



# PreK-2 Suspension Ban: How are elementary schools adapting to the policy change?

## Discussions With Four Elementary School Principals

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) board of trustees approved a change to the district's disciplinary policy in February 2017, whereby students in prekindergarten (pre-K) through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade shall not be suspended unless deemed a serious safety risk to themselves or others. The board stated the change was intended to encourage more equitable and supportive disciplinary practices.

To better understand how schools are adapting to the suspension ban, the Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted interviews with principals at four AISD elementary schools. Schools were chosen based on participation in training for Culturally Responsive Restorative Practices (CRRP) and Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI). CRRP is a framework for building relationships, addressing conflict, repairing harm, and improving school climate through an equity-focused and culturally responsive lens. TBRI is an attachment-based framework rooted in empowerment, connection, and correction that helps adults work with youth trauma. Additional discussions with program specialists and district leaders indicated that the mission, values, and practices of these schools were well aligned with the district's goal of implementing nonpunitive disciplinary practices as a means of improving school climate and equity. Demographically, these schools are more ethnically diverse than the district average, with a relatively greater percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged, English language learner, or special education.

Interviews were largely guided with the following questions: What resources, programs, methods, or techniques are useful when responding to students' behavioral needs? What challenges do schools continue to face? What can be done to better meet students' behavioral needs and improve equity and school climate?

## What themes emerged from the principal interviews?

### Importance of Mindset

Principals emphasized the importance of internalizing a mindset rooted in respect, empathy, humanity, and compassion for students, families, staff, and the self. A natural byproduct of this mindset is the belief that **punitive discipline is not an effective tool for changing behavior, as most misbehavior is the product of trauma**. Multiple principals emphasized the irrationality of sending a student back to the environment where the trauma likely occurred. Without additional supports in place outside of school, principals believed suspensions are unlikely to elicit an enduring change in behavior. This context further necessitates acceptance of the idea that **there is no single solution to addressing students' behavioral needs**. Staff must be committed to seeing every student as a unique human being who is affected by every interaction with staff members, and understanding that the process of working through trauma is incremental and lifelong.

### Circles

Principals indicated that **circles** are a regular practice among staff and students. Circles

are a simple concept: staff and students sit together in a circle for an informal discussion, wherein one person speaks at a time while all others listen. Sometimes circles are held as a method of checking in with students or staff members, without a particular topic or goal. Such informal circles are intended to provide everyone with an opportunity to speak in a forum where others know they should listen attentively, which allows everyone to get to know each other better and strengthens feelings of community, trust, and safety. Principals said this type of circle also served as an effective tool for brainstorming and collaboration between staff members. Principals indicated that staff and students largely enjoy the informal communal circle. Staff circles served as a good opportunity for modeling the activity and gaining buy-in with teachers, who can take the practice into the classroom as a means of building relationships with students and encouraging student voice.

Circles are also used to repair harm, such as when one student does something hurtful to another. This type of circle generally involves the relevant student(s) and some combination of the principal, assistant principal, or counselor, depending on who is available. Parents are asked to participate at the discretion of the principal. Principals believed that circles conducted to repair harm were effective as a short-term tool for responding to harm, but generally ineffective in supporting long-term change, without additional support.

### Building Relationships With Students and Staff

Principals emphasized the importance of building relationships with students, with a particular focus on students who have experienced trauma. Indeed, one of the major challenges has been encouraging teachers to get to know students with trauma-related behavioral needs. Due to the absence of an appropriate space on school grounds for these students to deescalate, students spend a substantial amount of time with front office staff. Principals said that the process of establishing a trusting relationship with these students resulted in positive behavioral changes, as students felt safe, respected, and cared for. **The challenge from the principals' perspective was encouraging teachers to change their mindset regarding the administration of discipline.** Principals felt that teachers too frequently sent students to the office for minor infractions, thereby preventing students from remaining in the learning environment, and moreover, inhibiting feelings of trust and closeness between teacher and student. As an alternative, principals wanted teachers to feel appropriately skilled to manage students' behavior. Consequently, teachers and principals welcome more **practical professional development opportunities** (e.g., TBRI) focused on classroom management with students who have experienced trauma, as well as ongoing feedback with respect to their own instructional practices.

Two crucial components to establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with students are **intention** and **consistency**. The inherent power dynamic of the student-teacher relationship means that every interaction has the potential to have a significant impact on the student, without the teacher fully realizing that impact. As such, **adopting a mindset that is conscious of one's influence, biases, privilege, and triggers is crucial to effectively building healthy relationships with students.**

### Self-Awareness and Self-Care

One prerequisite to building healthy relationships with students, according to principals, is the necessity of cultivating an enhanced self-awareness of one's own biases, triggers,

## What is the suspension ban?

In February 2017, the AISD board of trustees approved changes to the district's student disciplinary policy to prohibit any home suspension, placement in alternative education program, or expulsion for students below 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, except "when required by law or for behavior that represents a clear and present danger of physical injury to the student, other students or school personnel" (AISD board of trustees, 2017).

The board stated that the policy change was intended to support the implementation of nonpunitive disciplinary practices and to create a more responsive, supportive learning environment. The press release stated that "additional staff will support campuses as they address discipline challenges and students' behavior skill development, and will deliver professional learning to campus administrators and teachers."

The press release can be found on the AISD [website](#)

privilege, and past trauma(s). Each of these factors has the potential to significantly influence interactions with students, so working to understand one's self can provide a stronger foundation on which to build relationships with students. Additionally, just as staff members are expected to act with compassion, empathy, and respect for others, they should likewise be intentional in their efforts to care for the self. As one principal stated, "You can't serve from an empty platter." In other words, **it is unwise to expect educators to effectively build relationships with students if they have not engaged in a process of self-reflection, self-acceptance, and self-care.**

**"When you know better, you do better. So if you want people to do better, train them. Acknowledge their hardship and struggle, and provide not just the training but the follow-up support."**

### **Focus on Prevention / Preemption**

Principals discussed the necessity of incorporating more preventive and preemptive efforts (e.g., TBRI) when working with students who have trauma-related behavioral needs. The current approach is largely reactive, whereby a student acts out, and a specialist or coach visits the campus, when available, to help the child get back into the classroom. Once the child returns to the classroom, the specialist or coach leaves to work with students at other schools. **Principals were unanimous in their opinion that such specialists and coaches were effective and helpful but were frequently not available when needed, and that such a reactionary approach failed to properly address students' underlying needs. Principals believed that more consistent, intentional work is needed, such as that done by a full-time licensed mental health professional (LMHP), to properly care for students who have experienced trauma.**

### **Need for Full-time, On-Campus Resources, Staffing, and Support**

Principals were unanimous in their desire for additional staffing (e.g., full-time assistant principal or parent support specialist) and program support (e.g., Communities in Schools or Families as Partners). Principals believed that additional staffing and program support would better help school administration respond to students' behavioral needs. More specifically, program support would help build relationships with families, whereas additional staffing would provide greater flexibility to provide adequate care and support at school.

Understanding the current financial limitations of the district, principals were realistic in their expectations regarding additional support; however, they nonetheless believed a full-time LMHP assigned to one or two campuses would be of great benefit to students who had experienced trauma. Principals emphasized that the percentage of students with significant trauma-related behavioral needs at their respective schools is small (i.e., fewer than five students per campus), but the time and energy necessary to adequately care for these students was a significant burden to the overall administration of the school. **Given the limited number of front office staff available to respond, as well as the absence of an appropriate space for de-escalation and support, it remains a substantial burden when the principal, assistant principal, or counselor is expected to push aside normal duties to provide care and support to a single student, sometimes for hours at a time.** Moreover, some principal were concerned that counselors were frequently pulled into a role that could be perceived by students as disciplinary, due to the principal or assistant principal not being available. They felt that such role confusion could be a significant barrier to establishing and maintaining trust.

**"It's a very real struggle. I think it's very difficult for most people to imagine the impact even one 6-year-old can have on a classroom, but it is a very real struggle."**

### **Desire for Greater External Support With District Initiatives and Mandates**

Principals felt that support for district initiatives was sufficient in the early stages but waned over time, leaving schools with an additional administrative requirement without a corresponding increase in resources or support. **Principals believed that consistent, ongoing support from district leaders would help them better understand**

**how to achieve district-related goals and requirements. More importantly, it would reassure school staff that district leaders were committed to their success.** Indeed, one principal expressed feeling helpless to respond to every district mandate, without a substantial increase in resources or support, referring to their school as a “resource desert.”

## What are the next steps?

### Strategic Focus on Helping Students With Trauma

More strategic efforts to provide consistent, ongoing support to students who have experienced trauma by LMHPs and behavioral specialists would alleviate the burden placed on school administration. Expansion of community- and parent-based engagement programs would also help triangulate support for students outside school.

### Focus on Prevention

A holistic approach that balances preventive and responsive efforts would more effectively help students work through trauma and keep them in the classroom. Ongoing support from community- and parent-based engagement programs would ensure the greater likelihood of consistent, ongoing support for the students who need it most.

### Practical Professional Development Opportunities

A simplified, practical approach to strengthening teachers’ classroom management skills, with specific emphasis on students with trauma-related behavioral needs, would reduce the burden placed on school administration to handle disciplinary matters. Follow-up feedback and support from instructional coaches would strengthen this foundation and help school staff internalize the practical relevance of learned methods and techniques.

### Consistent District Support

District support must be consistent and sustained. As mentioned earlier, principals believed there is no single solution to addressing students’ behavioral needs, meaning that district programs and initiatives must be comprehensively supported over time. Clear and intentional communication from district leaders regarding the availability and relevance of district programs and resources would also reassure schools and increase the likelihood of use.

## Conclusion

There remains significant room for improving equity and school climate in AISD schools. The suspension ban highlighted the necessity of providing greater support to children who have experienced trauma and may require more support than their classmates. Unfortunately, the principals at these elementary schools believed that the current system places an excessive burden on school staff to properly care for these students, and that existing support systems are not sufficiently comprehensive to properly help these students process their trauma. By adopting a more strategic, intentional, and comprehensive approach to students’ trauma-related behavioral needs, AISD can create an environment where all can learn and grow together.

**Sixty-seven students in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 79% of whom were Black or Hispanic males, were suspended 181 times during the 2016–2017 school year (i.e., partial or full, at-home or in-school suspension).**



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June 2018

Publication 17.26