



Beyond Bullying

How Hostile School Climate Perpetuates the School-to-Prison Pipeline for LGBT Youth

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Introduction and summary

School discipline policies have been under heightened scrutiny by the U.S. Department of Education because of the disparate impact they have on students of color. Data released last spring by the Office for Civil Rights, or OCR, revealed that rigid school discipline policies—which lead to suspensions and expulsions of students for even the most minor offenses—perpetuate a school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately criminalizes students of color and students with disabilities.¹

Last month, the U.S. Department of Education released “Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide For Improving School Climate and Discipline,” the first time federal agencies have offered legal guidelines to address and reduce racial discrimination and disproportionality in schools.² This guidance makes tremendous strides in reporting on the stark racial disparities in school discipline, however, missing from this groundbreaking work are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, youth—who are also disproportionately affected by harsh school discipline policies—due to the dearth of data to illuminate their experiences.

All too often, LGBT youth are pushed out of the classroom as a result of a hostile school climate. When an LGBT youth is tormented in school by classmates and is emotionally or physically harmed, or even worse, driven to suicide, the news media rightly shines a spotlight on the situation. And while bullying grabs the headlines, as it should, it is only a portion of the story when it comes to LGBT youth feeling unwelcome and less than safe in school.

To be certain, peer-on-peer bullying is an important factor that influences school climate and has been linked to poor health, well-being, and educational outcomes.³ But research suggests that harsh school discipline policies also degrade the overall school experience and cycle LGBT youth and students of color into the juvenile justice system at alarming rates. The role that overly harsh school discipline policies and adults in schools play in setting school climate is often overlooked. School discipline policies and the application of those rules set the tone for the school environment and shape the experiences for students of color and LGBT youth.

Studies suggest that the actions (or inactions) of adults in schools associated with school climate—issues that go beyond bullying—have the potential to derail youth, particularly LGBT youth, and push them into a cycle of unfair criminalization that has lifelong consequences:

- LGBT youth, particularly gender-nonconforming girls, are up to three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment by school administrators than their non-LGB counterparts.⁴
- As with racial disparities in school discipline, higher rates of punishment do not correlate with higher rates of misbehavior among LGBT youth.⁵
- LGBT youth are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system; they make up just 5 percent to 7 percent of the overall youth population, but represent 15 percent of those in the juvenile justice system.⁶
- LGBT youth report significant distrust of school administrators and do not believe that school officials do enough to foster safe and welcoming school climates.⁷

Safe and welcoming school climates are essential to achieving positive educational outcomes for all youth, especially students of color and LGBT youth who often face harassment, bias, and discrimination at school based on their race, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression. In this report, we examine the disparate impact of harsh school discipline and the policing of schools on students of color and LGBT youth, as well as the role that adults in schools play in perpetuating hostile school climates for those youth. Furthermore, we explain why it is important that discipline policies are fair and supportive, rather than punitive and criminalizing, and foster healthy learning environments in which all students can excel.

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