

THE EFFECTS OF RESTORATIVE APPROACHES TO DISCIPLINE IN NEW ORLEANS SCHOOLS

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Overview

The rise of zero tolerance policies in recent decades has led to higher rates of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions and expulsions in schools nationwide. School and community leaders have raised concerns that this form of discipline disproportionately affects students of color and that affected students are more likely to fall behind academically or drop out of school. To minimize exclusionary discipline, a growing number of schools have instead tried restorative approaches to discipline, which put an emphasis on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punitive action.

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In this study, we examine whether using restorative approaches to discipline affects student suspension rates and standardized test scores. We use data from a non-profit in New Orleans that facilitates restorative practices in schools. These data specifically focus on restorative circles which are meetings and discussions among those involved in the incidents. We compare student outcomes at schools that reported using restorative approaches with similar students at schools that did not report using restorative approaches and draw the following conclusions:

- Restorative approaches had little effect on suspension rates for students overall. However, in two of the three years after the schools began using restorative approaches, we find some evidence that students who had previously been suspended saw a 35% reduction in their average number of suspensions per year and a 32% reduction in the number of days they were suspended.
- We find strong evidence that these changes for students who had previously been suspended were largely driven by

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a decrease in suspensions for violent infractions. Reductions in violent suspensions were seen every year for these students.

- Schools that held the fewest restorative circles saw declines in all suspensions primarily in the first year. The schools that held the most restorative circles saw reductions in suspensions mainly in the third year of partnering with the non-profit.
- We find inconsistent evidence of the use of restorative circles' impact on the academic performance of students who had not experienced prior suspension. We see little evidence of restorative circles' impact on the academic performance of students who had experienced prior suspension.

To help us understand the effect of restorative practices as perceived by stakeholders, we also interviewed students and staff members at two schools using restorative approaches. These students and staff reported positive experiences with restorative practices. Our interviews helped provide useful context to understand how these policies were implemented in practice and how people experienced them.

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Background

The use of exclusionary discipline in the U.S. has grown significantly in the past few decades as the percent of students in 6th grade and up who had ever been suspended went from 15.2% in 1993 to 19.6% in 2012. This trend was exacerbated by the passage of laws that require zero tolerance policies for certain infractions in schools, mandating significant consequences such as suspensions or expulsions.

[Previous ERA-New Orleans research](#) shows that expulsion and suspension rates spiked after a series of school reforms converted almost all New Orleans' schools to publicly funded, privately run charter schools after Hurricane Katrina. These rates dropped after 2009 and returned to pre-Katrina levels by 2012, possibly because of public pressure and legal challenges related to a special education lawsuit from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The purpose of exclusionary discipline is to remove potentially disruptive students from the classroom in order to punish these students, deter future misbehavior, and create a more peaceful learning environment for others. However, critics have questioned whether exclusionary discipline does more harm than good, as [existing research](#) finds that being suspended can [significantly increase](#) the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. In addition, civil rights leaders point out that punitive discipline disproportionately affects marginalized students. Nationwide, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended from school than their white peers, and students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities.

Restorative practices offer an alternative form of discipline where the focus is not on punishing the student but rather repairing harm done and, through that, restoring relationships. This could improve the learning environment for everyone without the side effects of exclusionary discipline. One popular practice is the restorative circle, where students and adults discuss infractions and create a contract with specific steps and a timeline for how the student or students involved will make amends.

As an example, a school might convene a restorative circle because Student A has vandalized Student B's locker. During the circle, participants might decide that Student A will work with Student B to repair the locker. The contract is fulfilled when the students work together to successfully repair the locker. The emphasis is therefore placed on repairing damage (through fixing the locker) and restoring relationships (through the students working together), rather than on punishment and isolation from the community (through suspension).

A school may choose to hold a circle as an alternative to suspension, in addition to a suspension, or as a preventative measure to de-escalate conflicts between students. A [national survey](#) found that over 40% of U.S. schools reported using restorative circles in 2017-2018. Despite the popularity of restorative approaches, there have been few [rigorous studies](#) showing [their effects](#).

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In this study, we analyze how adopting restorative approaches can affect schools, addressing three main questions:

- How did the use of restorative approaches to discipline affect suspension rates?
- How did the use of restorative approaches affect academic outcomes?
- Did schools that held the most restorative circles see similar outcomes as schools that held the fewest?

How did we carry out the analysis?

We used data from a local non-profit that provides training and support for schools to hold restorative circles. These data include information on each circle at partner schools, though not the specific students involved, from 2010-2016. We also used 2008-2016 anonymized student disciplinary records and enrollment data from the Louisiana Department of Education.

During this time, there was a large drop in the suspension and expulsion rates for the New Orleans school system overall. The question is therefore not whether schools using restorative practices saw a drop in suspensions, but whether this drop in suspensions *was greater than the decrease in other New Orleans schools*. Therefore, it is important to look at data both before and after schools partnered with the non-profit.

We used these data in a statistical analysis called “difference-in-differences,” which is commonly used by researchers to analyze public policy. We calculated the change in suspensions after schools started using restorative practices. We then compared that to how much those measures changed in similar schools that did not partner with the non-profit to adopt restorative practices. With this method, we also adjusted for student characteristics that differ between schools, such as race

and family income. The goal of this method is to provide the best possible evidence on whether restorative approaches caused changes in student outcomes.

Thirty-three schools in Orleans Parish worked with the non-profit during this time. We assumed that a school used restorative practices from the beginning of their partnership with the non-profit onward. We compared non-profit partnered schools to other schools in the city that served the same grade ranges and had similar performance ratings from the state, but never reported using restorative practices to the *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools*. (While it is possible that some of these schools used restorative approaches without reporting it, we assume this is not the case.) In addition, we matched students in schools that used restorative practices to a comparison group of students with similar demographics and disciplinary histories.

How did the use of restorative approaches to discipline affect suspension rates?

In the schools that used restorative circles, we find little impact on the number and length of student suspensions overall. By the third year of implementation, we find some evidence that the average student at a restorative practices school had 0.07 fewer suspensions per year than their peers at schools that did not utilize restorative practices, a 22% decline from the year just before the schools adopted restorative approaches. Most of this decline is attributable to a reduction in non-violent suspensions. Moreover, there is no statistically significant change in the *days* of suspensions, or any significant effects in other years.

However, when we looked only at students *who had previously been suspended*, our results suggest that the average previously suspended students experienced 0.2 fewer suspensions per year in both the first and third year of implementation, a 35% reduction from the year just before the schools adopted restorative approaches (Figure 1). This change is about three times greater than the change for all students. Moreover, there is also some evidence of a decrease in total days of suspension (about half a day less spent in suspension). A third of students in the sample had a previous suspension, so this change impacts a meaningful share of the student population. Essentially, the adoption of restorative practices signals a focus on students with a history of disciplinary action. Students who had never been formally disciplined were not likely to be impacted by restorative practices because they were unlikely to have future disciplinary events.

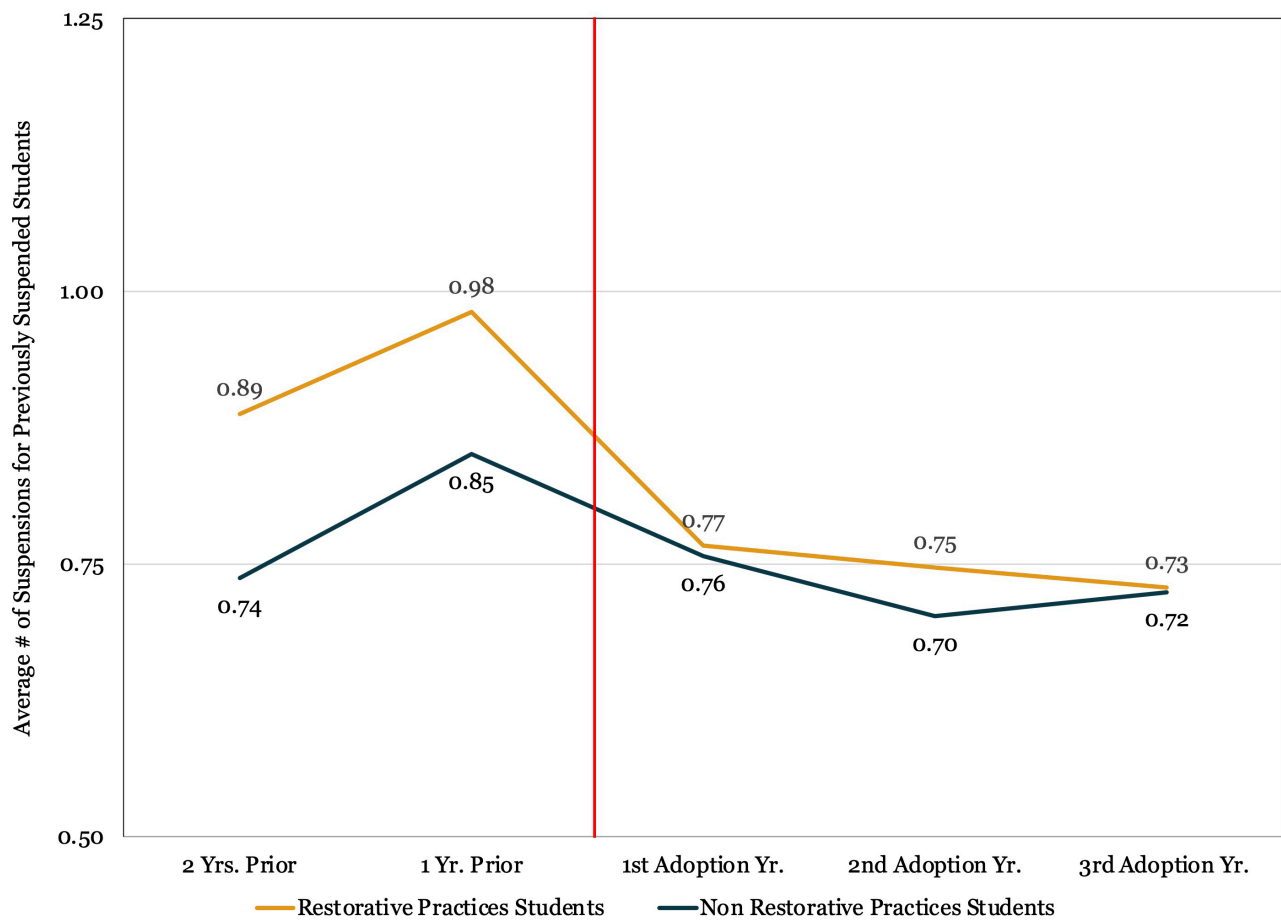
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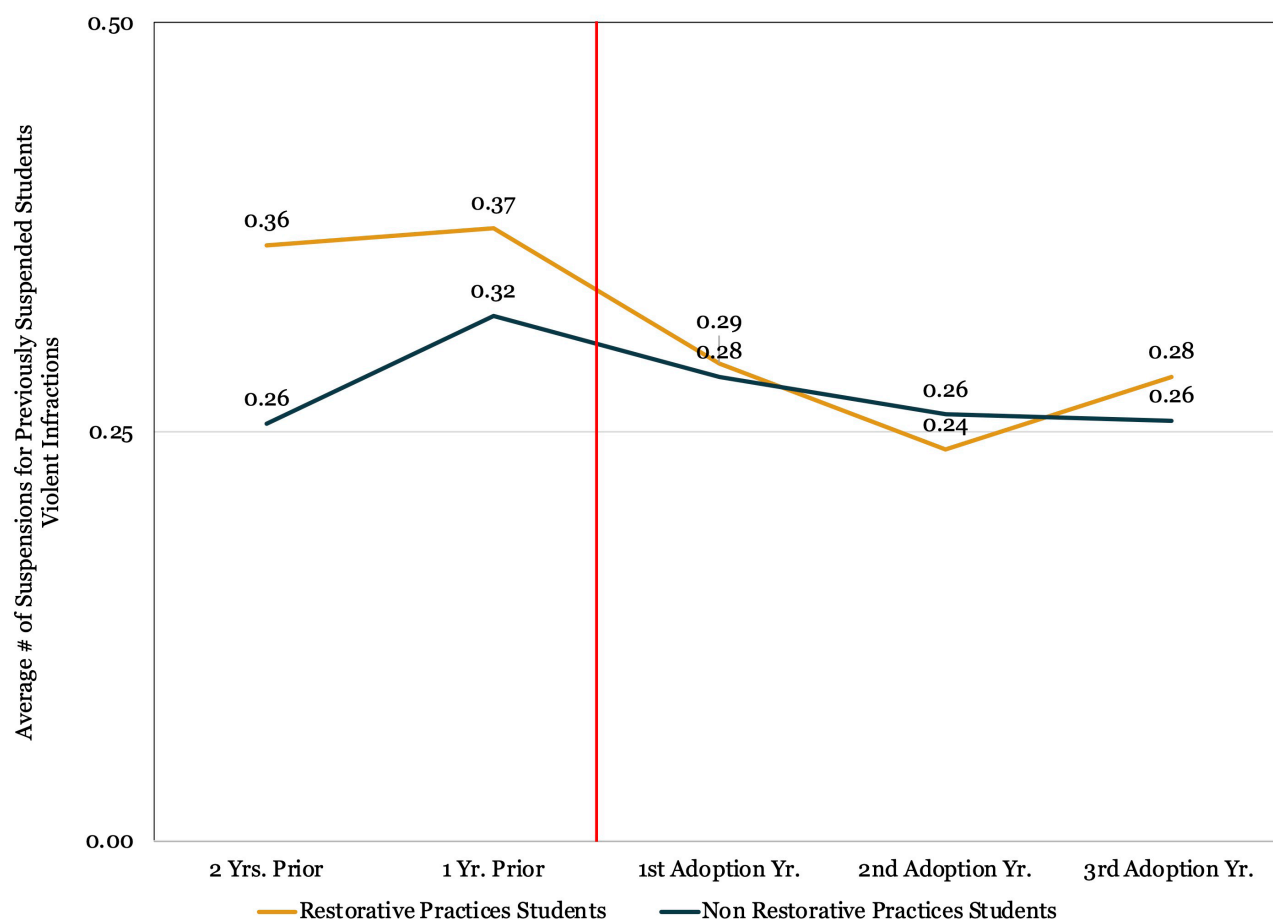
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Figure 1: Previously suspended students experienced fewer suspensions after their schools adopted restorative approaches



The decrease in suspensions for students who had previously been suspended does not necessarily mean that students changed their behavior. It is possible that school leaders used their discretion to suspend students less often for the same infractions. However, for *violent infractions*, school leaders have less discretion over the appropriateness of exclusionary discipline. When we isolate suspensions of previously suspended students for violent infractions, we note a reduction each year after partnering with the non-profit, as shown in Figure 2. Because school leaders have less flexibility in disciplinary action for violent infractions, the drop in suspensions specifically for these incidents suggests that restorative approaches led to a true change in student behavior and a safer school environment.

Figure 2: Previously suspended students experienced fewer suspensions for violent infractions each year after their schools adopted restorative approaches



We also analyzed infractions by categorizing them as either “specific” or “non-specific.” This allowed us to differentiate between actual changes in student behavior versus changes to how schools responded to student behavior. We assumed that specific infractions, like “bringing a weapon to school,” were more likely to reflect student behavior, and non-specific infractions, like “using threatening language,” were more subjective and therefore more likely to reflect how schools responded to student behavior. Results for specific infractions follow a similar pattern as results for violent infractions. See the accompanying technical report for more details.

How did the use of restorative approaches affect academic outcomes?

Disciplinary practices at schools also affect students' academic outcomes. On one hand, if the suspension rate goes down, some students will miss fewer days of school and therefore learn more. On the other hand, there may also be interruptions to a whole classroom's learning if disruptive students are not removed. Students may perceive that a school that uses restorative approaches is being more lenient to misbehavior, and they may act out more as a result. It is also possible that time devoted to restorative practices negatively affects test scores because time spent in restorative circles and related steps is time not spent on academic content.

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We see some evidence of reduced standardized test scores, but half of the effects are positive, although insignificant. Conversely, students who had been previously suspended experienced an increase in science test scores in the third year.

Overall, we find inconsistent evidence of effects on academic test scores for students.

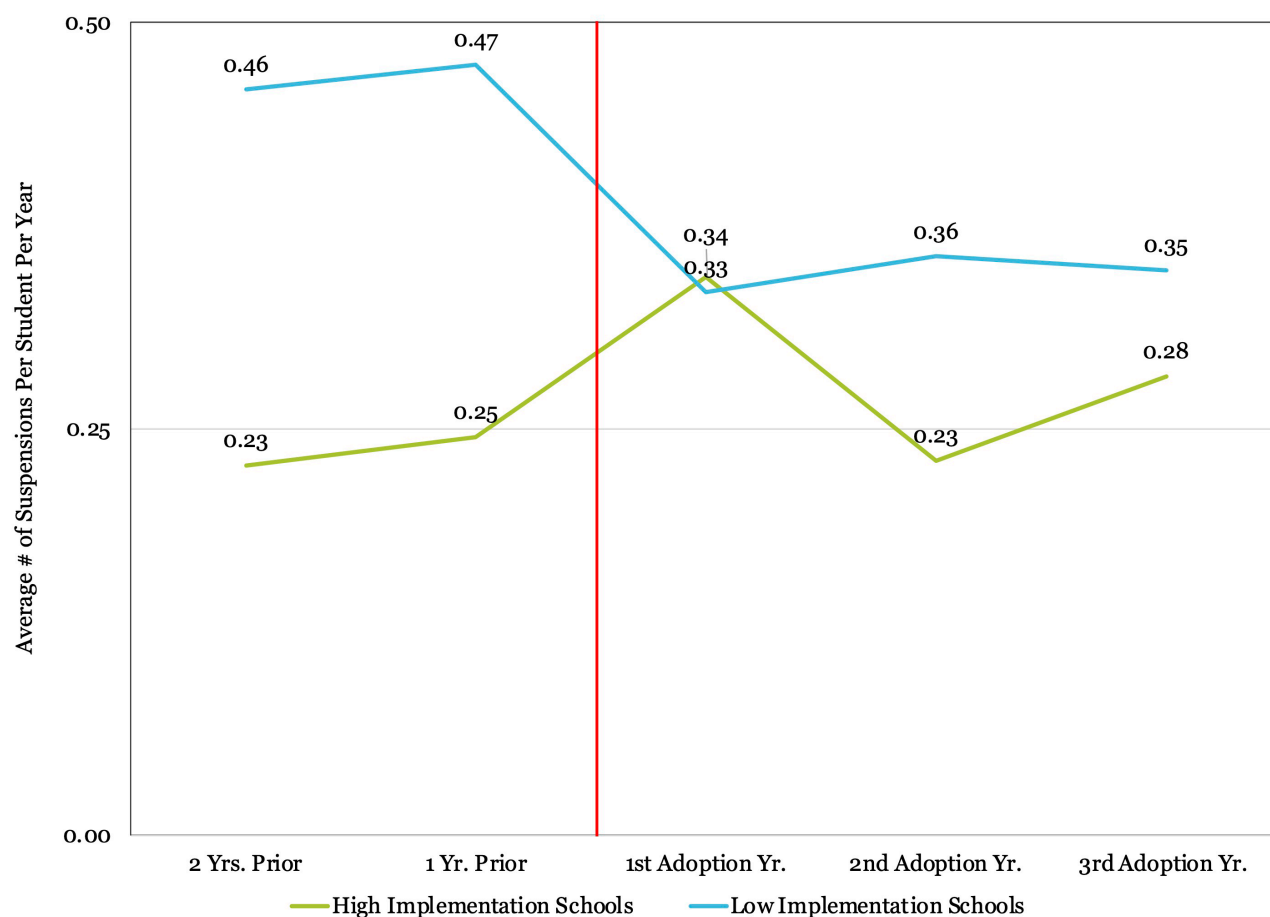
Did schools that held the most restorative circles see similar outcomes as schools that held the fewest?

One issue that makes it difficult to study whether restorative practices work is that researchers may not know whether a school that has reported using restorative practices has fully adopted this approach. In this case, we can look at the number of circles that a local non-profit reported each of their partner schools held per year to see how holding more circles affects students.

Schools varied greatly in how often they held circles. While the average number of restorative circles held annually was 13, some schools held over 70 circles in a single year. The top 25% of schools had more than 11 circles per year; we call those schools with “high implementation.” The bottom 25% had 3 or fewer circles per year; we call these schools with “low implementation.” Incidentally, 73% of low implementation schools in our sample only partnered with the non-profit for one year, while 15% of high implementation schools partnered with the non-profit for only one year.

Results for high implementation schools were similar to the results overall: there was little impact across all students (Figure 3), but additional analyses find some evidence of a decrease in suspensions for violent offenses in the third year of using restorative approaches for previously suspended students. Low implementation schools saw a significant drop in suspensions the first year for all students. However, the change did not last, with few significant changes by the third year. This suggests that these schools experimented with restorative practices briefly and then moved on to another disciplinary approach.

Figure 3: Changes in the suspension rate were different for low implementation schools and high implementation schools



We also analyzed schools by categorizing how many of their circles were successful and resulted in a contract that students agreed to participate in to make amends. Results for schools with the most circles resulting in contracts follow a similar pattern as results for low implementation schools. See the accompanying technical report for more details.

How did students and staff perceive restorative practices?

We interviewed a total of thirteen students and eleven staff members from two schools that transitioned from zero-tolerance policies to restorative practices. While not all students interviewed had been suspended or expelled, all interviewees had experienced high discipline environments. One school fully implemented restorative practices and very rarely used exclusionary discipline, while the other employed a hybrid model of both restorative practices and exclusionary discipline.

Over 80% of staff interviewees and over 90% of student interviewees expressed the opinion that restorative practices successfully improved school culture. Most interviewees also believed that restorative practices reduced suspensions. Interview participants noted that the most significant change in school culture appeared in students' improved relationships with the school community, noting that there was a greater feeling of belonging, respect, and safety among students. As one faculty member said,

“...anything that helps build those relationships is gonna help build safety and security, and so having the restorative process puts a premium on those relationships.”

30% of interviewed students directly connected this heightened feeling of respect with improved classroom management and a more focused learning environment.

While most interviewees expressed positive feedback about restorative practices, many participants emphasized that the way restorative practices were used determined the success of the approach. Even when schools chose to use restorative practices and partner with the same non-profit, they adapted this approach in different ways. Our interviews revealed three critical factors for the success of restorative practices: time commitment, staff buy-in and training resources, and strong relationships between staff and students.

In the high implementation school, suspensions were rarely given, restorative circles were prioritized, and other aspects of restorative approaches, such as talking through issues informally, were common. A student in the whole-school setting [*the high implementation school*] said,

“students don’t get suspended or expelled unless it’s, like, something serious [such as weapon or drug possession].”

Staff at this school noted higher levels of training and resources dedicated to restorative practices.

Alternately, the hybrid model school paired restorative approaches with exclusionary discipline. Staff at this school expressed a frustration with the lack of training and resources, a clear contrast to the support provided at the full implementation school. Furthermore, not all staff in the hybrid model were trained in restorative practices.

Participants also reported that staff turnover had a negative effect on the implementation of restorative practices. At the hybrid model school, interviewees experienced frequent changes in leadership and staff turnover which they felt damaged the relationships at the core of restorative practices. Turnover made it much more difficult to commit time to proper implementation due to increased workloads and loss of collegial support. Turnover further resulted in the introduction of new faculty members who were not trained in restorative practices. Whereas staff turnover negatively affected

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relationships between students and staff at the hybrid model school, students and staff at the full implementation school emphasized strong relationships and a welcoming environment as a positive contribution to the success of restorative practices. One faculty member noted that students taking time to be emotionally comfortable with restorative practices was to be expected: “Because the whole point is you have to go through your own learning curve, right?”

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a nationwide swell of activism around issues of racial justice and equity. In the backdrop of this activism, education leaders have viewed exclusionary discipline practices with a more critical eye. Restorative approaches offer a potential alternative to punitive discipline, one that may help students build better relationships with their teachers and peers and learn conflict resolution skills.

Our results indicate that the use of restorative practices led to reduced suspension rates for students who were previously suspended. Overall, suspension rate reductions appear throughout all years for schools that adopted restorative practices. We find evidence of reduced suspension, regardless of whether a school is a high or low implementation school. We see the largest reduction for suspensions for violent infractions, indicating that the use of restorative approaches led to a true improvement in school safety. We do not see any clear changes in test scores overall, which could mean the the various effects offset one another or that the effect on test scores were just too small to detect.

These findings, combined with interviews from students and adults who experienced restorative approaches first-hand, indicate that this practice is not a quick fix solution. It takes a significant investment of time and effort to train participants and earn buy-in from staff and students to see sustained results. Restorative approaches remain a promising alternative to punitive discipline in schools where both leadership and staff are committed to change.

How is this Research Related to Other ERA-New Orleans Studies?

This study continues previous research on discipline in New Orleans schools:

In *The Effects of the New Orleans School Reforms on Exclusionary Discipline Practices*, Mónica Hernández found that there was a large spike in the expulsion rate (1.5-2.7 percentage points, a 140-250% increase) in New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina. The rate returned to pre-Katrina levels after public pressure and legal challenges.

In *A Different Approach to Student Behavior: Addressing School Discipline and Socio-Emotional Learning Through Positive Behavior Intervention Systems*, Nathan Barrett and Douglas N. Harris studied the effects of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), another alternative method of behavior management in schools. They found that schools in Louisiana that schools that used Kickboard, software developed to help teachers keep track of student behavior as part of a system of PBIS, saw the average number of suspensions drop by 0.14-0.38 per student per year. They saw no evidence of a reduction in test scores.

In *What are the Sources of School Discipline Disparities by Student Race and Family Income?*, Nathan Barrett, Andrew McEachin, Jonathan N. Mills, and Jon Valant found that Black students in Louisiana are about twice as likely to be suspended as White students, and low-income students are about 1.75 times as likely as non-low-income students to be suspended. Black and low-income students also receive longer suspensions than their peers for the same types of infractions.

About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce rigorous, objective, and useful research to understand the post-Katrina school reforms and their long-term effects on all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Schools for New Orleans, NOLA Public Schools, Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website.

EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org

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