in minimizing unwanted behaviors through positive behavior management programs, staff development programs, and relationships with community-based organizations, the fact remains that schools are being charged with a very large task and very few resources to accomplish it. Within the context of the resources they are given by the district, schools do not have the capacity to deal with the

challenging behaviors that are exhibited. In such a context exclusionary policies are inevitable consequences of inadequate funding.

### *The District Level*

The qualitative portion of this study also provided great insight into the role of the district in reducing exclusions. Seattle Public Schools openly recognizes that disproportionality in discipline is problematic in its schools and that reducing it is critical to achieving equity and educational goals for its students. Changes in district attitudes toward disproportionality began under Past-Superintendent Susan Enfield and continue under Superintendent José Banda, who has established equity as his top priority. That said, the district is taking numerous steps to address the excessive use of exclusionary discipline in schools. In 2011 it established two committees to look at policies and procedures and make recommendations to the superintendent to change them at the district level: the Race and Equity Advisory Committee and the Positive Climate and Discipline Advisory Committee. The Race and Equity Advisory Committee is intended to: “represent diverse voices and perspectives across the education system and community on equity; address authentic concerns with the current system and recognized disproportionality; and make thoughtful, timely policy, procedures and school support recommendations for change” (SPS 2011). The committee looks at district policy through an equity lens to identify and eliminate subjective language that might contribute to disproportionality in exclusions. The Positive Climate and Discipline Advisory Committee is intended to “advise the superintendent and make recommendations to enhance school climate, develop appropriate options for behavior management standards and disciplinary

sanctions that will reduce disproportionality and increase prosocial behavior, review and advise on progressive discipline programs, and advise on accountability systems” (SPS 2012a). As such, the district is successfully creating forums for addressing disproportionality, reconsidering current practices, and creating new policy.

The passage of a new policy entitled “Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity” in August 2012 furthered the district’s commitment to these new goals and authorized its ability to work toward the goal of reducing disproportionality. The policy commits the district to:

Raise the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the lowest and highest performing students; Eliminate the racial predictability and disproportionality in all aspects of education and its administration (e.g., the disproportionate over-application of discipline to students of color, their over-representation in Special Education, and their under-representation in various Advanced Learning programs); [and] Ensure all students regardless of race or class graduate from Seattle Public Schools ready to succeed in a racially and culturally diverse local, national, and global community. (SPS 2012c)

The policy charged the district with ensuring equitable access to quality education, conducting a racial equity analysis, ensuring workforce equity, providing professional development for employees, creating welcoming school environments that support diversity, fomenting community partnerships to support successes, providing students with multiple pathways to success, and recognizing cultural, class, language, and ethnic diversity among students and staff (SPS 2012c). This policy is particularly significant in resolving the issue of racial disproportionality because it empowers the district to make tough choices between equality and equity. By enforcing the term equity over a more traditional emphasis on equality, the district recognizes that all schools do not serve their students equally and that some will require additional resources and authorizes the unequal distribution of resources to better serve its students of color.

The district has begun to implement some of these changes. It recognizes the important role that school staff play in changing attitudes toward discipline and promoting positive student behavior. As such, hiring and recruitment practices have changed to include more diverse staff at all levels, with cultural competence in mind. According to Bernardo Ruiz, Equity and Race District Lead, the interview process now includes questions on equity and multiculturalism, as well as discipline, asking interviewees how they would respond to a given incident involving misbehavior. Teachers are also offered voluntary professional development opportunities to expand their classroom management skills, including classroom leadership workshops. The intent of these trainings is to increase cultural competence, promote buy-in of new attitudes toward discipline and behavior management, and develop community and support. Ruiz notes that about 450 teachers have volunteered to be trained through principal-initiated efforts (out of 3,100 teachers district-wide, about 15%). Principals are also undergoing professional development on race and equity. Their role as leaders across the district is viewed as crucial to ensuring that the policy moves into action.

The district is also active in creating open dialogue with community organizations that can provide expertise in these areas. The membership of the Positive Climate and Discipline Advisory Committee, for example, includes principals, parents, and district personnel, as well as representatives from youth justice, parent educator, discipline, psychology, social justice, and ethnic-based organizations. While numerous community-based organizations endorsed the passage of the policy on Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity, seeing it as a positive step, they simultaneously expressed concern with the district's capacity to act upon these goals (SESEC

2012b). Without the commitment of resources the district will be tied to minimal progress, despite its good intentions.

The district is in the process of overhauling its philosophy on discipline through its commitment to educational and racial equity by establishing new expectations for schools and focusing on new outcomes. However, no district-wide approach to implementing those changes has been passed down to schools. Despite a year and a half of committee meetings to determine how to improve school climate, no recommendations have been made that can be put into practice. While the district provides support for schools that wish to implement PBIS, the program is not in every school. The district currently provides data to schools while making its expectations known, and schools are given the flexibility to use the methods they see fit to reach those goals. Such flexibility in creating school climate at the school level likely helps account for the variety in exclusionary discipline rates from school to school. While it provides the grounds for experimentation in different models for promoting positive school climates, that same flexibility creates the risk that some schools will not prioritize the issue.

With regard to exclusionary discipline, current district policy provides basic guidelines for school administrators to follow when dealing with discipline issues once they leave the classroom, intended to normalize schools' responses to unwanted behaviors. In this effort, behaviors are divided into two categories—"district offenses" and "exceptional misconduct." District offenses include "behaviors that disrupt or interfere with the educational process" (SPS 2013a). In these cases the district generally encourages schools to use school-based interventions. For 10 of the 16 categories, school-based interventions are recommended for first-time offenses, and out-of-school disciplinary actions are stipulated beyond that. Among

these categories are very general descriptions of misconduct including “disruptive conduct,” “rule breaking,” and “disobedience.” These are the types of offenses that the literature on exclusionary discipline warns are subjective, or prone to bias at an individual level. The district is currently revising the language surrounding its official policy for these types of offenses, promoting stronger commitments to prevention and school-based interventions.

In addition to these more pliable definitions, however, the district also prescribes zero tolerance for 35 forms of exceptional misconduct, or “behavior that warrants a suspension for the first offense” (SPS 2013a). Most of the behaviors categorized here are serious criminal offenses (fighting, the sale/possession of drugs or alcohol, sexual assault, etc.). In these cases, the line is drawn; if a student is caught in these circumstances, there is no school-based option and exclusion is required. The district currently has no school-based solutions for such offenses beyond enrollment at Interagency Academy, a coalition of small alternative schools across the city that work with students who have been excluded from their traditional schools.

Given Seattle Public Schools’ disciplinary guidelines, investigation into the reasons behind the exclusionary discipline it doles out is essential. In the 2011-12 school year, exclusion in Seattle Public Schools stemmed largely from fighting with no major injury (40.3%) and fighting with major injury (24.3%), as well as from drugs (18.7%), bullying (12.8%), tobacco (2.9%), alcohol (3.4%), and violence with major injury (.2%) (see Table 1). When aggregated, only 15.7 percent of suspensions and expulsions were given for “district offenses” (OSPI 2012a). The majority of exclusions in Seattle Public Schools (84.3%) were for exceptional misconduct, where administrators had no choice but to suspend or expel the student in question under district policy (OSPI 2012a). When divided up into violent or nonviolent behaviors, 35.3 percent

of the offenses were non-violent, while 64.7 percent were violent. The suggestion in the literature that a large number of suspensions (95% nationwide) may be due to the subjective nature of a nonviolent offense, then, does not apply to the case of Seattle Public Schools. Instead, it suggests that while working to eliminate subjectivity in district policy will help to reduce a small portion of exclusions, Seattle Public Schools confronts an even greater challenge to reduce serious behaviors. Handling incidents that deal with substance abuse and violence are tasks beyond a school’s mission or capacity, requiring outside attention and interventions to understand why a student demonstrates a given behavior.

	Bullying		Tobacco		Alcohol		Drugs		Fighting (no major injury)		Fighting (major injury)		Violence with major injury		Total	
	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel	Suspend	Expel
#	306	1	7	0	82	0	445	2	961	1	573	8	4	0	2,378	12
%	12.8	8.3	.3	-	3.4	-	18.7	16.7	40	8.3	24	66.7	1.7	-	100	100
#	307		7		82		447		962		581		4		2,390	
%	12.8		2.9		3.4		18.7		40.3		24.3		.2		100	
District Offenses = 15.7%					Exceptional Misconduct = 84.3%											
Non-Violent Offenses = 35.3%									Violent Offenses = 64.7%							

Source: OSPI 2013a.

The severity of the offenses in Seattle Public Schools brings into question the depth of positive school climates alone to help reduce suspensions. Jody McVittie of Sound Discipline warned against the hope that the implementation of a single program (like PBIS or restorative justice) will be the magic bullet to solve the district’s worries over disproportionality. She proposed:

“an integrated approach to discipline and social emotional learning. One that sets clear expectations, one where the adults model deep respect as they follow through in response to inappropriate behavior, one that teaches the social skills the students need to succeed instead of punishing them over and over again (which is obviously not working).” (Comments from on-line forum on discipline)

This implies an overhaul of basic attitudes surrounding education that expands the role of the school to incorporate both academic and socio-emotional responsibilities to meet their goals. She also worried that while incentive systems may work to deter unwanted behaviors, many students with recurring behavior issues have deeper issues that need to be explored.

A huge percentage of the students with recurrent behavior problems have experienced some kind of significant adverse childhood experience. Many have had more than one. A student with an insecure attachment and 4 or more adverse childhood experiences is 32 times less likely to succeed in school. This is not anyone’s fault – it is a result of brain changes and we can do better when we work to create trauma informed/sensitive classrooms and schools.

Children who have experienced trauma will not respond to systems based on incentives and expectations alone and the causal factors underlying behavior problems are likely to reside much deeper than the district may recognize. This also means that much more significant, systemic interventions and trainings may be required to truly target the problem. Maggie Wilkins of the League of Education Voters supported this notion, arguing that “transforming discipline (like most meaningful solutions) entails change at the personal, cultural and institutional level.” The changes taking place, as slow as they may be, represent what she refers to as “layers of change” (comments from on-line forum). They are taking place at many levels— in the legislature, at the district, in schools, within communities, and among individuals. The level of the change that is required to overcome deeply rooted punitive practices will require more than any single solution to yield significant results.

In May 2012 Seattle Public Schools came under investigation by the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights for its disproportionate practices. While still unclear what this may entail for the district, it is likely that it will require the implementation of serious changes from above. Other investigations across the nation have resulted in agreements between districts and the DOE to pursue disciplinary methods than keep students in school, improve school climate, identify and provide at-risk students with appropriate services, implement district-wide trainings, and improve data collection (DOE 2012b). While the district has already begun to implement some of these changes, pressure from the Department of Education may provide the necessary impetus to prioritize the reduction of disproportionality and push implementation of new policies to promote racial and educational equity.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The use of exclusionary discipline is a significant issue for the Southeast Seattle community, given the desire to close the achievement and opportunity gaps and achieve educational equity. Southeast students are excluded from school at a higher rate than the district average. Within this there is great variety at the school level, with extremes from school to school. At the elementary school level suspensions range from 1.1 to 16.3 percent of the average student population and eight elementary schools suspend at a rate above the district average. Both Southeast middle schools suspend at rates above the district average and Aki Kurose holds the highest rate among all district schools. At the high school level, two Southeast schools are above the district high school average for suspensions and Rainier Beach holds the highest rates among district high schools.

Disproportionality of exclusionary discipline is widespread in Southeast Seattle, with African-American and American Indian students heavily overrepresented in the data. Hispanic students are slightly overrepresented in comparison, and white and Asian-American students are both heavily underrepresented. Southeast middle schools have lower levels of disproportionality than the district middle school average for African-American, Hispanic, American Indian, and minority students more generally. Southeast high schools have higher levels of disproportionality than the district high school average for African-American, American Indian, and minority students. Levels of disproportionality vary from school to school in their severity, but no schools are excluded from the phenomenon. Drops in the number of exclusions from 2011 to 2012 were present at both Rainier Beach and Cleveland high schools, however only Rainier Beach experienced a drop in the rate of disproportionality over the same year.

These two outcomes provided grounds to better understand at what level changes were being made to provoke these impacts.

The qualitative portion of this study determined that these changes can be credited to the school level, where internal commitments from administrators and staff can have significant impacts upon the use of exclusionary discipline. Whereas the literature on disproportionality suggested that it is rooted at the teacher level, this study goes further to conclude that all school-level staff must be committed to promoting reductions in disproportionality, understanding the importance of attaining racial and educational equity and its consequences for the community. Strong administrative leadership that targets this goal is of primary importance in setting expectations for staff, students, parents, and support staff from the community, and creating a positive learning community.

This study also shows that two distinct changes are necessary to properly serve students and reduce the incidence of exclusion: (1) School-wide prevention programs are needed to improve school climate, set expectations for students and staff, and give staff the tools they need to understand and deal with challenging behaviors. (2) Service provision is needed at the individual level to deal with student behaviors that challenge the traditional (academic) role of the school—to provide the socio-emotional supports (counseling, mentoring, and case management) that support academic progress. It can be concluded that the use of exclusionary discipline in Seattle schools is a consequence of too few resources and too little support for students.

Schools can make some progress on their own by developing and implementing new philosophies on discipline, supporting professional development activities that encourage

them, raising awareness of consequences of punitive disciplinary techniques, and collaborating with community partners to support their needs. However, they remain hindered by district level zero-tolerance policies that mandate exclusion for many offenses. The majority of exclusions in Seattle Public Schools are not for subjective offenses and involve violent or criminal offenses, contradicting assertions in the literature that the majority of exclusions are for minor subjective offenses. This poses an even greater challenge to Seattle schools. While the reduction of exclusions due to subjective or minor offenses would make some progress, the majority is based in much more serious behaviors rooted at the individual level and requiring significant levels of intervention. This reinforces the fact that while school-wide prevention programs will likely help achieve reductions in exclusionary discipline, they will not be a magic bullet. It highlights the importance of committing more deeply rooted socio-emotional supports to truly tackle this issue.

The district currently appears to be dabbling with the idea of reducing exclusionary discipline. It leaves the enormity of the task of reducing exclusions and disproportionality to school administrators, allowing them to experiment with methods in their schools. While such an approach could prove beneficial as grounds for experimentation with a variety of methods, at the same time it represents a low level of commitment to the issue, allowing some schools to do nothing at all, as evidenced by abnormally high levels of exclusion at some schools. The lack of commitment to this issue questions the district's commitment to achieving racial and educational equity more generally. The repercussions of its discipline policies disproportionately harm minority students and perpetuate systemic racism. Given the

challenges facing Southeast schools in serving a diverse community with high levels of poverty, the practice of exclusionary discipline does no service to bolster students' chances of success.

## CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving educational equity requires attention to disproportionality. Children of color are being systematically barred from the classroom, with significant repercussions for the community by diminishing its relationship with the public education structure, risking future incomes and quality of life for its residents, and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline. In an environment where exclusion is often the only option and resources that could mitigate such outcomes are withheld, racial and educational equity simply cannot be attained. Several recommendations follow from the results provided by this study.

Advocates should use collective voice to pressure the district to embrace its own Policy on Racial and Educational Equity and create a district-wide philosophy on discipline dedicated to keeping students in school and providing the necessary resources to do so. Such a shift should include district-wide policy to promote positive climates in *every* school as mechanisms for prevention. In addition, advocates should support the expansion of counselors, case managers, and other mental health supports, as well as partnerships between schools and community partners to create the resources needed for deeper interventions. They should also advocate for the funding of on-site alternatives for schools to deal with serious behaviors, such as effective models of in-school suspension. They should pressure the district to reconsider zero-tolerance policies and instead promote case-by-case analysis of disciplinary measures with school-based interventions taking priority. Finally, they should push the district and the state to adequately fund these endeavors in accordance with said policy.

Advocates can also work with individual schools to heighten the prioritization of reducing exclusionary discipline. They should identify and focus support on schools with high

rates of exclusion, expressing concern from the community to administrators and framing the issue in terms of students' educational and civil rights and potential costs to the community. This could include encouragement to conduct teacher-level analysis at a school to identify who in a building tends to make more students referrals and target training resources as a result. Principals could use this information to target their use of the district's trainings on classroom management and cultural competence. In order to help serve students higher level needs, advocates could help schools identify the specific needs of individual students and connect them to community partners who can provide the resources that schools cannot.

Advocates should also promote the value of local voice and parent engagement in school decision-making processes to ensure that schools and their operations adequately represent the community and answer to its needs. This could be achieved by ensuring parent/community representation in hiring activities for school staff and administrators and participation in professional development activities that take place. They should also undertake efforts to raise the issue of disproportionality within the community more generally to encourage public discussion and awareness, being careful to include all stakeholders in the community, and especially parents and students.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS<sup>9</sup>

Emergency Expulsion: Immediate removal of a student from school for misbehavior on the basis that an administrator has good and sufficient reason to believe that the student's presence is a danger to himself/herself or others, or an immediate or continuing threat of substantial disruption to the educational process of the school.

Expulsion: An expulsion is the formal exclusion for misbehavior of a student from ever returning to the specific school in the District that he or she is attending. If the expulsion is from the District, the student may not return to any school or program in the District.

Exclusionary discipline: Any form of discipline where a student is removed from school as a consequence for misbehavior, including short-term and long-term suspensions, and expulsions.

Long-term suspension: A suspension that is longer than 10 days and generally less than 90 days. In Seattle Public Schools, a student subjected to a long-term suspension normally returns to the same school at the end of the suspension period. A student is not eligible for homework from their school unless the long-term suspension is less than 15 days. Since students are not allowed to trespass on school grounds while suspended, arrangements must be made for someone else to pick up and return the homework.

SE Schools: Rainier Beach High School, Franklin High School, Cleveland High School, Mercer Middle School, Aki Kurose Middle School, Orca K-8, South Shore K-8, John Muir Elementary, Beacon Hill Elementary, Kimball Elementary, Hawthorne Elementary, Maple Elementary, Dearborn Park Elementary, Rainier View Elementary, Van Asselt Elementary, Wing Luke

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<sup>9</sup> Many of these definitions are taken directly from Seattle Public Schools, as this is the relevant context for the study (SPS 2013a).

Elementary, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, Graham Hill Elementary, Dunlap Elementary, Emerson Elementary.

SE Seattle: The area south of I-90 and east of I-5.

Short-term suspension: A suspension that is not longer than ten (10) consecutive school days.

In the Seattle Public Schools, a student subjected to a short-term suspension normally returns to the same school at the end of the suspension period.

Zero-tolerance: When exclusionary discipline is the mandated outcome for disciplining a particular offense.

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