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Time for Change? Educators' Perceptions of Discipline Reform in Their Schools

Beginning in the late 1980s, policymakers concerned about violence in schools began to enact “zero-tolerance” policies in districts and states across the country. These policies mandated the use of exclusionary discipline for several behaviors, including such less serious offenses as classroom disruption and dress-code violations.¹ The efficacy of exclusionary discipline has been challenged, given longstanding concerns that schools’ safety and discipline policies and practices do not create safe and supportive learning environments for all students; empirical evidence demonstrating persistent disparities in school discipline; and the negative consequences of harsh discipline practices on several student, teacher, and school outcomes.² Over the past few years, the state policy landscape has begun to dramatically shift away from exclusionary discipline in response to both local and federal pressure.³ As of 2015, 22 states and the District of Columbia had revised their laws to move away from a reliance on exclusionary discipline practices and toward more-supportive interventions to address behavioral and safety challenges in schools.⁴ Although the momentum across states and large urban districts appears to be shifting away from more-punitive forms of discipline, the position of the Trump administration remains unclear. Officials at the U.S. Department of Education recently announced their

Data from the RAND Corporation’s web-based American Educator Panels (AEP) provide insight into teachers’ and principals’ perceptions of the need for discipline reform in their schools. We used the survey to ask a nationally representative sample of teachers and principals to select the top three interventions that they think are most important for students in their respective schools.¹ Respondents were given 13 options; we restrict our analysis to secondary-school teachers and principals, as only they were presented with this full range of options.

¹ An *intervention* was broadly defined in the survey as a targeted program and/or strategy to support student outcomes. Respondents were asked to “select the top three interventions that you think are most important for your students in your school.”

¹ Skiba and Losen, 2016.

² Barrett et al., 2017; Davis and Jordan, 1994; Fabelo et al., 2011; Rausch and Skiba, 2005; Steinberg, Allensworth, and Johnson, 2013; Steinberg and Lacoé, 2017.

³ Skiba and Losen, 2016; Steinberg and Lacoé, 2017.

⁴ Steinberg and Lacoé, 2017.

intention to revisit some Obama-era guidelines on reducing disparities in school discipline amid concerns that these federal guidelines too severely limit local decisionmaking.⁵

Given the rapidly changing policy landscape and the central role of teachers and principals as implementers of reform, it is important to understand whether educators prioritize discipline reform in their own schools and whether role type (i.e., teacher, principal) and school poverty are related to respondents' likelihood to prioritize discipline reform. Differences in prioritization between teachers and principals may be driven, in part, by the process of discipline, as it is often initiated by teachers, then escalated to school administrators. School poverty is also an important factor, given evidence of higher rates of serious disciplinary action in high-poverty schools.⁶

Many Secondary-School Educators Identified Discipline Reform as Very Important

Discipline reform was identified as one of the top three most important interventions by 31 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals (see the figures in the Appendix for teachers' and principals'

⁵ Ujifusa, 2017; Blad and Klein, 2018.

⁶ Musu-Gillette et al., 2018.

general ranking of top-three interventions among the 13 options).⁷ We did not find this teacher-principal difference to be statistically significant.

Teachers in High-Poverty Schools More Likely to Prioritize Discipline Reform

We find that secondary-school teachers were more likely to identify discipline reform as a top-three issue than secondary-school principals, although this difference was not statistically significant. Secondary-school teachers and principals in high-poverty schools were more likely than those in low-poverty schools to identify discipline reform as a top-three important intervention, as illustrated in Figure 1.⁸ Although this difference was statistically significant when we conducted a simple comparison between educators from schools with different poverty levels, the difference diminished after controlling for numerous school-, district-, and state-level variables.⁹

⁷ Discipline reform was third highest among the 12 evidence-based reforms in the survey, excluding the "other" alternative.

⁸ This difference was significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

⁹ The control variables included student racial/ethnic demographics, location (city, suburban, town, rural), school size, school level, eligibility and provision of a schoolwide Title I program, district percentage of students with disabilities and English-language learners, educator tenure (in role and in role at current school), educator demographics including gender and race/ethnicity, and state fixed effects.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

We estimated weighted cross-tabulations of teacher and principal responses indicating discipline reform as a top-three intervention. We also estimated weighted cross-tabulations of educator responses (teacher and principal responses collapsed) across poverty levels (using an ordinal variable to indicate one of four quartiles of poverty level) and school level (elementary, middle, or high school).

We also conducted supplemental analyses that included many additional covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.¹

¹ These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity; percentage free and reduced-price lunch; percentage white, black, and Hispanic; school size; an indicator for elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language-learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

Discussion

Although large shares of educators indicated a need to prioritize discipline reform as an intervention for their schools (among the given options), it remains unclear *why* they identified discipline reform as one of the top three interventions needed for their schools. The neutral framing of the option leaves room for interpretation among respondents. In other words, it seems equally plausible that an educator selecting discipline reform might desire *more*-exclusionary discipline practices at his or her school;

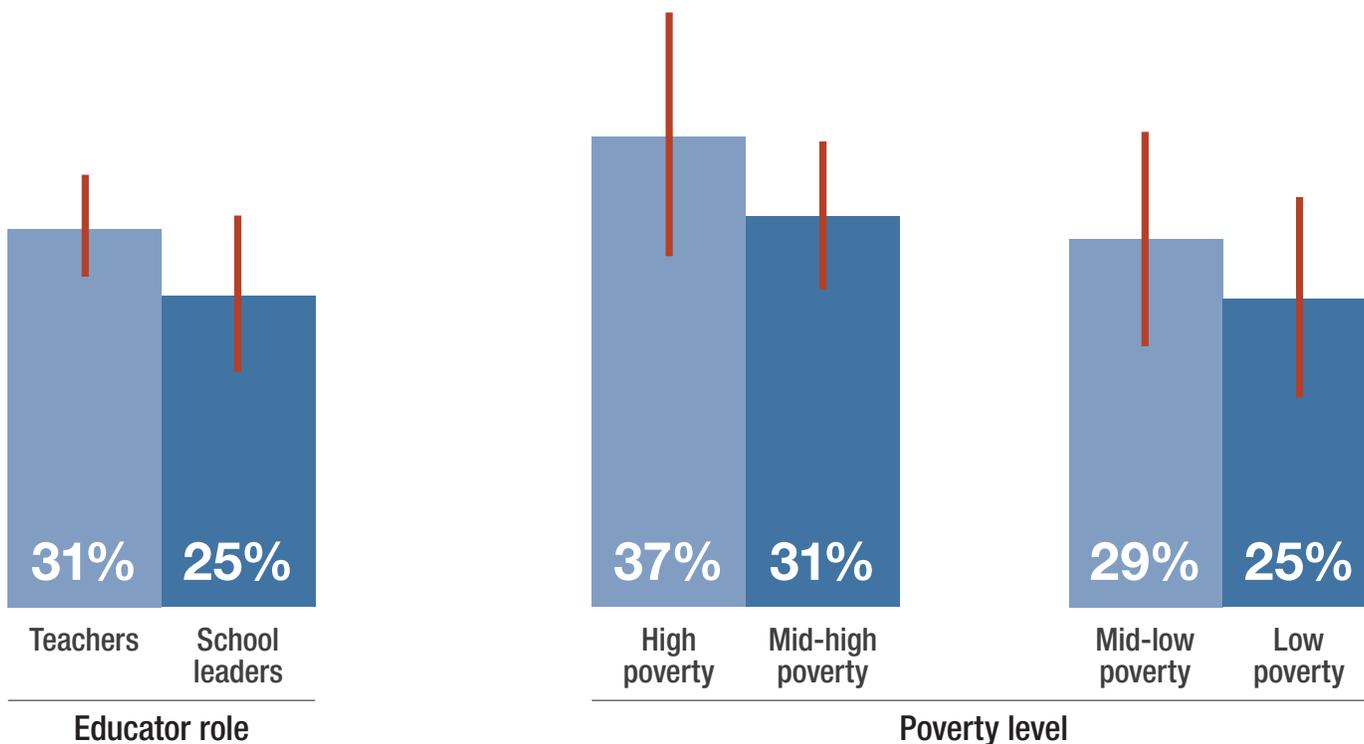
alternatively, educators may be signaling a desire for different types of approaches to discipline altogether (e.g., restorative practices). Moreover, it is important to note that survey respondents identified three important interventions from a nonexhaustive list of 13 options (including an “other,” write-in option). This list did not include many evidence-based interventions that teachers and school leaders may be likely to indicate a need for (e.g., curriculum materials, supports for family engagement).

Although these results do not generate clear insight on educator preferences surrounding

FIGURE 1

Educators in High-Poverty Schools Were Most Interested in Discipline Reform

Weighted Shares of Educators Selecting Discipline Reform as One of the Top Three Interventions Important for Their Schools



NOTE: Weighted means for poverty level include both teacher and principal responses. Vertical bars represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals.

approaches to student discipline, they do indicate that large shares of both teachers and school leaders prioritize discipline reform in their schools. In a 2017 review, Steinberg and Lacoé summarize the alternative discipline programs and policies that administrators, teachers, and policymakers have or are implementing, including, for example, restorative justice practices and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS).¹⁰ They find

¹⁰ Steinberg and Lacoé, 2017.

that the evidence base across most of these programs and policies is still relatively thin (with the exception of SWPBIS). As districts, schools, and teachers continue to experiment with different approaches to discipline, more research is required to provide a detailed understanding of educators’ perspectives on their efficacy.

Appendix

FIGURE 2

Weighted Shares of Teachers Selecting Interventions as One of the Top Three Interventions Important for Their Schools

Identified as Top-Three Intervention Among Teachers

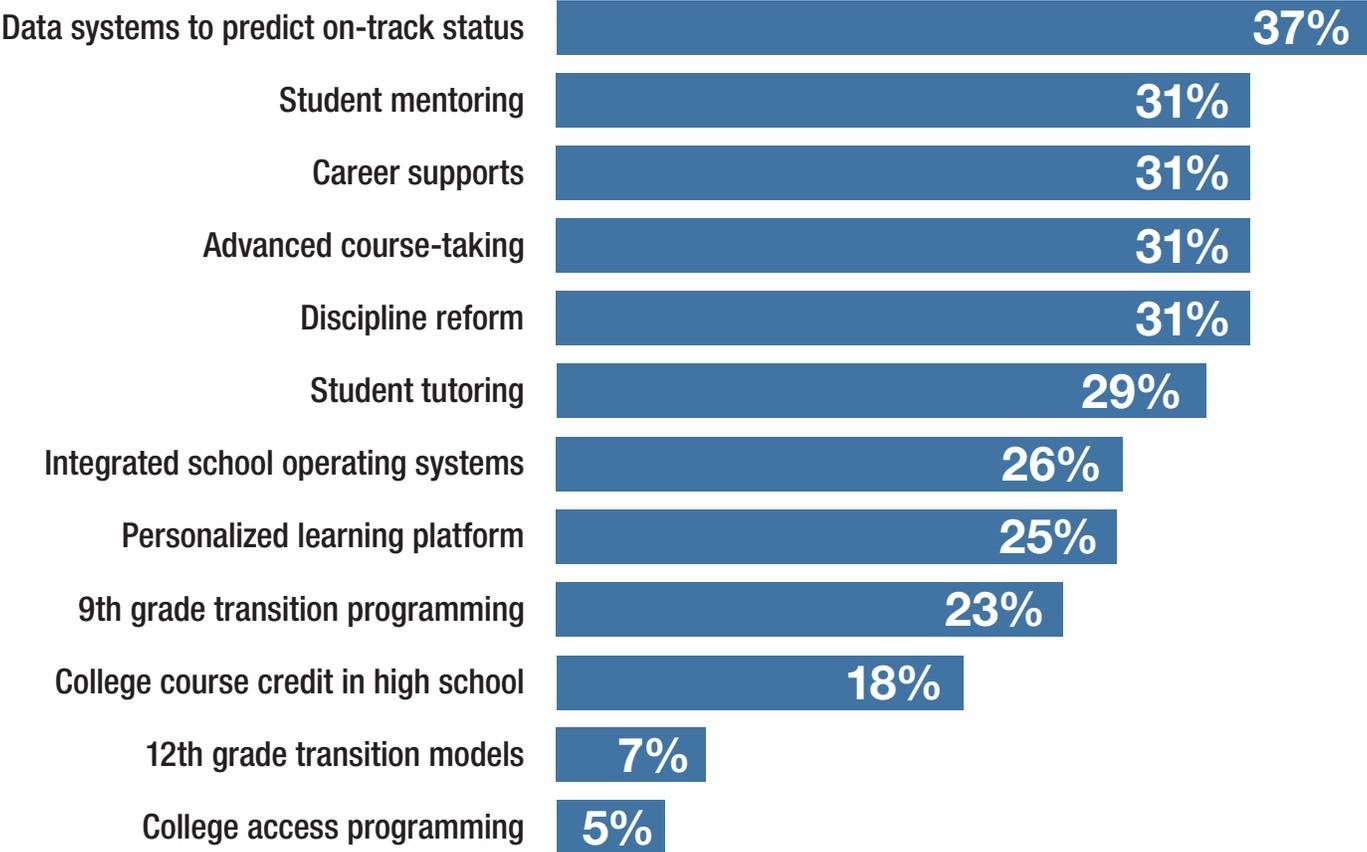
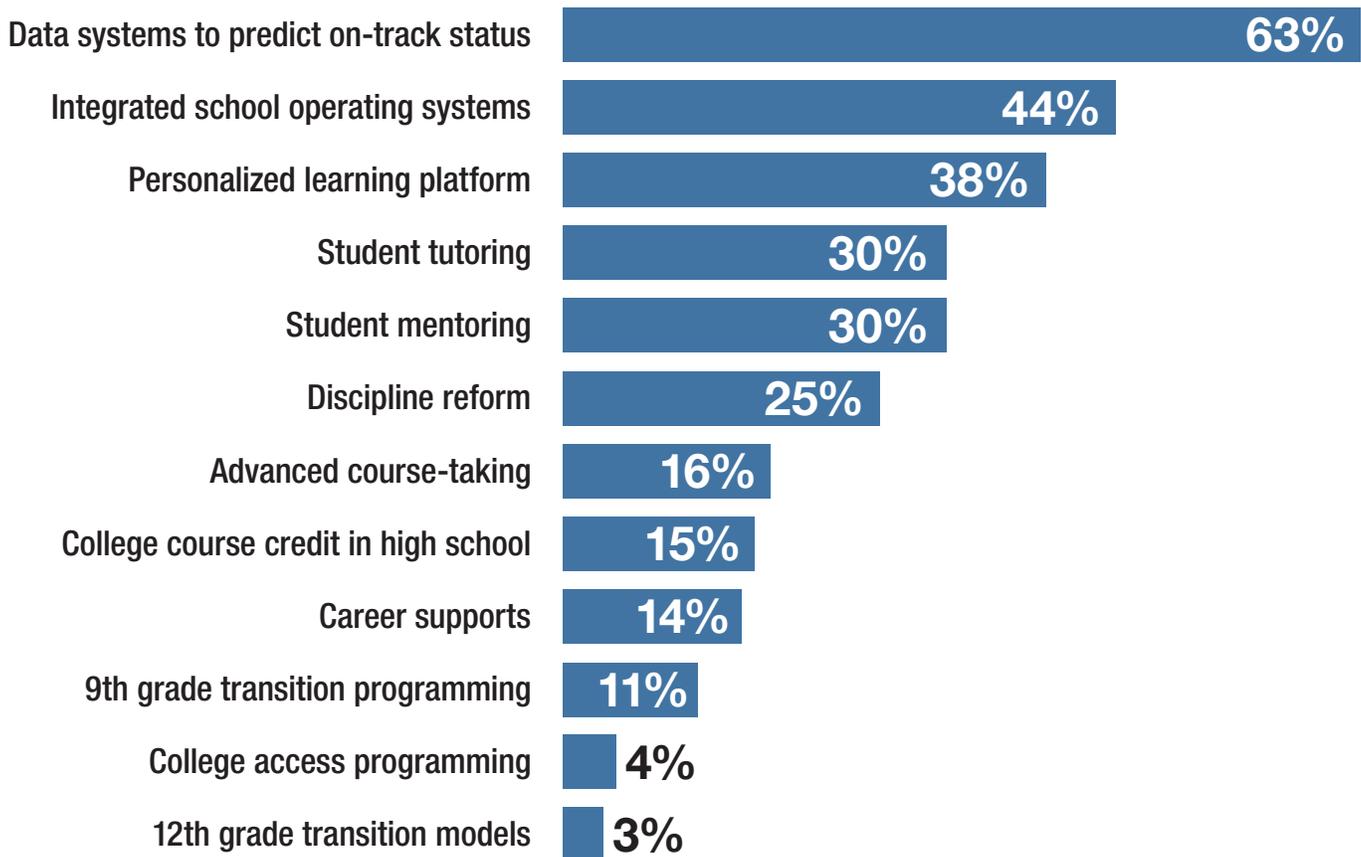


FIGURE 3

Weighted Shares of Principals Selecting Interventions as One of the Top Three Interventions Important for Their Schools

Identified as Top-Three Intervention Among Principals



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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

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