

The Inanity of Zoom School Suspensions

Disciplinary action is often needless and discriminatory. The patchwork of in-person and virtual schooling is making things worse.

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By Aaricka Washington

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I'm going to be honest: I didn't know what I was doing.

There I was, a 22-year-old standing at the front of a classroom of lower-income elementary students in southwest Houston with only one month of training and an undergraduate degree in journalism. But I was a young, Black woman and in interviews I had shown a clear passion for helping Black and brown children succeed — which made me a Teach for America darling.

And I felt somewhat anchored by Doug Lemov's "Teach Like a Champion" books, a manual championed by many education reformers, which offered techniques for gaining the compliance of every student in the classroom. I just had to follow its "rules of classroom management." In the early months, nothing made me happier than when my students stood in a straight line with their hands behind their back. This rigid leadership was intended to help them close the achievement gap. But moments of full compliance were fleeting, and suspensions were commonplace.

When I sent one of my brightest second-grade boys to the office after a fight, he ended up suspended and came back days later a different child. He left the school soon afterward. The problem, I learned, was that discipline and punishment came

before relationship building.

Students and educators are beginning the school year this fall under unheard-of circumstances as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. And I am gripped by the fear that aggressive school discipline is only going to get worse.

Some cases of harsh disciplinary actions have already made news. In May, a Michigan judge sent a 15 year-old Black girl with a learning disability in to a juvenile detention center because she did not do her homework, a violation of her probation. In Sacramento, Calif., a rising fourth-grader's email privileges were briefly suspended after she was accused of having "bombarded the district's tech support department with requests."

In this moment of crisis, rather than reflexively devolving into punitive tactics, educators can radically shift their mind- set on classroom behavior and particularly how they treat marginalized students. Subini Annamma, an associate professor at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, is researching students who have been suspended from the San Francisco Unified School District, asking them about their experiences.

The district was recently singled out for review by the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education: According to the Office of Civil Rights' data, while 16.3 percent of Black students had disabilities in the district 62.4 percent of Black students with Limited English Proficiency or disability status receive more than one out-of-school suspension.

Disabled or not, a student having several disciplinary actions can be the first step in a path that can lead students to juvenile correctional facilities.

"I think educators need to constantly ask themselves, 'Is this worth getting my kid in trouble for?'" Ms. Annamma told me. "'Is this what I want to give of my autonomy as a teacher?'"

As schools prepare to become even more regimented by implementing protocols to prevent the spread of the virus, discipline may only grow more intense. According to Chalkbeat, in some Texas school districts, intentionally spitting, sneezing or

coughing on a peer could be treated as assault.

In Shelby County, Tennessee, students will not be expected to wear uniforms, but they are expected to look “presentable regardless of the location in which learning occurs,” according to the existing dress code. “Repeat offenders” will be subject to suspension.

Dan Losen, the director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA’s Civil Rights Project, told me he is already finding huge discrepancies in the discipline data from large school districts.

“I’m just worried that we’re going to see a major upswing in things like referrals to police or suspensions,” Mr. Losen said. “I can imagine the administrators and staff either calling the cops more or suspending more often because even minor violations now have, at least in theory, a health risk.”

Elizabeth Hanif, a high school math teacher in Long Island, said some Zoom class rules she found online seemed unnecessary and would only exacerbate the problems with the virtual schooling. Attempting to establish rules on your own as a teacher doesn’t change a child’s behavior in substantial ways, she said. Having a relationship with them does.

“The goal is for our students to learn,” Ms. Hanif said.

Joseph D. Nelson, an education researcher whose research at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Columbia University’s Teachers College focuses on Black boyhood, told me that among the students he taught before the pandemic, “most of the boys were high performing,” but “bored with their other classes. They were fulfilling teachers’ expectations of them by acting out.”

Mr. Nelson says educators can use strategies like getting to know a student’s interests by intentionally forming interpersonal bonds or going beyond school curriculum to meet a student’s learning needs. That, naturally, may require more institutional investment — a different but overlapping challenge for American schools that were already overwhelmed and are now wrestling with a hodgepodge of remote work and physical returns to campus.

Amid this pandemic, survival — just finding ways to make school work from week to week — may be the best some districts can do. The last thing they should do, then, is further punish the students who for too long faced needless discipline.

I will never stop thinking about the many dozens of students I taught before becoming a reporter. When I think about those few years, I don't think of all the strict programming I originally tried to enforce. I think of all the things my children actually taught me, a naïve, 20-something: about my Blackness, about teaching without controlling, about the need to break rigid rules and, eventually, fix this broken education system.

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