



School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

SSWAA ENDORSES SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES

SSWAA Endorses Supportive School Discipline Practices

SSWAA has joined a national movement led by the U.S. Department of Education and different educational interest and reform groups that is focusing on the elimination of exclusionary discipline practices that primarily impact students of color and students with disabilities. This civil rights issue has caught the attention of groups such as the ACLU, Public Council, Safe & Supportive Schools, U.S. Dept. of Justice, the Council of State Governments Justice Center, and others working in restorative justice, school climate improvement, and other efforts to end the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

According to the U.S. Dept. of Education (2014), national data from the Office for Civil Rights in “Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline” show that:

Youths of color and youths with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by suspensions and expulsions. For example, data show that African-American students without disabilities are more than three times as likely as their white peers without disabilities to be expelled or suspended. Although students who receive special education services represent 12 percent of students in the country, they make up 19 percent of students suspended in school, 20 percent of students receiving out-of-school suspension once, 25 percent of students receiving multiple out-of-school suspensions, 19 percent of students expelled, 23 percent of students referred to law enforcement, and 23 percent of students receiving a school-related arrest (p. i).

This disparity in practice has negatively impacted generations of students based on their race or educational label. It is essential that national organizations like SSWAA take a stand against these practices.

Fair and Equitable Discipline

SSWAA unequivocally endorses fair and equitable discipline practices for all students, with the expectation that all school staff administer appropriate discipline to students without prejudice or discrimination. Of particular note, SSWAA expects all persons engaged in disciplinary practices in schools to pay particular attention to how they discipline students of color and those with disabilities who have been disproportionately affected by overly punitive disciplinary practices. Those practices have often included overuse of suspensions and expulsions as initial consequences. SSWAA strongly believes that non-punitive efforts to address student behavioral concerns should be exhausted and well-documented before any suspension or expulsion occurs.

The U.S. Dept. of Education recommends that schools emphasize the acquisition of social-emotional learning (SEL) by students as well as the training of teachers, staff, and administrators in basic engagement and positive support of students. SSWAA agrees with these recommendations and believes that School Social Workers are key players in both of those endeavors, helping to create and implement SEL programs and deliver training initiatives.

SSWAA encourages teachers and administrators to utilize culturally responsive discipline practices to address student behavior. Culturally responsive discipline emphasizes understanding how students' cultural backgrounds influence their behavior in ways that can be misinterpreted as confrontational by those in authority who are viewing the behavior through their own cultural lens. This perspective should influence those in authority to re-conceptualize student behavior as more prominently influenced by culture instead of characterizing it as oppositional or defiant, leading to more fair and equitable discipline. Teachers and administrators should also apply an instructional approach to discipline where correction of misbehavior is seen as a teaching opportunity for students to learn new skills.

With their training in engagement and de-escalation skills, School Social Workers are well-suited to train teachers and staff in this culturally responsive instructional approach. They can also translate their knowledge on trauma-informed care and apply it to schools, working consistently with teachers and staff to view students through a different lens than a "compliant or defiant" perspective. School Social Workers can help the school community understand the context of student struggles, support students exhibiting behavioral challenges, and leverage the power of family and community to intervene.

School Social Workers are well equipped to lead local collaboration efforts with community resources, such as law enforcement, community mental health services, and family resource centers, that reflect best practices to addressing student discipline.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

School disciplinary measures historically have relied heavily on suspensions and removal of students from the classroom by sending students to the office. While such measures are necessary at times in order to maintain safety and order in school, there are more positive, evidence-based approaches to maintaining a safe and supportive school environment. SSWAA supports interventions that address student behaviors in a more comprehensive manner within the framework of a multi-tiered systems of support, such as "PBIS" or "Safe and Civil Schools." Such approaches have proven to be effective in maintaining a positive school climate without the loss of instructional time to student learning that occurs when students are removed from the classroom or suspended from school.

Continual Improvement

SSWAA believes that schools should implement the following strategies to continue improving fair and equitable disciplinary practices:

- Teach students about positive behaviors, how to recognize these types of behaviors in action, and how to display them in their own interactions with others.
- Apply evidence-based and strengths-based prevention and intervention strategies both inside and outside of the classroom.
- Utilize discipline data to inform appropriate responses to behavioral issues and to ensure continued equitable treatment of all students.
- Provide in-service training for all school staff on the use of strength-based approaches.
- Create a learning community that embraces instruction in social-emotional skill development and enhances student-teacher interactions (CASTL, n.d.).

SSWAA recognizes the inherent challenges in successfully educating all students while also appropriately addressing discipline in a holistic way. We support School Social Workers and others who continue to be committed to students' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Finally, we endorse the considerable efforts of school leaders in the United States who actively seek on a daily basis to ensure a safe and appropriate educational experience for all students.

References

- Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). (n.d.) *Measuring and Improving Student-Teacher Interactions to Improve PK-12 Settings to Enhance Student Learning*. University of Virginia, Curry School of Education. Retrieved on 7-21-16 at: http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/CLASS-MTP_PK-12_brief.pdf
- U.S. Dept. of Education. (2014). *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*. Office for Civil Rights. Retrieved on 7-23-16 at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>