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Out of the Classroom and Less Likely to Graduate: The Relationship Between Exclusionary Discipline and Four-Year Graduation Rates in Texas

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In the summer of 2019, Texas legislators passed SB 2432. The bill made it easier for schools to punish students using Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs), a form of exclusionary discipline that removes students from their educational environment (Swaby, 2019). In the 87th legislative session, new bills like Texas H.B. 1201 (2021), which died in committee, were attempting to curb the use, prevalence, and severity of various forms of exclusionary discipline placements for students through preventative and restorative practices. Many district leaders want guidance on how they should use exclusionary discipline, but the answer is not simple. This study builds upon previous research showing the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline on students and its impact on graduation.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has set the goal of having 60% of Texans earn a post-secondary credential by 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). Raising high school graduation rates by understanding the factors that affect them is vital to meeting this critical benchmark. The following paper examines data collected from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that shows the relationship between single and multiple assignments to In-School Suspension (ISS), Out of School Suspension (OSS), and DAEPs and four-year high school graduation rates for students who were in ninth grade between 2011 and 2014 in Texas. This analysis shows both the disproportional use of exclusionary discipline for Black and Latinx students, and that students assigned to exclusionary discipline placements had lower rates of graduation. The study provides a deeper understanding of the connections between these issues to help inform policymakers in revising discipline protocols and implementation in schools.

Background

Many districts are rethinking their approach to discipline amid school safety concerns (Colombi & Osher, 2015). After the Columbine shooting in Colorado 20 years ago, many schools took a zero-tolerance approach that removed students from schools for offenses related to drugs, weapons, or signs of violence. Proponents of this strategy argue that removing disruptive students will help prevent further disruption and improve classroom climate. However, researchers on the American Psychological Association's Zero-Tolerance Task Force found that zero-tolerance approaches did not make schools safer (Reynolds et al., 2008). They found that instead of deterring future misbehavior, exclusionary discipline can increase rates of future misbehavior. Concerns about the negative impacts on students' mental health and increased exposure to the juvenile justice system have called into question the efficacy of zero-tolerance techniques. The following section reviews previous research that has shown the connection between the school-to-prison pipeline, exclusionary discipline practices, and the implications of exclusionary discipline on graduation rates.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline describes the connection between exclusionary discipline used in schools and the justice system (Potter et al., 2017). Students of color – particularly Latinx and Black students – are more likely to be punished through exclusionary discipline actions, and they are more likely to experience involvement with the justice system. In a statewide study of Texas students, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that students who are expelled or suspended are three times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, students with more than one disciplinary action were more likely to have juvenile justice contact (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Researchers have also established that the impact of the school to prison pipeline disproportionately falls on students of color. In a study of racial threat in schools, Payne and Welch (2010) found that schools with higher percentages of Black students have harsher discipline protocols. In another study by Skiba et al. (2011), researchers found that students of color were more often and more harshly disciplined than were White students for similar behaviors. Students in the 2015–2016 school year lost an estimated 11 million days of instruction across the country, with Black students losing the highest proportion of instructional days, 66 days of instruction per 100 students (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). In Texas, Fabelo et al. (2011) showed that Black students were more likely to receive a discretionary suspension than their White peers.

Discipline Use in Texas

Exclusionary discipline takes many forms in the current educational landscape, including a range of tools from informal removals from classrooms and formal juvenile justice placements. The three most common forms of exclusionary discipline reported across Texas are In-School Suspensions (ISS), Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS), and Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs). Between the 2011 and 2014 school years, there were almost 8 million assignments to ISS, OSS, and DAEP, impacting 3.5 million Texas students (TEA, 2020). Nearly one in five students experienced exclusionary discipline across all grade levels (TEA, 2020). ISS, the least restrictive form of discipline tracked by Texas schools, allows students to remain on campus, but in a supervised area removed from other students. When assigned to OSS, students are removed from the school environment for a maximum of three consecutive days.

Students assigned to DAEPs are removed from their home campus and sent to another campus for a set number of days decided by administrators (Tex. Educ. Code Ann., 2017). While students at DAEPs receive instruction when they are away from their home classrooms, the time they are off campus is often longer than a typical in-school or out-of-school suspension. In 2008, the average DAEP stay for students across the state of Texas was 27 school days (Fabelo et al., 2011). After completing the assigned number of days, students return to their home campus. Texas law under Sec. 37.008 requires DAEPs to meet both the educational and behavioral needs of students but leaves the design mostly up to districts and school boards (Tex. Educ. Code Ann., 2017). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has further clarified these rules by providing guidance on accountability measures, clarifying teacher training requirements, and requiring minimal transition procedures for students returning from DAEPs (Tex. Educ. Code Ann., 2017). After attending a DAEP, students should return to their home campuses with the skills needed to succeed, but exclusionary discipline assignments can reinforce and promote negative behaviors (McIntosh et al., 2008). Students ping-pong back and forth from these alternative campuses to their home campus, disrupting academic and social ties. A previous statewide study found that students who were assigned to DAEPs once

returned to DAEPs about 20% of the time (Blackmon, 2016). Furthermore, in a study of two districts in Texas, students of color were more likely to return to a DAEP setting than were White students (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). Additionally, students who experience multiple forms of exclusionary discipline are even more likely to have negative outcomes in life, such as dropping out of school and having contact with the criminal justice system, than those who are assigned just once (Skiba et al., 2014).

Focus on Graduation

Amid heightened focus on student learning and progress, policy makers, parents, educators, and communities use graduation rates to measure school systems' success or failure. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board aims to have 60% of Texans ages 25-34 earn a certificate or degree by 2030 to increase the percentage of students gaining marketable skills for 21st century jobs (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). Texas's goals emphasize the importance of secondary high school completion because of the costs of high school dropouts. High school graduation has become critical for workforce participation, choice of future opportunities, and broader economic development. It is even more important now as we consider the impacts and implications of learning loss on students' attainment and potential.

Researchers have used ninth-grade outcomes as early warning signs to predict high school graduation rates. Allensworth (2013) found that ninth-grade performance predicted graduation rates correctly 80% of the time. Students who are retained in ninth grade have increased odds of dropping out of high school (Bornsheur et al., 2011). Students who do not graduate from high school make on average \$10,000 less per year than a high school graduate (Breslow, 2012). Before the pandemic, unemployment for high school dropouts was 12%, a third higher than for those with a high school diploma, and at the beginning of 2021 the employment gap had increased further (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). Furthermore, incarceration rates were 63 times higher for young people who dropped out of high school compared to those with a college degree (Breslow, 2012).

There is an established relationship in the literature between exclusionary discipline and high school dropout rates. In their meta-analysis, Noltemeyer et al. (2015) found a statistically significant inverse relationship between suspensions and academic achievement. Furthermore, they found a statistically significant positive relationship between OSS and dropout rates (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). In another study of ninth graders, researchers found that after the first suspension in a student's ninth-grade year, an additional suspension increased their odds of dropping out by 20% (Balfanz et al., 2014). A study of the short and long-term outcomes of suspended students in New York City Public Schools showed that students who were suspended were less likely to graduate in four, five or six years compared to non-suspended peers (Chu & Ready, 2018). Not only are the impacts for individual students important to understand, but the effects on larger society are important to consider. Marchbanks et al. (2014) estimated the cost of dropouts associated with discipline in Texas between \$5.0 billion and \$9.0 billion in lost wages per cohort of students over their total lifetimes. The unintended consequences of exclusionary discipline should be considered when deciding how to shift the use of discipline for students and teachers.

Methods

Because of the connection between the ninth-grade school year and graduation outcomes (Al-lensworth, 2013; Balfanz et al., 2014), this study focused on students' experiences with exclusionary discipline in ninth grade. The research questions explored in this paper are as follows:

1. What relationship do single and multiple assignments to ISS, OSS, or DAEP in ninth grade have with students' four-year graduation rates? Do the resulting relationships between four-year graduation rates differ between types of exclusionary discipline?
2. Are certain student groups – considering ethnicity, gender, special education services, and socioeconomic status – more likely to experience exclusionary discipline through ISS, OSS, or DAEP once or more than once in their ninth-grade year?

This quantitative study used a descriptive design to determine the relationship between multiple placements in exclusionary discipline and four-year graduation rates. Data for students who experienced ISS, OSS, or DAEP assignments in ninth grade were analyzed according to ethnicity, gender, special education services, and economic status to evaluate whether these factors change their proportional representation in discipline assignments. Four-year graduation rates of students who were not disciplined, disciplined once, and disciplined more than once in their ninth-grade year were compared using a descriptive analysis in Excel. The researchers focused on four-year graduation to measure the ninth-grade cohorts' on-time graduation rate. All graphs and figures were created using Excel. The analysis consisted of cleaning, compiling, and organizing the data to address the questions generated from literature review.

Sample

The data set tracked graduation outcomes for 1,669,391 first-time ninth graders who were enrolled in ninth grade in Texas public high schools between 2011 and 2014. The researchers used this time period to allow for enough years for each cohort to reach the four-year graduation mark. During this time period, there were on average 400,000 ninth-grade students each school year in the state of Texas. The researchers used data drawn from the records of students who began ninth grade in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 and were expected to graduate in the spring of 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. This study accessed archival demographic data from TEA for ninth-grade students during this time. The researchers asked TEA for graduation outcome data for students who experienced ISS, OSS, or DAEP placements once or more than once through a Texas Public Information Act request submitted on the agency's online portal found on the TEA website. The researchers analyzed student graduation outcomes and demographic information for different groups based on disciplinary assignments. These data included information on the total number of ninth graders according to ethnicity, gender, economic status, special education, and at-risk status. The requested data included summaries of four-year graduation outcomes for students who were:

- Not disciplined
- Single placement in ISS
- Single placement in OSS
- Single placement in DAEP
- Multiple placements in ISS

- Multiple placements in OSS
- Multiple placements in DAEP

Students who left the state before their four-year graduation date were not included in the data set. Students who experienced the same discipline category more than once were not counted in the singular category. Because students who experienced different types of exclusionary discipline were not removed from the data set, the discipline categories were not mutually exclusive. To compare across all three types of discipline, only Black, Latinx, and White student populations had large enough sample sizes to examine. Due to the smaller number of Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian students placed in DAEP settings, the sample size was obscured because of FERPA requirements in the data set. The experiences of these students are extremely important and should be further examined using differentiated data in the future.

The analysis explored how multiple placements in a DAEP in ninth grade related to four-year graduation rates. The same relationships for students assigned to ISS and OSS were analyzed to demonstrate the relationship between suspensions and graduation rates. For the second analysis, data were compared by race and/or ethnicity, at-risk status, socioeconomic status, disability, and gender. Archival demographic data were compared with data from all ninth-grade students in Texas in order to show the proportional representation of students who experienced multiple placements at ISS, OSS, and DAEPs. This data was used to compare against the general student population instead of the more narrow confinements of the data requested.

Findings

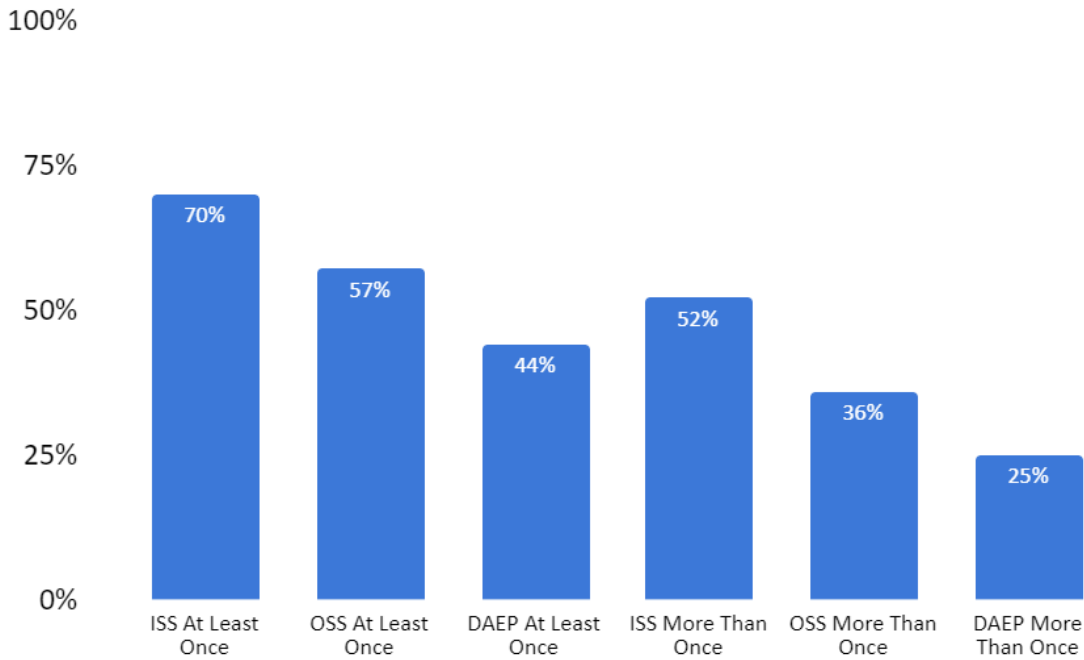
The findings are organized by the two foci of the study: exploring the relationship between ninth grade discipline assignments and four-year graduation, and the relationship between demographics and exclusionary discipline assignments.

Graduation Rates

Graduation rates by students disciplined or not disciplined. Students who were not disciplined graduated at much higher rates than students who were. On average, 48% of students who were disciplined in the ninth-grade year at least once graduated in four years, compared to 84% of students who were not disciplined in their ninth-grade year. In addition, graduation rates for students who were only disciplined once were higher than for those disciplined more than once. Figure 1 shows the differing graduation rates for students who experienced a discipline action once and more than once. On average, the graduation rate decreased by 20 percentage points for students who experienced multiple disciplinary assignments.

Figure 1

Texas Four-Year Graduation Rates by Discipline Type



Note. Graduation Rates by Disciplined Once and More, Texas Public Schools, 2011-2015. Adapted from Graduation Outcomes for Ninth Graders Placed in ISS, OSS, or DAEP Once or More received from TEA on January 24, 2020 in response to Texas Public Information Act.

Graduation rates by type and amount of discipline. More restrictive types of exclusionary discipline were associated with lower graduation rates. As shown in Figure 1, students assigned to ISS once had a 71% graduation rate, the highest rate within the discipline categories. That rate drops to 52% for students who were assigned more than once to ISS. About 57% of students who were assigned to OSS once graduated in four years, and 36% of students who were assigned multiple times did so. Compared to students assigned to ISS or OSS once, students assigned to DAEP one time were less likely to graduate. Only 44% of students assigned to DAEPs once graduated in four years. Students who were assigned to DAEPs multiple times had the lowest graduation rates (25%) out of the three disciplinary actions. These data highlight the potential negative impact that DAEPs can have on students' graduation outcomes and call into question the long-term effects on students of this tool of discipline.

Student Demographics

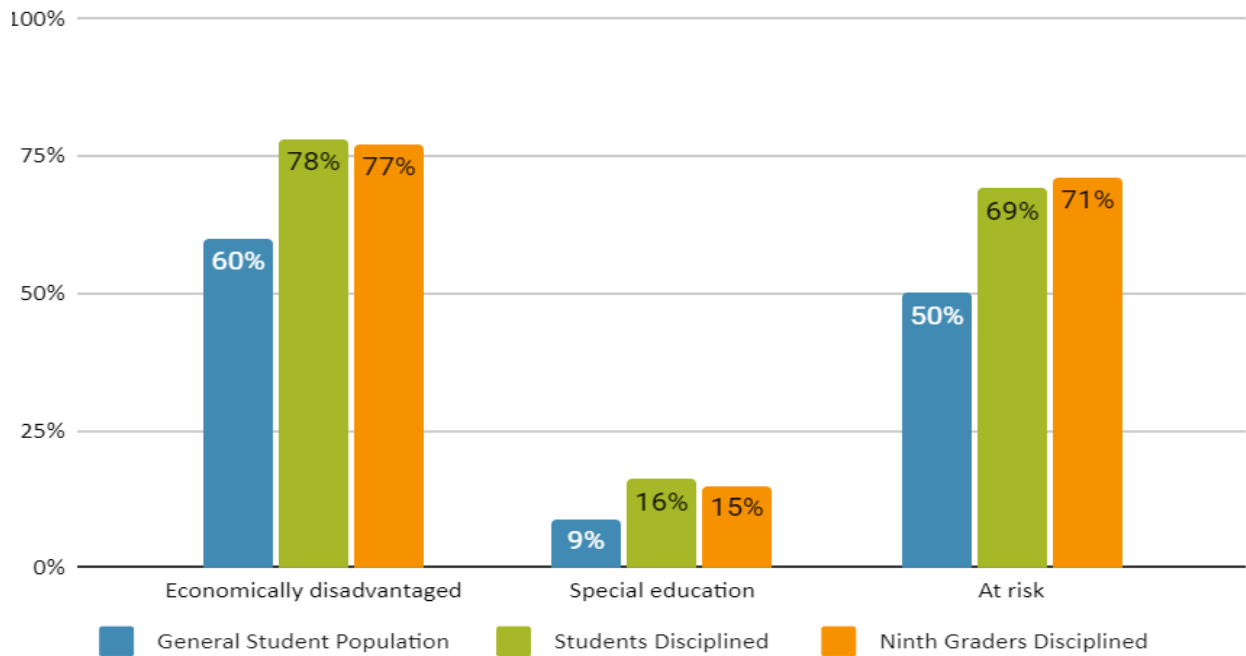
Discipline Rates by Student Demographics. The second question explored in this paper focused on the relationship between ninth-grade student demographics and proportional representation of students assigned to ISS, OSS, and DAEP once or more than once. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, students who were disciplined were more likely to be Black and Latinx, compared to the proportions of students who were not disciplined. White students were less likely to be disciplined, compared to

their proportion in the general population. Furthermore, students who were disciplined were more likely to be economically disadvantaged, receiving special-education services, and male.

Discipline rates by socioeconomic, at-risk, and special education status. Students with disabilities, students considered at-risk, and economically disadvantaged students were overrepresented among disciplined students compared to the general student population. Students are *at-risk* if they fall into a variety of categories. For example, students can qualify as at-risk for not meeting standards on early standardized testing or experiencing homelessness or dropping out of school. As shown in Figure 2, students who were economically disadvantaged represented 60% of Texas ninth graders, but made up 77% of students disciplined. Although 9% of ninth grade students across Texas are students with disabilities, almost 16% of those who were disciplined had a disability. Similarly, half of the ninth graders in Texas are considered at-risk, but almost 70% of those disciplined were at-risk. Furthermore, for economically disadvantaged students, at-risk students, and students with disabilities, as the restrictiveness of the placements increased so did the disproportionate representation of these subgroups. In the student groups with more than one DAEP and OSS assignment, students receiving special education services were overrepresented by a factor of two compared to their proportion of the ninth-grade students.

Figure 2

Texas Rates of Exclusionary Discipline for Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education and At-Risk Students

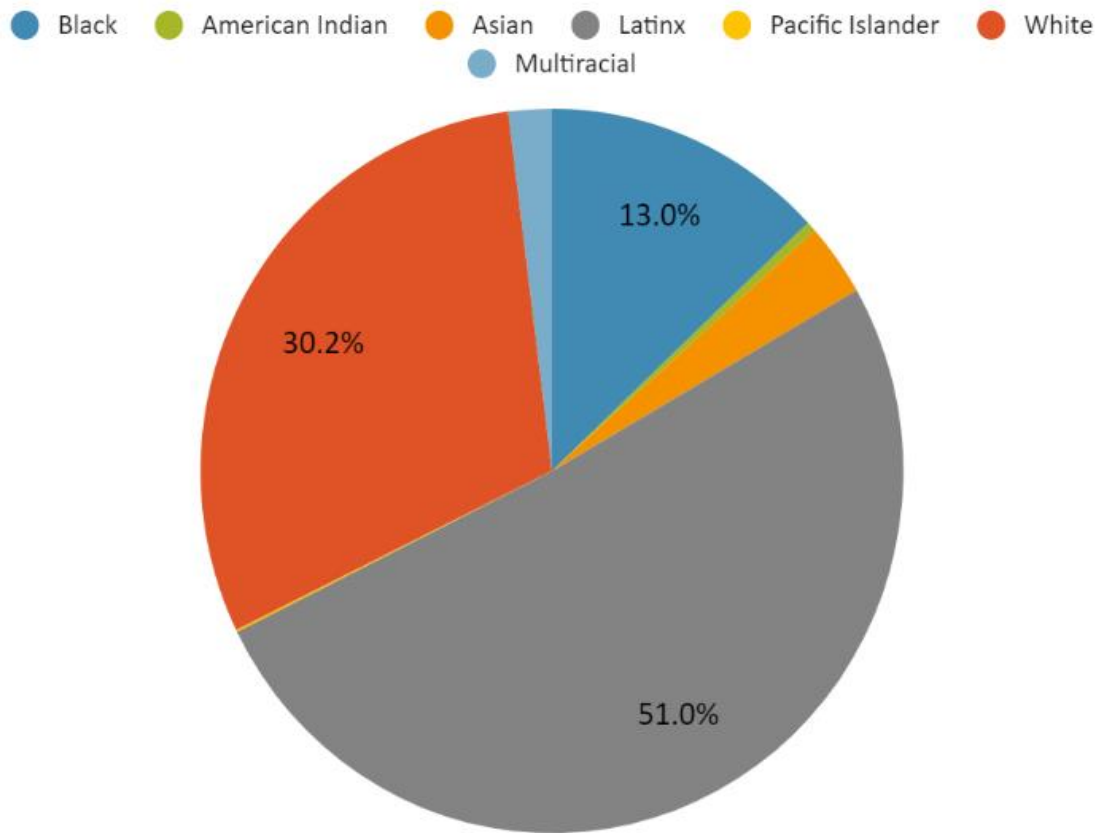


Note. Adapted from Graduation Outcomes for Ninth Graders Placed in ISS, OSS, or DAEP Once or More received from TEA on January 24, 2020 in response to Texas Public Information Act.

Discipline rates by race/ethnicity. Black and Latinx students, compared to the general student population shown in Figure 3, were overrepresented in receiving ISS, OSS and DAEP assignments both once and more than once in their ninth-grade years. Conversely, as shown in Figure 4, White students were underrepresented in every discipline category. Only Black, Latinx, and White students are included in the data analysis below because the sample size was obscured because of FERPA requirements in the data set

Figure 3

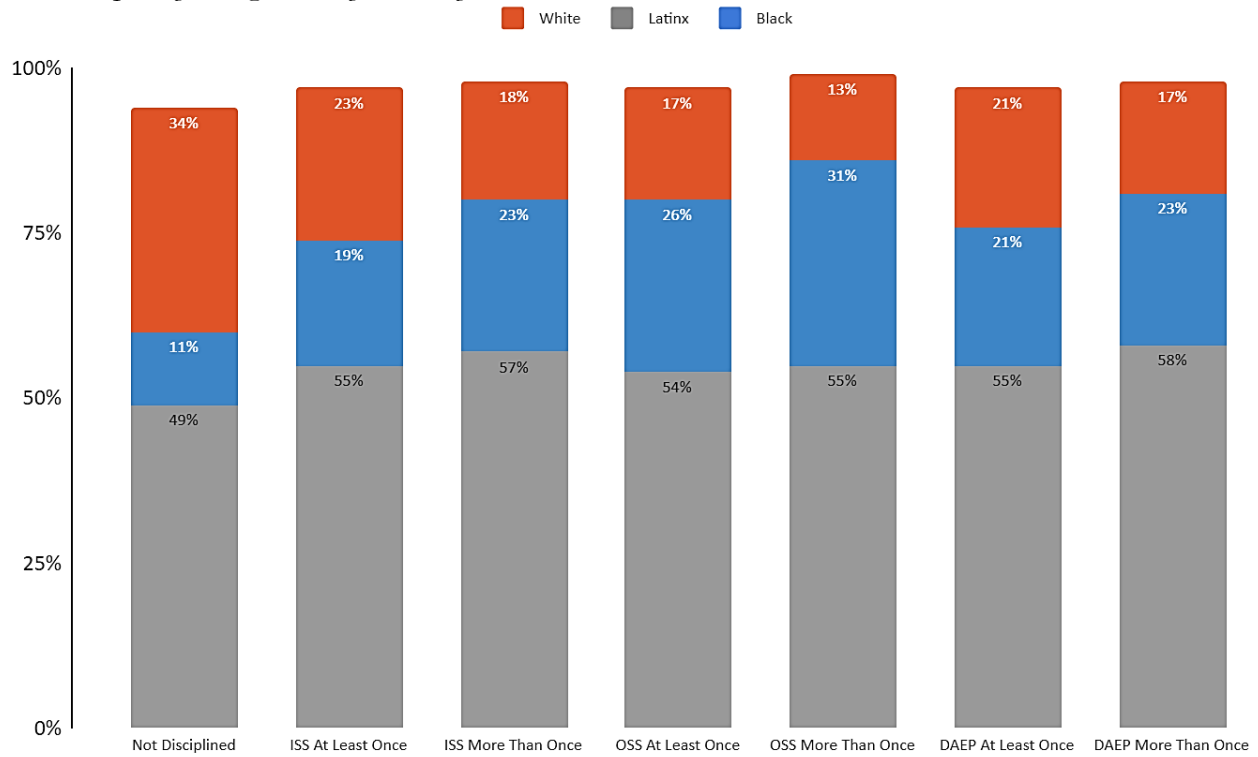
2011-2015 Texas Ninth Grade Population by Race/Ethnicity



Note. Adapted from Texas Education Agency. (2016). *Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2015–16* (GE17 601 04). Retrieved from https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/enroll_2015-16.pdf

Figure 4

Total Disciplinary Assignments by Ethnicity



Note. Adapted from Graduation Outcomes for Ninth Graders Placed in ISS, OSS, or DAEP Once or More received from TEA on January 24, 2020 in response to Texas Public Information Act.

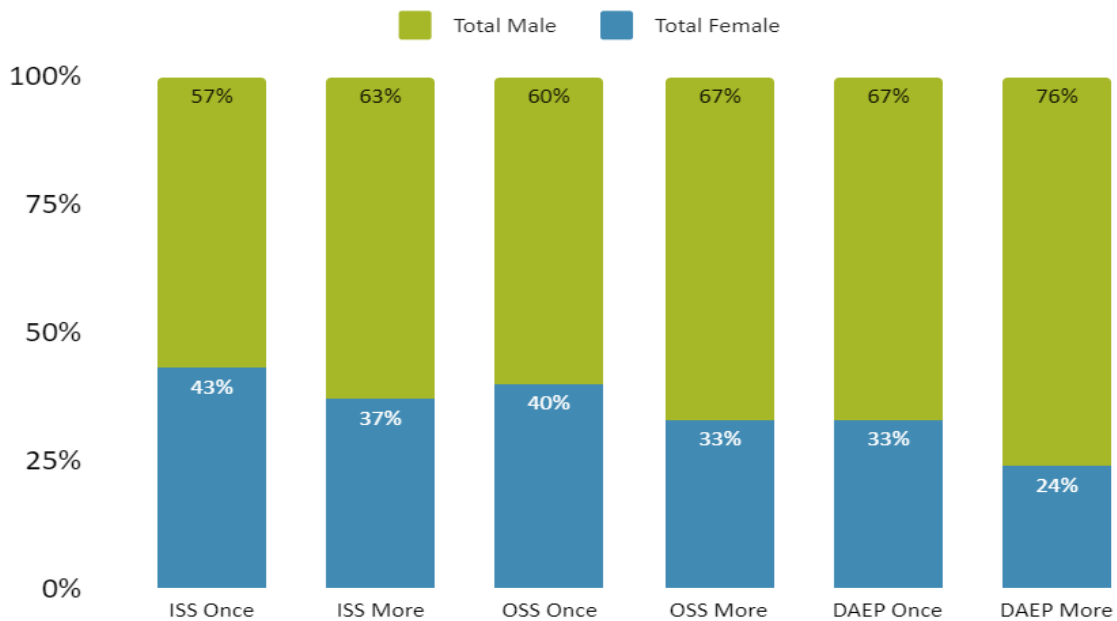
White students made up about 30% of Texas ninth-grade students, but 23% or less of students disciplined. Black and Latinx students made up higher percentages of students with more than one discipline action in their ninth-grade year. Out of all ninth-grade students, Latinx students made up 51% of students during the time of this study, yet 54% of students assigned to ISS once and 57% of students assigned more than once to ISS were Latinx. Black students made up 11% of the Texas ninth grade population but made up 26% of students assigned to OSS once and 31% of the students assigned to OSS more than once. Conversely, lower percentages of White students had multiple disciplinary assignments. White students made up 30% of the ninth-grade population yet were only 21% of students assigned to DAEP once and 17% of students assigned more than once.

Not only did Black and Latinx students represent a higher proportion of students who were disciplined more than once, but as the restrictiveness of discipline increased from ISS to OSS to DAEP, so did the disproportionality of Black and Latinx students. Latinx students made up 54% of students assigned to ISS, but 58% of students assigned to DAEP. Similarly, Black students made up 19% of students assigned to ISS, but 22% of students assigned to DAEP. White students made up 23% of students assigned to ISS and only 21% of students assigned to DAEP, showing a proportional decrease in their assignments as the type of discipline becomes more exclusionary. Out of all discipline categories, OSS had the most disproportionate assignments for Black and Latinx students.

Discipline Rates by Gender. On average, 48.6% of Texas students in each cohort studied were assigned female, and 51.4% were identified as male. This balance drastically changed when looking at gender among students assigned to exclusionary discipline. Across all grade levels, the gender division that the data showed in those who were assigned to ISS, OSS, or DAEP in Texas was 30% female and 70% male (TEA, 2020). In the graduating cohort data, there is a higher proportion of male students disciplined as shown in Figure 5. Male students are overrepresented in every category of discipline, but male overrepresentation is more dramatic in multiple assignments than in single assignments. Furthermore, female students are least present in multiple OSS and multiple DAEP assignments.

Figure 5

Texas Discipline Rates - Ninth Graders by Gender



Note. Discipline assignments by gender, Texas Public Schools, 2011–2015. Adapted from Graduation Outcomes for Ninth Graders Placed in ISS, OSS, or DAEP Once or More received from TEA on January 24, 2020 in response to Texas Public Information Act request.

Summary of findings. Using student demographic information in analyzing assignments to ISS, OSS, and DAEP, this study showed that groups of students who have been historically marginalized in the education system were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than other groups of students. Students who were disciplined with exclusionary action were more likely to be male, Black, Latinx, at-risk, low income, or enrolled in special education programming. The more restrictive the form of exclusionary discipline category, the more disproportionality was present in each cohort year.

Limitations

The data set used in this study had several limitations. The first is that exclusionary discipline is one of many factors and variables that impact students' graduation rates, so we cannot determine the extent to which discipline alone is associated with graduation. Second, the data set used did not account for students who were assigned to different types of exclusionary discipline in the same year or students who were not first time ninth graders. This means some students may have been counted more than once in the data and others may have been included in the total population, but not the disciplined populations. Third, the data were shared as a report of averages of students, not individual data points. This data limited the types of analysis available to understand the information.

Discussion

Ninth grade has been established as a critical year for high school success in previous research, and this research adds to the literature showing the negative relationship between exclusionary discipline in ninth grade and graduation rates (Allensworth, 2013). Across Texas, students who were not disciplined had higher four-year graduation rates than did students who were disciplined. In all discipline categories, students who were disciplined graduated at lower rates than the state four-year average. Students in their ninth-grade year who had only one disciplinary assignment had higher four-year graduation rates than peers who experienced more than one assignment. The percentage of students graduating in four years dropped 20 percentage points from one assignment to more than one assignment across ISS, OSS, and DAEP. The decrease in graduation rates emphasizes the need to question the use of exclusionary discipline more than once in the same year as a form of behavior intervention. When looking at graduation rate by type of exclusionary discipline and demographic, students across all demographic groups assigned multiple times to DAEPs graduated at the lowest rates, aligning with previous research around the impact of exclusionary discipline used for ninth graders (Balfanz et al., 2014).

As found in other research, ninth-grade students who were disciplined were more likely to be Black, Latinx, and multiracial than were the sample who were not disciplined (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). This reflects the statewide and nationwide patterns of overrepresentation for Black and Latinx students in disciplinary assignments (Fabelo et al., 2011). In this study, Black and Latinx students, compared to the general population, were overrepresented in receiving ISS, OSS and DAEP assignments both once and more than once in their ninth-grade years across Texas. Lower percentages of white students had multiple disciplinary assignments. This reflects previous research showing that Black and Latinx students are disciplined more harshly and more often than their White counterparts (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Students with disabilities, students at-risk, and students who qualified as economically disadvantaged were overrepresented in the discipline analyses when compared to the general student population. Furthermore, for these students, the more restrictive the discipline assignment, the more disproportionality existed. This highlights the intersectional experience of students who are already at the margins of the educational experience being pushed further from opportunity through these exclusionary methods. These data emphasize the overrepresentation of vulnerable students in ninth-grade discipline rates, pointing to a bigger question about why and how exclusionary discipline is used in schools.

Finally, male students were overrepresented in every discipline category. The disproportionality follows the same pattern as other student characteristics discussed above. Male students made up 73% of students assigned to DAEP more than once, the most disproportional representation of all disciplinary actions. Previous research echoes these patterns in gender differences, showing the disparate impacts that exclusionary discipline has on Black male students (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). The data show that some students are more likely to be removed from their classroom and school than others.

Implications for Policy Makers

Students who are disciplined with exclusionary methods in ninth grade have lower rates of four-year graduation. Considering the state's goal of having 60% of students with a post-secondary credential by 2030, the use of exclusionary discipline could be a barrier to meeting this goal, specifically for the groups of students who are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline based on their identities. These findings suggest that students in Texas who are disciplined via ISS, OSS, or DAEP in their ninth-grade year should be flagged for extra interventions and drop out preventions to support them in reaching the goal of four-year graduation. Policymakers may consider the disparate impact that the use of exclusionary discipline can have on specific groups of students who are more likely to experience discipline as they create guidelines, policy, and laws that either promote or hinder the use of these tools in schools because of their potential impact on graduation rates for students. The legislation proposed in the 87th session of the Texas legislature focused on implementing restorative programming that prompts students to talk about the underlying issue that caused the behavior, and to find ways to make things right with the harmed party. These restorative conversations can look like peer mediation, student conferences, or restitution circles, and have been shown in emerging research to reduce recidivism and assignments to exclusionary discipline (Rodriguez, 2007; Wilson et al., 2017; Anyon et al., 2016). Connecting the dots between the use of exclusionary discipline and accountability measures is an important step in considering the overall impact of discipline systems on the whole child.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of in-class learning and a new wave of bills addressing exclusionary discipline entered the 87th Texas legislature, critically examining the use of discipline in schools is extremely timely. Students assigned to DAEPs in their ninth-grade year had lower rates of graduation than students experiencing other forms of discipline. Furthermore, the data shows the overrepresentation of Latinx and Black students when it comes to the more exclusionary discipline assignments. Healthy graduation rates are a foundation of a healthy economy in Texas, as the state faces growing challenges. As leaders create new rules and expectations to meet health guidelines, educators and practitioners should examine their use of exclusionary discipline to understand the long-term consequences of its implementation.

Dr. Kristian Lenderman is a former educator who supports teachers and school leaders in building inclusive and just learning environments. Her research focuses broadly on school climate, equity, and teacher training. She received her Ed.D. from the University of Houston in 2020.

Dr. Jacqueline Hawkins currently serves as the Special Populations Ed.D. Program Lead in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Houston. Dr. Hawkins' research focuses on prevention and intervention work for educators and parents who engage with students in applied contexts across the education pipeline. She engages a systems change approach to research professional development, transition support, and early interventions for students who strive for better outcomes.

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