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## Discipline, Disparity, and Diplomas: Suspension and Grade Retention in a Southeastern State

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**Discipline, Disparity, and Diplomas: Suspension and Grade Retention in a Southeastern  
State**

A DISSERTATION  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Coastal Carolina University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Coastal Carolina University

Conway, SC

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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Suzanne Horn

### Abstract

This study was designed to explore how race and gender impact student success in a southeastern state. A mixed-methods design was implemented so that the quantitative data could be further explained and explored using qualitative research. The quantitative analysis was conducted using a three-factor ANOVA to analyze the number of days a student misses due to suspension and the number of grade level retentions; race, gender, and the district a student attends were used as the independent variables in the analyses. Purposive sampling and the development of a script for the qualitative interviews followed the quantitative analyses. Interviews with administrators in one district within the southeastern state were conducted to further explore the impact of race and gender on discipline and student grade level retention. The results of this study highlight the need for schools and districts to evaluate their discipline practices and explore the disparate number of males who are being retained in a grade level.

### *Keywords*

Discipline, disparity, suspension, retention

## DEDICATION

Stephen and Nellie

it has always been, and will always be, for you.

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## Introduction

Traditional discipline practices include exclusionary measures such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. These exclusionary measures result in lost instructional time for the students (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019) and are more prominent in Black populations (Balfanz et al., 2015). The disparities in school discipline procedures are prominent and widespread for Black students, males, and students with disabilities; these students are disproportionately represented in out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, referral to law enforcement, expulsions, corporal punishment, and school-related arrest (Nowicki & United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Additionally, when examining referrals by gender, Black females are more likely to be referred than White females (Morris & Perry, 2017). The type of discipline referral a student receives contributes to the disparity. Subjective office discipline referrals (ODRs) are more ambiguous, and teachers and staff decide whether the behavior will be resolved in the classroom.

Conversely, objective ODRs have specific procedures due to the potential threat of harming others or oneself with these infractions (Morris & Perry, 2017). Black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately suspended; often, these suspensions result from minor and nonviolent subjective offenses (Balfanz et al., 2015). A range of issues are perceived to contribute to this disparity: the effects of poverty, mental health issues, and trauma (Nowicki & United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). These disparities are also connected to long-term outcomes for students, such as employment and (continued) involvement with the criminal justice program (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

## **Background of the Problem**

Since the 1970s, suspension for student discipline has increased; often, the use of suspension (exclusionary discipline) for student discipline infractions is based on a zero-tolerance policy. Zero-tolerance was first introduced to the public in the 1980s when a program to impound sea vessels carrying any quantity of drugs was developed and endorsed as a national model by then U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). From this endorsement, the term zero-tolerance began to describe policies that have harsh and nonnegotiable consequences. Zero-tolerance policies entered the school systems through school discipline legislation in the 1990s and early 2000s. To improve school safety, zero-tolerance policies expanded the list of violations for which a student must be suspended or expelled (Winter, 2016). These policies resulted in students facing expulsion for more than weapons and drugs; they also faced zero-tolerance consequences for school disruption and smoking (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Zero-tolerance policies also increased the suspension and expulsion rates in the country, especially for Black students and those with disabilities (Rafa & Education Commission of the States, 2019). The increase shows disparities in school discipline between Black and White students in schools (Losen, 2013). Zero-tolerance policies may contribute to school discipline disparities (Curran, 2016), and research shows that marginalized populations are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than their peers (Anderson & Ritter, 2017).

While zero-tolerance policies still exist, several states have put limitations on mandatory exclusionary discipline and encouraged schools and districts to use alternative discipline strategies (Rafa & Education Commission of the States, 2019). A 2014 “Dear Colleague Letter” (DCL) (United States Department of Education, 2014) addressed the disparities in the administration of school discipline. Specifically, it explained that unlawful discrimination based

on race could occur “in two ways: first, if the student is subjected to different treatment based on the student’s race, and second, if a policy is neutral on its face – meaning that the policy itself does not mention race – and is administered in an evenhanded manner but has a disparate impact” (United States Department of Education, 2014). The DCL advised school districts that they could be violating the Civil Rights Act if students in subgroups were disciplined at different rates. It provided the legal framework that would be used to investigate allegations of different treatment or disparate impact (Lewis et al., 2019). In addition, the DCL provided a resource guide for improving school climate, which included sample scenarios that described how violations could occur within school discipline proceedings. In 2018, the Trump administration rescinded the DCL (Eden & Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2014), which removed federal involvement with school discipline within the United States.

Exclusionary discipline is negatively related to academic achievement (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). Black students and students with disabilities are suspended and expelled from school at more than twice the rate as other students. This disparity is seen even when the students are involved in the same type of infraction yet receive different consequences. When students are removed from the school setting for discipline purposes, they miss the opportunity to learn and engage positively in school (Lacoe et al., 2019). Exclusionary discipline practices remove students from the educational setting and have a negative impact on their academic outcomes.

The negative impacts of exclusionary discipline include decreased academic performance, increased incidence of grade retention, and higher dropout rates. These discipline measures do not include only those in the secondary setting; one in ten urban-born elementary

students experience exclusionary discipline by age nine. 40% of Black males in the demographic were removed from school for exclusionary discipline by age nine (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Over 11% of Black males are suspended before 4th grade and over 27% by 6th grade; the rate jumps to over 50% by the time a Black male is in 8th grade (Shollenberger, 2015). The disparity also impacts females; Black females are suspended more than White females, and often for more subjective offenses.

### **Statement of Problem**

Missed instructional time impacts a student's academic success; students who experience exclusionary discipline are more at risk for student grade level retention and dropping out (Marshbanks et al., 2015). A student who experiences even one day of in-school suspension (ISS) has a greater chance of student grade level retention than a student who has not. On the secondary level, research by Marshbanks et al. (2015) shows that one incidence of ISS increases the chances of retention in 11th or 12th grade by 46.2%. Grade retention is correlated with lower graduation rates; the more a student misses time in the classroom, the greater the likelihood of dropping out. The disproportionate representations of Black males in exclusionary discipline proceedings may also impact their graduation rate. For example, in a southeastern state, data revealed that in recent school years, nonwhite males dropped out at the highest rate in the state (as reported on the state department website, 2021). Determining one of the potential reasons for a student's decision to drop out of school can help districts address these rates and continue (or begin) the work to improve them.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to determine if there are disparities in discipline proceedings for Black students enrolled in southeastern high schools. It also aims to examine the impact of gender and

race on discipline referrals within the state. To further understand the impact of school discipline, if disparities are found in the school discipline, data analysis will be run to determine if there is a statistically significant interaction between the disparities and grade level retention for Black students. Additionally, interviews with administrators in one district will be conducted to explore how schools and districts manage student discipline and if they hope to implement any changes in the future.

### Research Questions

1. Do race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed because of suspension for students?
2. Do race, gender, and district impact the number of student grade level retentions?

### Significance of Study

This study is designed to determine if there are disparities in one southeastern state's school discipline. A mixed-method design is used in this study to take the analysis from school discipline proceedings and determine what schools are doing to respond to student behavior and discipline. Racial disparity in a school's discipline impacts a student's post-secondary outcomes; students who are removed from the classroom are more likely to drop out than their non-suspended peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). Dropping out of school without receiving a high school diploma can impact an individual's chances of employment, income, health status, and housing opportunities (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Even if a suspended student graduates, there are still negative outcomes connected to a suspension in 7-12th grade. These students are more likely to experience criminal victimization, criminal activity, and incarceration (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). When students are regularly removed from the academic setting, it can also negatively impact non-suspended students. Students feel alienated when they attend schools with high security and

excessive student suspensions (Finn & Servoss, 2015). As a result of the negative outcomes of exclusionary discipline, many districts have implemented alternatives for those procedures that unnecessarily take the student out of his/her learning environment (Nowicki & United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). The traditional discipline practices are being replaced with efforts to change a school's culture and decrease the number of exclusionary discipline incidents. There are evidence-based programs that reduce disciplinary exclusion and work to narrow the discipline gap (Losen, 2015).

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be defined:

**Pushed out:** Students who are pushed out of school commonly leave because of circumstances connected to the school setting. For example, students who are recommended for alternative schools because of behavior may choose to drop out rather than move schools (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011).

**Pulled out:** Reasons attributed to "pull out" include family responsibilities that cause a student to leave school; These often include taking care of siblings and/or other family members.

Additionally, this phrase also can refer to the difficulty for some students to be in school rather than earn a paycheck by working during those school hours (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

**Black:** Inclusive language requires choosing the appropriate words when we discuss individuals and/or groups. To honor this inclusion, this research study categorizes students as Black unless specified by the research or by an individual as African American. The University of South Carolina Aiken recently provided their community with an inclusive language guide. The university states: "Black and African American are not always interchangeable. Some

individuals prefer the term Black because they do not identify as African and/or American” (University of South Carolina Aiken, n.d.).

Drop out: “A student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a high school diploma or transferring to another school with a known exit reason” (Weaver-Randall et al., 2018).

Exclusionary discipline: includes anything that removes the child from the regular school setting on a permanent or temporary basis (Gerlinger et al., 2021).

Zero tolerance: Punitive and nonnegotiable discipline proceedings for certain infractions. Many of these resulted from the 1994 Guns Free America Act that mandated exclusionary disciplinary repercussions for bringing a weapon on public school property. Zero Tolerance policies mandate specifically predetermined (and often punitive) consequences regardless of the circumstances or any other mitigating circumstances (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Graduation rates: This is the percentage of students who complete high school, not to include alternative diploma pathways (Rumberger, 2011).

Discipline gap: The discipline gap refers to “large disparities in disciplinary exclusion that flow along the lines of race, gender, and disability status” (Losen, 2015, p.1).

Achievement gap: The academic outcomes for students that are historically disadvantaged by their race, disability status, or language (Losen, 2015).

Disparate impact: group-based differences in outcomes (Sullivan et al., 2014).

Office Discipline Referral (ODR): The referral is what a staff member writes up to describe the student incident. The information and process that goes with the referral can vary by school.

Student Grade Level Retention: Students need certain course credits to advance to the next grade level. When students fail these courses, they are retained in their current grade level and must repeat the course.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Delimitations: The graduation rate for Black students in one southeastern state is 9.8% lower than the graduation rate for Black males in the state. The state categorizes its data by nonwhite male, nonwhite female, White male, and White female. In the state, nonwhite males drop out at a higher rate than any other demographic. This study is focused on Black students in this demographic to determine if discipline disparities contribute to the lower graduation rate. Additionally, this research seeks to determine if alternative discipline policies/programs are being used to help address disparities.

Limitations: This study is limited in focusing on four districts in a southeastern state whose size and demographics vary from other regions of the state and country. The data in this study focuses on all Black students; however, it is important to recognize that nationally students with disabilities are suspended at rates higher than their peers (Gage et al., 2019). Additionally, this study uses data compiled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, there may be demographic and/or enrollment differences between the current data and that used in this study. Another limitation of this study is its use of binary gender identification. The language used in this study is not degendered due to the data's use of the binary markers provided on the student's school record.

Assumptions: The data provided by the State Department of Education, the Office of Civil Rights, and the school district are accurate.

## **Positionality**

Growing up the daughter of an immigrant, I have witnessed the way stereotypes and bias impact a person's opportunities and experiences. You may not realize that I am a first-generation American and the daughter of an Iranian, but that culture and community have shaped my life. On the outside, I appear Caucasian, and the intersectionality of my outward appearance, my identity, and gender have also shaped my experiences. As a White woman researching Black disparities, I have done my best to honor the cultural experiences of Black students. However, I acknowledge and respect my role as an outsider in this research. Kimberle Crenshaw (2016) defines intersectionality as a lens that allows for examining how social problems overlap and create multiple levels of social inequity for individuals and groups. Although I am a woman researcher and understand the impact of my gender on certain opportunities and experiences, I cannot understand the experience of the intersectionality of race and gender on student experiences.

## **Conclusion**

High school graduation has been considered a marker of "success in education" (America's Promise Alliance, 2020, p. 13) for most of the 20th century. However, many students drop out and fail to reach this milestone. A dropout is "a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a high school diploma or transferring to another school with a known exit reason (Weaver-Randall et al., 2018). Dropouts who do not return and earn their high school diploma may struggle to find a path to post-secondary success. Students who do not graduate from high school are less likely to find employment and more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (America's Promise Alliance, 2020). These consequences are harmful to the dropout and the nation at large. Thanks to intervention programs

and research, improvements have been made to keep students in school and on track to graduate. However, despite these intervention programs and recent gains in the graduation rate, the dropout crisis is still a concern. Determining the impact of school discipline on student grade level retention will improve graduation rates for Black students. However, it will also contribute to their post-secondary success and their peers.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to this research study and provided the purpose of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology for the research study. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 discusses the study's findings, provides recommendations for future research studies, and concludes this research study.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Discipline Laws/Regulations

While schools handle much of their discipline in-house, some laws guide their decision-making. The southeastern state used in this study allows schools to retain their discipline rules if they align with the elements in the state regulations. These regulations identify three levels of student misconduct: disorderly, disruptive, and criminal. The state provides possible sanctions for each infraction level, but local school boards can authorize stricter standards than those suggested (as cited on the district website, 2021).

A southeastern state and four of its largest school districts are used in this mixed-methods study. One of the districts in the study provides mandatory disciplinary action for offenses with weapons and/or drugs. The district provides suggested actions for Level I (disorderly conduct), and Level II (disruptive conduct), but the sanction assigned is at the school's discretion. Level III offenses have less variety in possible sanctions. Students with disabilities are disciplined in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Underwood, 2020). Section 504 ensures that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against, excluded, or denied "benefits from federally funded activities on the basis of a disability ... Individuals who have an impairment, a record of impairment, or are perceived as having an impairment may receive accommodations to ensure equitable access to public services (29 U.S.C. 794)" (Underwood, 2020, p. 64). IDEA "ensures a free and appropriate public education to students whose disabilities affect their education and who need services to make meaningful educational progress" (Underwood, 2020, p. 64). Students with disabilities cannot be disciplined for behaviors tied to their disability; however,

that does not mean that the behavior is not addressed. Disciplined students protected under IDEA will have a functional behavior assessment, and a positive behavior support plan will be developed (Underwood, 2020). Although Section 504 does not have a specific requirement for student discipline, courts have interpreted the statute as prohibiting student discipline for behaviors tied to the student's disabilities.

### **Objective vs. Subjective Policies**

Racial disparities in education have been connected to the difference between subjective (discretionary) and objective (mandatory) referrals. While mandatory offenses are tied to specific rules and policies, such as bringing a weapon on campus, discretionary (subjective) referrals are more connected to behaviors and how they are interpreted by the person doing the referral (Blake et al., 2015). The subjective nature of discretionary discipline lends itself to the idea that discipline aims to help students acquire the behaviors associated with being a good student and developing grit and self-regulatory skills (Fergus, 2015). While there are policies necessary to maintain the safety of students and personnel, there are also policies that may deem behavior that is culturally appropriate in a student's home or community inappropriate at school. Students bring certain norms, social practices, and behaviors to school, which may be different from the mainstream culture in a school (Howard, 2003). If students are unaware of how to shift between environments and teachers are unaware of the cultural differences, the disconnect could result in subjective discipline infractions. Further, if teachers are unaware of these cultural differences, behaviors may be misinterpreted, and students may receive an ODR. The number of ODRs in a school building also depends on the teacher's type of classroom discipline. For example, if a teacher uses a relational approach to discipline, fewer reported subjective referrals (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). A relational approach focuses on trust and respect between staff and students and

works on developing a meaningful relationship where the staff has a deep understanding of students' lives. The relationship between staff and students can help create a foundation that supports problem-solving in times of conflict (Anyon et al., 2018). When teachers are aware of a student's triggers and coping resources, they are better equipped to understand the root cause of the behavior (Anyon et al., 2018) and may manage it within the classroom rather than issue an ODR.

Teachers, administrators, and other staff make judgment calls regarding subjective discipline referrals that lead to Black students being disproportionately given ODRs (Losen, 2013). Not only are Black students subject to more frequent discipline referrals, but they are also given more severe punishment for minor subjective misbehavior infractions (Skiba et al., 2011). In fact, racial disparities decrease for objective infractions such as truancy (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). The most common referral issued is "defiance of authority," and Black students are overrepresented in this category (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Black students are overrepresented in ODRs due to disruptive behaviors such as insubordination and disrespect (Serpell et al., 2020). Black females are often given ODRs for willful defiance; this subjective term can include "everything from a student having a verbal altercation with a teacher to refusing to remove a hat in school or complete an assignment" (Morris, 2016, p. 70). Interestingly, these disparities are more statistically significant between schools rather than within them; this also contributes to research that suggests Black students disproportionately attend schools with more punitive school discipline procedures (Ritter & Anderson, 2018) and higher security levels (Finn & Servoss, 2015).

A person's bias can impact subjective discipline; therefore, implicit bias impacts outcomes for student discipline infractions. Subjective categories such as disorderly conduct and

insubordination require teacher and/or administrator discretion (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). If these teachers and/or administrators are unaware of their implicit bias, they may make decisions that cause disparate outcomes. A three-year study of Arkansas K-12 schools found disparities in the referrals Black students receive for the subjective categories of disorderly conduct and insubordination (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). White students are less likely to be perceived as troublemakers and are awarded more opportunities to change their behavior before disciplinary action is taken (Blake et al., 2015). However, almost 80% of a district's disciplinary infractions recorded for Black males are minor and non-violent (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Disciplinary referrals are issued for negative attitudes and disengagement more than for more serious offenses like weapons and drugs (Toldson et al., 2015). When students are written up for subjective discipline infractions, school personnel are responsible for choosing the consequences assigned (Losen, 2013). The initial referral and the resulting disciplinary action significantly contribute to racial disparities in school discipline (Skiba et al., 2011); therefore, it is essential that implicit bias is considered to prevent disparities.

### **Implicit Bias**

Although the desire of most educators is to ensure the best for children, implicit bias can cause them to respond to students in ways that are not equitable. These biases can cause actions and outcomes that do not align with a person's explicit intentions (Staats, 2016). These biases can also impact the choice of policy or practice used by schools when a student breaks a school or classroom rule. Additionally, when educators are unaware of this bias, they can make decisions that contribute to racial disparities that exist on campuses. These disparities are not necessarily attached to specific student behavior but more to the way that behavior is interpreted by school staff (Blake et al., 2020; Losen, 2013). For example, mandatory disciplinary protocols include

more severe infractions that have a specific disciplinary consequence tied to them. These can include assault, arson, possession of drugs, and/or weapons; consequently, the discipline required is mandated by law (Blake et al., 2020). However, in the classroom setting teachers may be more likely to make subjective decisions based on the cognitive load that comes with teaching and managing student behavior and the stress that results from incidents of disruptive student behavior (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019).

In addition to the implicit bias that teachers may have, there are also cultural differences that may exist between Black students and the mainstream culture of the school they attend (Townsend, 2000). These cultural differences may impact how a teacher or administrator perceives a student's behavior. Additionally, teachers may be more likely to perceive White students as less likely to be troublemakers and therefore are more likely to give them opportunities to change their behavior without the use of school discipline (Losen, 2013). Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) found that implicit biases may result in a cycle where teachers expect Black males to misbehave and therefore treat those students with suspicion and pay closer attention to their behavior. This can also result in Black students feeling like they are being treated unfairly and respond to teachers and administrators with a negative attitude. Additionally, these punishments can lead to students feeling a sense of distrust for authority (Perry & Morris, 2014).

### **Exclusionary Discipline**

Exclusionary discipline includes disciplinary rulings that remove students from the regular classroom setting. Students who experience more exclusionary discipline have significantly worse delinquency outcomes. In fact, exclusionary discipline is related to more, rather than fewer, delinquent outcomes (Gerlinger et al., 2021). Exclusionary discipline impacts

student academic achievement, and Black students are at least three times more likely than White students to experience exclusionary discipline (Morris & Perry, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Ritter and Anderson (2018) found that Black students in Arkansas are more likely to attend districts that use exclusionary discipline for drug/alcohol and truancy infractions. Not only are Black students disproportionately attending these schools, but within them, Black students are more than twice as likely to be referred for non-violent offenses than their White peers.

The negative impacts of exclusionary discipline are so vast that they outweigh the positive benefits that prevention programs offer. Even one suspension in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade can impact a student's chances of graduating: the odds of dropping out double with a referral in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The number of suspensions in 9<sup>th</sup> grade has a statistically significant relationship to a student's secondary and postsecondary outcomes (Balfanz et al., 2015). The impacts go beyond the secondary setting, and students who have been suspended and graduated high school are less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree (Shollenberger, 2015). Additionally, the hostile environment created by the overuse of exclusionary discipline can lead to worse student behaviors. The frequent turnover of students in classes because of suspensions can create a fragmented and unstable environment (Perry & Morris, 2014). The impacts are not only academic but exclusionary discipline is also detrimental to a student's behavioral development (Gerlinger et al., 2021). For example, school environments with a high number of exclusionary disciplinary proceedings can cause students to feel heightened anxiety (Morris & Perry, 2016).

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance policies stem from the "broken-window" philosophy that to protect communities, reactions to even minor infractions (the broken window) must be handled with a strong force to send the message that behaviors like it will not be tolerated. By sending this

message, supporters of this policy believe that the only way to maintain social order is to harshly punish even minor infractions (Forsyth et al., 2015). The Reagan Administration first proposed zero tolerance legislation in schools in 1986; however, the bill was defeated in Congress. This defeat did not end the push to increase the length and quantity of suspensions for a wide range of student behaviors. The 1994 Guns Free School Act (GFSA) was created to keep weapons off public-school property and to keep students safe (Grace & Nelson, 2019). The GFSA added a mandatory year expulsion for possessing a firearm on school property. This requirement resulted in several state-level policies that presumed that strict punishment would help end weapons on school campuses (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). Zero tolerance policies generally consist of those that mandate severe consequences for certain offenses regardless of the circumstance (Curran, 2016). These infractions are not limited to weapons, zero-tolerance is used to discipline both major and minor infractions, and zero-tolerance policies and legislation vary across states and on the federal level (Bell, 2015). Although zero-tolerance policies were put in place to protect students, they also removed students from the academic setting. The removal of these students not only has negative impacts on the student, but research has also shown that schools are not significantly safer with the removal of the student (Skiba, 2014). A 2008 Taskforce commissioned by the American Psychological Association found that “despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero-tolerance policies have not provided evidence that such approaches can guarantee safe and productive school climates” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 857). Zero Tolerance policies in school can also result in the juvenile justice system entering a student’s life because of school-based incidents or behaviors. For example, in 2011, schools in Philadelphia boasted large security forces designed to keep their inner-city schools safe; specifically, the school district and

the city's juvenile justice system formed an alliance to control student behavior (Thompson, 2011). This resulted in public school students in the poorer neighborhoods being in legal trouble for minor offenses such as truancy (Curtis, 2014; Thompson, 2011). The long-term impact of incidents like the one in Philadelphia contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP).

States with zero-tolerance laws that include state-mandated expulsion are predictive of a higher number of students suspended from school. The percentage of Black students in a school is also a statistically significant predictor of the level of school security (Finn & Servoss, 2015). Further, states that have both mandated zero-tolerance laws and a higher proportion of Black students in a school district show greater disparities for Black students (Curran, 2016). However, it is important to note that schools that are too lenient in their school discipline policies report higher student pushout rates (Varela et al., 2018). When schools are too strict or lenient student retention and academic success are impacted. A school's climate impacts all students, not just the suspended (Peguero et al., 2018).

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

The path from the education system to the juvenile or adult criminal justice system is referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) (McCarter, 2017). The STPP draws the relationship between prisons and schools; the school being the start of a linear progression to prison (Simmons, 2017). The law enforcement tactics that schools use include random sweeps, searching of students, and interrogations (Kim et al., 2010). Students start to feel the impact of discipline as early as kindergarten; in fact, at the K-6 level, Black students are overrepresented in all infraction types and this trend continues into the middle (Skiba et al., 2011) and high school (Morris & Perry, 2016).

Students who have been disciplined in the previous year are more likely to be disciplined in the current school year (Losen, 2013). When students experience at least one suspension during grades 7-12, they are more likely to be incarcerated in young adulthood. The number of grades that a student is suspended increases the chances of incarceration by 26%. Men who are suspended at least once increased their odds of incarceration at a rate higher than their female counterparts. Even more, Black males have higher odds of incarceration than their White male or female counterparts. There is a relationship between the suspension in school and the odds of experiencing incarceration; these odds are even greater if the suspension occurs during grades 7-12 (Hemez et al., 2020).

Not only do discipline policies and their subsequent student suspensions impact a young adult's potential for incarceration, but these also leave students missing valuable instructional time (Thompson, 2018). When students are suspended from school, they feel less connected to the school, less invested in the course work, and less motivated to achieve academic success (Gregory et al., 2010). Missing instructional time can leave a student feeling detached from the classroom community. This academic disengagement affects disciplinary referrals for students; referrals are more likely to be issued for negative attitudes and academic disengagement than more serious offenses such as drugs or weapons (Toldson et al., 2015). Being given ISS even once in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade increases a student's likelihood of being retained in a course during junior or senior year. When students are suspended from school even once, they are more likely to drop out (Marshbanks et al., 2015). The amount of time a student is suspended is a predictor of their educational attainment (Shollenberger, 2015).

## Disparities

Across the United States, one in four Black students in middle and high school were suspended at least once during the 2009-2010 school year (Losen, 2015). In 2017-18 Black students represented 15 percent of student enrollment but accounted for 38 percent of students who experienced at least one episode of exclusionary discipline (United States Department of Education, 2021). Black students experience more ODRs than their White peers in the K-6 and 6-9 levels (Skiba et al., 2011), and nationally, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended (Curran, 2016) and four times as likely to be expelled (*Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 2012). A 2016 study of Kentucky public schools found that Black students are estimated to be six times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts (Morris & Perry, 2016). In 2012-2013 the odds of suspension for a Black student in Maryland public schools were higher than for White students (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). Nationally, Black students with and without learning disabilities are disproportionately suspended from school (Gage et al., 2019). The highest discrepancy in the type of referral issued is found in those that stem from tardy/truancy, disruption, and noncompliance (Anderson & Ritter, 2020).

Schools with a larger population of Black students report higher incidences of expulsion, suspension, and in-school suspension (Welch & Payne, 2012). The percentage of Black students in a school is a statistically significant predictor of suspension rates (Finn & Servoss, 2015). Additionally, schools that serve more non-White students administer longer punishments than those serving mainly White students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Schools that are disproportionate in their student population use exclusionary discipline more than those that are not disproportionate (Lacoe et al., 2019).

Black students who attend schools in an urban community experience higher rates of juvenile justice referrals; the same is true for Black students in rural schools (Marshbanks et al., 2018). In these communities, the research also reveals that regardless of the discipline practices if a school employs (stringent or lenient), the disparities remain. In fact, in urban schools, the diversity of the student population significantly impacts the juvenile justice rates; the larger the population of Black students, the higher number of referrals (Marshbanks et al., 2018).

Discrimination and exclusionary discipline directly impact student success (United States Department of Education, 2021).

## **Gender**

Intersectionality is the frame that allows for the examination of social problems that overlap and create multiple levels of social inequity for individuals and groups (Crenshaw, 2016). Intersectionality “references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape social inequalities” (Collins, 2015). For example, Black students face disparities based on their race, but disparities may also occur because of their gender for females.

Disparities in discipline proceedings are also significantly related to a student’s gender. Although Black males are more than 1.8 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Finn & Servoss, 2015) Black females are suspended more than White females (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris & Perry, 2017). Black females are more likely to receive ODRs for subjective discipline infractions, specifically, behaviors that are inconsistent with traditional notions of femininity (Morris & Perry, 2017). Black females are more likely to receive ODR for behavior that is seen as disobedient, aggressive, or defiant (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2015;

Morris & Perry, 2017). Black females are less likely to receive an ODR for objective offenses such as drug or alcohol possession or distribution (Annamma et al., 2019). They are punished more for breaking norms of behavior in a school (Annamma et al., 2019), but these norms may be different from those used at home or in their communities. Schools often expect females to embody traditional femininity and to be passive (Morris & Perry, 2017), quiet, and helpless in the face of men (Annamma et al., 2019). Black females often experience school discipline for “loud” and “defiant;” behaviors that have “underscored Black female resilience to the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism” (Morris, 2013, p. 5). In school, the behavior of Black females is often misunderstood and seen as disrespectful or disrupting when these students are trying to speak their opinion or stand up for themselves. The relationship between the staff member and student is essential in determining if the behavior will be seen as defiant or as a part of her expression and learning experience (Morris, 2016).

### **School Environment**

School districts that employ a higher-than-expected level of strictness experience higher rates of juvenile justice referrals (Marshbanks et al., 2018). When the school culture is punitive rather than nurturing and caring, students and school personnel lose the trust that is important to student success and a positive school environment (Morris & Perry, 2016). Additionally, the turnover of students in and out of the classroom because of disciplinary infractions creates a fragmented and unstable environment. The punitive nature of these schools also impacts the feelings of trust and caring between students and school personnel (Perry & Morris, 2014). Urban schools report that schools that are more punitive or are too lenient experience higher levels of juvenile justice referrals (Marshbanks et al., 2018). The racial make-up of a school is connected to the type of discipline administration uses (Welch & Payne, 2012). Students who

experience disparities and are suspended feel less connected to the school environment (Anyon et al., 2016; Grace & Nelson, 2019). Black students who attend schools where there are larger discipline disparities report feeling a negative school climate (Bottiani et al., 2017).

Black students experience a lower sense of belonging in a school that has a statistically significant suspension gap. These students also struggle to adjust to school because of the disparity in the discipline (Bottiani et al., 2017). When there are these disparities, all students perceive less care, concern, encouragement, and respect from the school adults; further, the out-of-school suspension rate for Black students is significantly correlated to connected-ness (Anyon et al., 2016). Research explains that it is the behavior of adults that impacts a student's feelings of connection more so than any specific fixed characteristic of their school (Anyon et al., 2016). When students feel trusted by school adults, they are more willing to take responsibility for their actions and are motivated to change them (Anyon et al., 2018).

Cultural discontinuity impacts a students' connection to the school environment as well. This discontinuity occurs when school personnel hold behavioral and academic expectations for students that are different from those they experience at home or in their community (Anyon et al., 2016). Cultural discontinuity impacts students academically when the learning style and classroom practices are different from those that originate from home or cultural activities (Tyler et al., 2008). In addition to cultural impacts, overexposure to the stress of poverty may also impact a student's understanding of school rules and norms (Skiba et al., 2011).

### **Achievement and Suspension**

Out-of-school suspension impacts a student's academic success (Morris & Perry, 2016). Student suspension is linked to lower academic achievement (Forsyth et al., 2015) and dropping out (Marshbanks et al., 2015). Students that have been suspended score lower on end-of-the-year

testing (Morris & Perry, 2016). Perry and Morris (2014) sampled 6-10<sup>th</sup> graders over the span of three years and found a correlation between out-of-school suspension and student achievement. Specifically, they found that reading growth is minimized when students experience a mean level of exclusionary discipline. When there is a prominent level of suspension, their research found that the MAP reading scores are lower; students who are suspended at least once each school year score over 15 points lower on reading (Perry & Morris, 2014). Additionally, there are similar correlations between suspensions and math achievement (Morris & Perry, 2016; Perry & Morris, 2014). In fact, students who are suspended in consecutive years score lower on math MAP testing than those who have not been suspended.

Out-of-school suspension has an impact on student academic achievement; there is a statistically significant relationship between out-of-school suspension and student academic achievement. Students who are suspended from school score lower on end-of-year progress tests; scores are higher in years when these students do not have any suspensions (Morris & Perry, 2016). Ibrahim and Johnson (2020) researched the impact on suspensions and outcomes in math courses. They found that school suspensions have a statistically significant impact on math achievement over the course of a student's academic career; suspension at the beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> grade “substantially lowered senior year math scores” (Ibrahim & Johnson, 2020, p. 93). There are racial disparities in the length and number of exclusionary punishments assigned to Black students which has a direct connection to student engagement and instructional time and achievement (Anderson & Ritter, 2020).

The length of time a student is removed from the classroom has an impact on their academic success. Morris and Perry (2016) found that when students are removed for low to moderate periods of time, test scores are not impacted. However, when there are increased levels

of exclusionary discipline, there is a negative impact on test scores. End-of-the-year reading and math scores for all students are negatively impacted by student suspension. Swanson et al. (2021) found that the number of times a student is suspended is significant. When students are suspended between six and ten times in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the likelihood of retention increases by 4.1 percent. In-school suspension (ISS) also impacts student grade level retention, one instance of ISS in 9<sup>th</sup> grade increases the probability of being retained in a grade during their junior or senior year by 46.2%. When students are retained, it not only may delay their graduation, but that delay also results in their careers starting when they are older which impacts their total earning potential (Marshbanks et al., 2015). Grade level retention due to failing a core class is linked to later negative school outcomes like dropping out (Rickles et al., 2018). Shollenberger (2015) found that one suspension in a student's K-12 career can decrease their likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma. In fact, the total amount of time a student is suspended can predict their overall educational attainment.

### **Drop-Out**

Students who are suspended from school are less likely than their non-suspended peers to graduate high school (Shollenberger, 2015). One of the indicators of a student at risk for dropping out is delinquency; severe delinquency (i.e., violence) has a more statistically significant relationship with dropping out (Henry et al., 2012). Dropouts are either students who have been *pushed* or *pulled* out of school. Students are *pushed out* of school by disciplinary actions that remove them from school; students who are *pulled out* are those that have dropped out of school because of factors outside of the school. Students who are *pushed out* of school often feel that school is an unwelcoming place where they do not fit in with teachers or classmates (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017). Varela et al. (2018) found that one of the reasons students

drop out is that they do not have a connection with the school environment. Often, these same students have a history of disciplinary infractions and academic struggles that contribute to their disengagement from school. Regardless of the school's location, schools with higher percentages of Black and Latino students are associated with higher pushout rates.

### **Course Retention**

Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) note that dropping out is not normally a sudden event that often begins with school disengagement. Henry et al. (2012) found that school disengagement is strongly connected to the decision to drop out of school. Academic failure is often noted as one of the first indicators of a student at risk of dropping out. Rickles et al. (2018) indicate that “failing core academic courses during the first year of high school is a strong signal of trouble to come” (p. 481). Students who fail to earn certain credits are retained in the same grade until they can earn those missed credits (Rumberger, 2011). Additionally, Barrat et al. (2012) found that students who repeat a grade in high school are less likely to reenroll after leaving school. Reenrollment becomes even less likely when students have already repeated a grade before dropping out.

Missed instruction due to discipline can impact a student’s engagement. In a study by McDermott et al. (2019) school environment and engagement are reported as the primary factors leading to a student’s decision to drop out. When students miss instructional time, they are at a greater risk of failure. Students report that academic failure is one of the contributors to their decision to drop out.

### **Culturally Responsive Schools**

Cultural discontinuity can also impact a student’s encounters with school discipline. Culturally responsive practices require that schools understand that a student's behavior in school

may be based on their home culture and that it may be different from the accepted norms within a school. In a culturally responsive school, staff work to ensure that students feel supported and validated. In this type of school, there is an understanding of how the school system has been established and “how well they support students from varying cultures, and how they can be changed to ensure the support and validation of each student” (Leverson et al., 2019, p. 2). The core components of culturally responsive structures in schools/classrooms are identity, voice, supportive environment, situational appropriateness, and the examination of data for equity (Leverson et al., 2019). Within each of these components' educators can help create a culturally responsive school and classroom. In a culturally responsive school, “teams adopt or revise expectations that are reflective of the cultural values of the surrounding community” (Leverson et al., 2019, p. 9). When schools acknowledge the community's culture, they help set students up for success. Culturally responsive schools help students code-switch across their settings, so they know the difference in expectations at home/community vs. in the school building (Leverson et al., 2019).

### **Relationships**

The type of relationship students has with the adults in the school building also impacts their disciplinary infractions and/or referrals. Students who have been suspended are more likely to have subsequent delinquent outcomes because they have a reputation of being troublemakers by administrators or teachers (Blake et al., 2015; Gerlinger et al., 2021). These stereotypes can also impact the way student behavior is handled in the classroom; a classroom discipline event can be escalated by the stereotype threat (Bottiani et al., 2017). However, positive relationships with staff may impact outcomes for these students. Blake et al. (2020) found in a study of Texas schools and the juvenile probation program, that after a student receives 13 discipline referrals

there is no longer a disparity between Black and White student disciplinary referrals. They presume this could be due to the administrators getting to know the students as individuals, and the relationships that form allow the racial stereotypes to diminish. Relationships that are built in a school can impact the discipline rate of the school. In a study of Denver Public Schools researchers found that when teachers form relationships with students, they are more likely to communicate the discipline issue with the student and work with them to redirect the behavior and own the situation (Anyon et al., 2018). Students who feel cared for also report paying more attention in class, complying with teacher rules, and showing up to class more often (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Students who feel supported, encouraged, and cared for by their teachers usually enjoy school (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). Additionally, when students feel loved and respected by school staff there are fewer reported problem behaviors and behavioral interventions are more successful (Anyon et al., 2018). When students perceive the school environment as oppressive and discriminatory, they become critical and suspicious of school adults and are less likely to feel respected, cared for, or encouraged (Anyon et al., 2016).

When students are removed from the classroom and school environment, they miss opportunities to build these important relationships with school staff. In a qualitative study of Denver schools, Anyon et al. (2018) found the most common theme that emerged from their interviews is the importance of relationship building. In fact, most staff members attributed their school's low suspension rate to the strong connections that were built between faculty and students. Additionally, strong relationships between staff and students can help students with problem-solving and conflict resolution. These relationships can also help teachers as they learn the root causes of student misbehavior and are able to provide interventions. This can foster a school environment where discipline is seen as an opportunity for growth and problem solving

rather than punishment (Anyon et al., 2018). Students also report trusting and obeying the teacher's authority when they feel the teacher has both high expectations and cares for them (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

### **Restorative Justice**

One practice that some schools have adopted to handle school discipline is the use of restorative justice. This practice is borrowed from the criminal justice concept of restorative justice and aims to use peaceful and nonpunitive approaches (Rafa & Education Commission of the States, 2019) rather than exclusionary methods of discipline. The practice shifts the focus from the behavior itself to building, nurturing, and repairing relationships (Rafa & Education Commission of the States, 2019) and promoting feelings of respect and satisfaction (González, 2015). Procedures for student discipline are nonpunitive and work to help students gain an understanding of what triggered the discipline event and learn strategies for handling situations in the future (Denti & Guerin, 2014). These practices offer schools an opportunity to promote positive behaviors and shift the focus from punitive punishment to responses that are supportive and corrective (Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). The focus of these practices is on the problem and not the person. These practices emphasize “accountability, restitution, and restoration of a school community” (González, 2015, p. 152).

Restorative practices focus on building authentic relationships between adults and students through a three-tier system. The three tiers, universal, targeted, and intensive, are designed to be both preventative and responsive to school discipline (Kervick et al., 2019). The first tier is the proactive level which is directed at the entire school community and focuses on community building and relationships. Tier one promotes a sense of belonging and inclusion for students in their learning environment and allows students the opportunity to reflect on their own

and others' behavior (Kervick et al., 2019). One method schools employ to implement tier one interventions is through a required course in one of the early grade levels. A foundational and required course serves as an introduction to restorative principles and establishes curricular foundations for students (González et al., 2019). The 2<sup>nd</sup> tier in the restorative model includes targeted responses that are focused on the repairing of relationships (Mansfield Cummings et al., 2018). In tier two conferences are conducted by trained instructional personnel, administrators, or other trained staff. Students participate in activities that are designed to allow them to assume responsibility for the harm done and work on developing solutions to repair relationships (Kervick et al., 2019).

The third and most intensive tier is used to help support students as they reenter the academic setting after a discipline incident that required removal (Kervick et al., 2019). Staff members who work with students in tier three are specifically trained to work with students (Mansfield Cummings et al., 2018) on the skills they need to reenter successfully. The focus in all tiers is on promoting inclusion and reflection (Kervick et al., 2019). Schotland et al. (2016) found that the use of restorative practices reduces the number of suspensions and improves the school climate. However, despite the positive impact of these practices, research indicates that schools with higher percentages of Black students are less likely to employ Restorative Justice practices (Payne & Welch, 2015).

### **PBIS/SWPBIS**

Another recommendation for schools and districts is to employ a positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) model in their schools. PBIS is an evidence-based system that works to improve and integrate all the data, systems, and practices that impact students (Sugai & Horner, 2020). When used on the school-wide level, PBIS is referred to as SWPBIS. The goal of

SWPBIS is to focus on positive reinforcements rather than punishments when it comes to student discipline (Gage et al., 2020). One of the key features of the PBIS model is a continuum of support for students. The three stages of this continuum are universal prevention which includes all students (entire student body), targeted prevention that works with identified students (secondary), and intensive, individualized (Tertiary) prevention (Sugai & Horner, 2002, 2020). The primary prevention stage includes discipline, classroom behavior management, and instructional practices and systems that are implemented school wide. Secondary prevention works to help reduce the number of existing problem behavior or situation cases by providing those students with more targeted instructional and behavioral support. Tertiary prevention is individualized for students who are at risk of emotional and/or behavioral failures. These preventions are intensive and customized for individual students (Sugai & Horner, 2020). In each tier, there are systems to implement and utilize PBIS and practices designed to provide each student with the support they need to manage their behaviors. SWPBIS can change the school climate and provide early intervention for students who struggle with school discipline (Skiba et al., 2011). SWBIS helps build consistency and communication and provides strategies for teaching students how to handle behaviors that could result in more severe discipline events (Skiba, 2014).

A 2016-2017 study of California schools found that schools implementing SWBIS reported significantly lower suspensions than non-implementing schools (Gage et al., 2020). Flannery et al. (2014) completed a multi-school three-year study of SWBIS implementation; this study revealed that the positive impact of SWBIS is statistically significant after the first year of implementation. During the implementation year, the schools did not see an improvement in

outcomes; however, there was a significant decrease in problem behavior incidences after the first year.

Another possibility for schools is to use elements from SWBIS and Restorative Justice (SWPRD) in a blended approach to school discipline reform. SWPRD is a three-tiered continuum that provides an opportunity to define and teach behavioral expectations and to utilize restorative circles to improve discipline (Vincent et al., 2016). A study by Vincent et al. (2016) found that using this blended approach decreased the number of ODRs for students, regardless of racial/ethnic background. Additionally, using SWPRD improved the perception of a school's discipline policy.

### **Trauma Informed Practices**

Trauma-informed practices can also be beneficial in reducing the number of exclusionary discipline incidents. Teachers who are responsive to the needs of students suffering from traumatic stress can make changes in the classroom that encourage and promote safety and learning (Skiba et al., 2011). There are several practices that can be adopted when a school is becoming trauma-informed; schools use a system of pillars (the number of pillars typically range from three to six) to guide their classroom procedures (Joseph et al., 2020). One trauma-informed practice that can be used is the *switch the channel* approach. During these *switch the channel* breaks students are given cognitive distractions to complete. These cognitive distractions are incompatible with negative thinking and can help a student calm down quickly (Skiba et al., 2011). This “channel switch” can help prevent the behavior that results in students being removed from the classroom.

West et al. (2014) studied the impact of trauma-informed intervention; the study included the use of Monarch Room (MR) intervention designed to provide an alternative discipline policy.

The MR is a location that is managed by trained staff to provide students with support and trauma interventions during the school day. When a student goes to the MR they are provided with positive support and resources to de-escalate. There are fidget toys, weighted blankets, exercise equipment, and other tools to help students learn to use motor skills to de-escalate and self-soothe (Crosby et al., 2018). Student response to the MR room and its effectiveness was revealed in their interview responses; they found it as a place that helped support them when they are experiencing trouble or just need a location to calm down (West et al., 2014). When teachers are aware that a student's challenging behavior may not be in response to a classroom event, but rather a response to trauma (Venet, 2018) discipline incidents may be avoided.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with the research methodology for this mixed-methods sequential explanatory study of disparities in school discipline and student grade level retention in secondary education. There is a connection between the discipline gap and the achievement gap in education (Losen, 2015). When students miss instructional time because of exclusionary discipline it impacts their academic success; even one suspension in 9<sup>th</sup> grade impacts a student's likelihood of dropping out. Post-secondary outcomes are also impacted by school discipline (Balfanz et al., 2015); these suspended teens are more likely to be incarcerated and less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree (Shollenberger, 2015). Black students are suspended at twice the rate of their White peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). This research aimed to determine how race and gender impact student success in a southeastern state. Specifically, the research looked at the impact of race, gender, and district impact on the number of days a student misses for suspension and the impact of those same variables on student grade level retention.

A mixed-methods research design includes the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, integrates analysis and results of the two data types, and is a research design that provides the logic and procedures for conducting the study, and theory and philosophy frame the procedures (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A two-phase explanatory mixed methods design was used for this study; the study began with a statistical analysis of the sample and followed with interviews of one district's school leaders to examine the quantitative results in more detail.

In the first phase, the quantitative hypothesis addressed the relationship between race, gender, and district on the number of days missed due to suspension and the impact of race,

gender, and district on student grade level retention. The second, qualitative phase was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and in-person with administrators in one of the districts used in the quantitative research. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to learn more about how discipline works in buildings across one district. Interviews were framed to examine how school leaders feel about their discipline practices, exclusionary discipline procedures, and intervention practices. The intent of this study is to assist schools in examining their use of exclusionary discipline, preventing and/or decreasing disparities in disciplinary proceedings, and improving academic outcomes for all students.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Morris and Perry (2016) studied the connection between school discipline and the achievement gap for students in Kentucky; they also confirm the over-representation of minority students in school discipline. Their study specifically examined the impact of the suspension on academic achievement as reported on achievement tests in reading and math. Through their study, they present evidence that exclusionary school discipline may hinder academic growth and contribute to the achievement gap. This study aims to further their research by determining if race, gender, and district impact suspension and retention in a southeastern state.

### **Research Design**

Disparities in school discipline and their impact on the success of students is a complex issue that requires the most complete analysis. The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design allows for that complete analysis through the quantitative analysis of the relationship between the variables and qualitative analysis to gain a more detailed understanding of the problem as it is experienced in schools (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative analysis helped the

researcher examine disparities in discipline and student grade level retention. The qualitative analysis helped explore the results of the quantitative analysis and further examined how schools manage student behavior and alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline.

The quantitative data in this study included referrals that result in any exclusionary discipline issuance in high schools in four of the largest districts in a southeastern state. Student active enrollment on the 180<sup>th</sup> day in the 2018-2019 school year was used to identify the largest districts in the state. The data is represented in tables and figures representing how suspension is administered based on race, gender, and district, and the impact of race, gender, and district on the number of grade level retentions for students. The data analyzed in this study is from the 2018-2019 school year. The 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years were interrupted and impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, the pandemic removed students from the classroom and moved them to learn in alternative formats that varied in effectiveness and in some cases resulted in student disengagement (Reimers, 2022). Data from prior to the pandemic was used in this study because of the impact on reporting student incidents during the school closures and modified schedules.

The qualitative data for this study was collected through interviews; based on the quantitative findings, the interviews were conducted with administrators and school leaders within one of the districts studied. An interview script was created after the quantitative data collection and analysis. The analysis showed that two districts in the study have higher levels of suspension and student retention. The interview script was developed to examine one of these districts and how policies and procedures impact student suspension and retention.

## **Phase One: Quantitative**

### ***Participants***

This study used data from select urban school districts within a southeastern state to determine if race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed due to suspension. The data was then analyzed to determine if there is a statistically significant connection between race, gender, and district and grade level retention. The study was furthered by focusing on one district in the state and how they manage student behavior and discipline. The quantitative portion of the research used data from all four of the districts. The first district used in quantitative analysis has an enrollment of over 45, 000 students; there are 13 secondary schools and those used in this study serve grades 9-12 (as reported on the District's Website, 2021). Two high schools within this district are categorized as Title 1 schools (as reported on the District's Website, n.d.). Title 1 is a federal program that provides schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families with financial assistance. This assistance is provided to "help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards" (United States Department of Education, 2018). In addition to Title 1's financial support, students can also qualify for free and reduced lunch. The second district has an enrollment of over 73, 000 students and fourteen high schools that serve students in grades 9-12 (as reported on the District's Website, 2021). As cited by the State Department of Education's website (n.d.), the district does not have any Title 1 secondary schools; however, three middle schools are categorized as Title 1. The third district used in this study has an enrollment of 37, 000 students and eight high schools (as reported on the district's website, 2021). There are three high schools categorized as Title 1 according to the State Department of Education (n.d.). The fourth district used in the study has an enrollment of 49,000 students between its eight constituent districts. There are 16 secondary schools and six of those

are categorized as Title 1 (as reported on the District's Website, n.d.). Of those researched in this study, this district serves the most students attending Title 1 schools. The qualitative analysis included interviews from one of the four districts used in the quantitative analysis.

The four districts used in this study represented the four largest counties and vary in geographic location within the state. Not only did this research contribute to assisting schools with disparities in school discipline, but it also helped schools work to prevent student incidents that lead to the use of exclusionary discipline. The decrease in the use of exclusionary discipline has positive impacts on all students; overly punitive school discipline can create an environment that is alienating for students (Finn & Servoss, 2015).

Subjects in this dissertation were students in grades 9 through 12 enrolled in one of the four districts during the academic school year 2018-2019. This study focused on the year prior to the pandemic's closure of schools in March 2020 because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student enrollment and data collection. Globally, students missed approximately 50% of their instructional time because of school closures due to COVID-19 (United Nations Children's Fund., 2021). Even more, public schools experienced a decline in enrollment as a result of the pandemic (Bassok & Shapiro, 2021). For example, one district in this study had an enrollment of 45, 584 total K-12 enrollment during the 2019-2020 school year while the enrollment in the 2020-21 school year was 44, 479. The 2021 enrollment is lower than enrollment prior to the pandemic; the 2018-2019 enrollment was 44, 896 (as reported on the state department's website). The impact of COVID-19 on school operations is why the data used for this study is from data collected prior to the pandemic.

## **Data Collection**

Data from the districts that will be used for the study included the school year 2017-2018. This archival data was accessed through the State Department of Education website, published school report cards, the United States Department of Education, and the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection website (CRDC). Each state is required to establish uniform management information and reporting system (UMIRS) to report their data to the federal government. This system allowed for access to information on the districts used in this study. This data included truancy rates, violent and drug-related suspensions, and services offered to the students involved in truant or drug-related behavior. The data is reported on the state level as habitual truant, suspension/expulsion offenses, chronic truant, and truant.

The numerical data in this study was accessed through the State Department of Education's website through their student intervention services department. Districts are federally required to report this data to the state and the state publishes it for public review. In addition to the data provided by the state through their truancy, suspension, and expulsion data, data from the school report card will be accessed. The school report card provides information and data about the school and district. This data includes the following information that is available: total district enrollment, school enrollment, graduation rate by race, unsafe incident information as reported in the incident management system (IMS) (as reported on the District's Website, 2021).

This research study also includes data provided by the United States Department of Education as collected in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The CRDC has been collecting data on key civil rights and education issues since 1968 (Civil Rights Data, 2021). The CRDC is updated every other year; the next update published will be based on 2020-2021;

however, that data is not available as of the start of this research study. Data from the 2017-2018 year is included in this study because data from the following school year derives from that reported to the State Department of Education and Edfacts (published by the United States Department of Education).

### **Instrument**

Research Question 1: Do race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed due to suspension?

Research Question 2: Do race, gender, and district impact the number of student grade level retentions?

When students miss school due to discipline proceedings it impacts their engagement in school; this disengagement contributes to lower academic achievement (Toldson et al., 2015). Even one instance of ISS can increase a student's likelihood of dropping out by 23.7% when compared to students who do not have any discipline incidents (Marshbanks et al., 2015). To examine this intersectionality in a southeastern state, data from the United States Department of Education was entered into SPSS for analysis. To answer the first research question, race, gender, and district were used as the independent variables, and days missed due to suspension was the dependent variable in a three-factor ANOVA analysis.

The analysis was run to answer the second research question; race, gender, and district were the independent variables for this analysis and the number of student grade level retentions was the dependent variable. A three-factor ANOVA was run to determine statistical significance interactions in the number of grade retentions in the state using three variables. Research shows that nationally, Black students experience more instances of exclusionary discipline than their peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). Race was used as a variable in this study to determine if a disparity

in school discipline exists in the districts researched. Males are suspended at a higher rate than females in secondary school, and Black students are suspended at higher rates than non-Hispanic White students (Finn & Servoss, 2015). However, Black females are suspended more than White females (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris & Perry, 2017). A joint effect was not found in the analysis of race and gender; therefore, additional analyses to examine the gendered impact of discipline proceedings were not conducted.

### **Interim Phase: Instrument Development**

After analyzing the quantitative results, the purposive sample was refined, a selection of the qualitative sample was made, and the interview script was created. The script was designed to elicit the best explanation of the results of the quantitative analysis. The maximal variation sampling strategy allowed the researcher to gather a diverse sample that offered different perspectives on how the discipline proceedings work in a school building (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The interview script advanced and developed as the quantitative data were analyzed. A semi-structured approach was used in the interview process; prompting, revising of questions, and the addition of questions-based participant responses (Galletta & Cross, 2013) were used in the interviews.

### **Phase Two: Qualitative**

#### ***Participants***

After obtaining IRB approval and completing the quantitative data analysis, subjects for the qualitative study were selected. Volunteers were recruited for a purposive qualitative sample through e-mail correspondence using addresses provided to the public through the district website. This sample included administrators and assistant principals of secondary schools in one of the four districts used in the quantitative analysis. The district selected had statistically

significant interactions between race and gender and student grade level suspensions. The district also had one of the highest number of days missed for suspension for all students. Interviews were conducted with each participant to examine how discipline is perceived and implemented at the school and what the school is doing to address the disparity. The district studied was selected based on the results of quantitative data analysis. The interview questions were focused on current exclusionary discipline practices and the use of intervention programs. The interviews were also designed to learn more about what practices the school uses to prevent disparity and will specifically ask about intervention programs in place.

The participants in this research study were from one of the districts used in the quantitative analysis; five administrators responded to the request for interviews out of the ten requests. All participant schools share similar demographics despite differences in enrollment numbers; three of the schools have an enrollment of over 1, 500 and one has an enrollment under 500 (United States Department of Education, n.d.). The first participant, Stella, is an assistant principal at a traditional four-year secondary school. The school is one of the largest in the district; however, the demographics of the student population are similar to the other schools used in the qualitative analysis. Stella is in her second year as an administrator; she was a classroom teacher for over 10 years before moving into administration.

Another participant, Ruby, is an assistant principal of a school that is designed for students that will be the first generation of college graduates. This school is the smallest used in this sample; however, demographically shares similar characteristics. Ruby moved into this position from a District Office job; prior to that, she was a teacher in the district.

Two participants, Charlie and Casey, work at the same school. These interviews were particularly insightful because although they work in the same building, they have different

perspectives on discipline. Charlie has been an administrator for over twenty-five years; half of those have been in the district used for this study. Prior to administration, he was a classroom teacher and coach before he moved into a leadership role in his previous district. Casey is the only participant who does not have any classroom experience; she moved into administration from a guidance role. Her role in her current school is the second administrative role she has filled.

The final participant, Lucy, works at another traditional secondary school within the district. This is her first full year as an administrator; however, last year she served as interim administrator. Prior to moving to her current school, she was a classroom teacher and served on the school's discipline committee. She also worked in another district as a teacher and coach in a neighboring district early in her career.

The participants hold a variety of positions within the district; these administrative positions range from curriculum facilitator to principal. There is also a range of religious practices represented as well; the participants varied and included Christian to Muslim. Additionally, there were various races represented in the sample. The sample included professionals in various stages of their administrative careers; this was also designed to provide a range of perspectives. Newer administrators may have different strategies and/or ideas based on more recent course work or research; the combination of experienced and novice administrators provides a more diverse data sample. Further, the overall diversity of this sample added to the richness of the data collected throughout the study.

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative data for this study was collected through interviews with administrators in a district that was used for quantitative data collection. Based on the quantitative findings, the

district was selected because there were statistically significant interactions between race and this district, and the district had the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest mean in days missed for suspension. The questions were revised and finalized to gather qualitative data and analyze how suspension may be impacting student success in the district. Interviews were conducted with administrators and school leaders in secondary schools within the district. The quantitative analysis showed districts that have higher means of days missed and/or student retention; the qualitative analysis was therefore designed to explore possible explanations for the number of students being suspended and/or retained. The interviews were conducted with administrators in one of the districts that had a high number of mean days missed for suspension. The questions were created to get more learn more about the discipline procedures in the district to explore how these may be impacting the number of suspensions. Questions that were used (See Appendix A) for the interview include: Please describe your discipline process and procedures. How are in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension used at your school? How are students provided academic support when they are suspended?

The district used for the qualitative data collection utilizes a program within the PowerSchool operation called Review360. This program requires the referrer (teacher, staff, etc) to provide information regarding the offense, location, time, category of offense, and a description of the incident. This IMS is used to report the incident information to the state and is reported on the school report card. The IMS streamlines the reporting of data from PowerSchool and no additional data entry is required.

### **Data Analysis**

Sub question RQ2: How does the district handle student discipline? Is the district responding to the disparities? What is being done? What do they hope to do in the future?

Data provided through the quantitative analysis provided me with one picture of what is happening in schools. Research shows that nationally, Black students experience more instances of exclusionary discipline than their peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). Race, gender, and district are used as variables in this study to determine how race and gender are impacting student suspension and grade level retention in the southeastern state. To gain a more thorough understanding of what is contributing to either of these results, a qualitative element is necessary. Interviews allowed me to gain an understanding of how decisions regarding discipline are impacting students and schools. To help me gain this understanding, the interview script was created based on the results of the quantitative analysis and designed to help explain how race and gender are impacting student success. Not all parts of the sub questions were answered; administrators did not address disparities directly. However, the researcher gained insight into how this could occur within the school and district.

### **Ethics**

Throughout this research, the intention was to honor the histories, experiences, and cultures of all participants and subjects. One way this was done was by conducting the interviews using the participant's chosen pronouns and culturally sensitive language. Interviews were held both virtually and face to face; after introducing and explaining the research design and questions, participants were told that the meeting would be recorded for coding purposes. For that reason, participants had the option to turn off their cameras during the recorded portion of the interviews. Ethical considerations were followed by first informing participants that their participation in the research is voluntary and that they may remove themselves from the study at any time without penalty. Open-ended questions were asked, and the answers were transcribed and recorded objectively for analysis.

I protected the identity of my research participants by removing all district and state identifiers in my transcriptions and in reporting my findings. By using pseudonyms, participants' names remained confidential in my transcriptions and analysis. After transcribing my interviews, the files were deleted and the only artifact that remains is the transcription. Although all appropriate steps were taken to protect the identity of my participants, I cannot guarantee that a reader will not make assumptions based on the data and analysis provided in the study.

### **Summary**

This research study aims to examine the impact of race, gender, and district on exclusionary discipline and student grade level retention. A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was used to provide the most complete analysis; the quantitative was used to refine the mixed-methods questions, determine participants, and design the qualitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

## **Chapter Four: Results**

This chapter provides the results of the mixed-methods study examining how race and gender impact students in a southeastern state. The first part of this study was conducted through quantitative analysis; data on district grade level retention and days missed due to suspension by gender and race was used in this analysis. The study was furthered by qualitative analysis through interviews with administrators in one of the districts used in the quantitative portion of this study.

This chapter presents the mixed methods results to answer the research questions:

1. Do race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed due to suspension for Black students?
2. Do race, gender, and district impact student grade level retention?

### **Quantitative Sample**

The sample used for quantitative analysis consisted of reported data on discipline and student grade level retention for 2018. The data for this study was published by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) through their biennial Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) in 2018; due to the pandemic, data for more recent years will not be available to the public until the Spring/Summer of 2022. Data was provided by the CRDC online data collection website sponsored by the United States Department of Education. The OCR's mission statement is "to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (Office of Civil Rights, 2022). They are also responsible for enforcing "Federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in programs or activities that receive federal assistance from the Department of Education" (Office of Civil Rights, 2022). Part of the OCR's duties include collecting data on America's schools and sharing

that data with the public. Additionally, this dissemination of information is provided to bring attention to critical issues in education. These reports are published and available to the public from the CRDC website.

Data was collected based on race and gender identifiers used by the OCR. For the purpose of this study, data on male and female-identified students and Black and White identified students from the four largest districts in a southeastern state were accessed, categorized, and uploaded into IBM SPSS. A three-factor ANOVA with interactions was conducted to analyze the relationship between the three independent variables (race, gender, and district) on a dependent variable (days missed). Data reported by the OCR does not include the referral type for each student infraction; consequently, the number of days students miss for suspension was used as the dependent variable. Therefore, the research question was revised from its original: “Do race, gender, and district impact the number of referrals for Black students” to “Do race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed due to suspension?” Research Question 2 was also revised from its original: “Do the number of referrals and race affect graduation rate” to “Do race, gender, and district impact student grade level retention?” This revision was made because student grade level retention is used by schools and districts to help identify students at risk of dropping out of school. In fact, “failing core academic course during the first year of high school is a strong signal of trouble to come” (Rickles et al., 2018). Therefore, grade retention was used as a predictor of an at-risk student to help examine a potential relationship between school discipline and graduation rates.

## **Results**

This section presents the results of the descriptive analysis (see Appendix B) for the first research question; a three-factor ANOVA was run to analyze the effect of race, gender, and

district on the number of days missed due to suspension. Table 1 provides the mean and standard deviation of the days missed based on race and gender in the southeastern state being studied.

**Table 1**

*Mean and Standard Deviation for Days Missed: Southeastern State*

	Male	Female
Black	248.41 (SD = 224.37)	144.15 (SD = 137.76)
White	164.93 (SD = 182.61)	60.01 (SD = 69.62)

This shows that males are missing more days, and Black males miss more than their White peers. Also notable from this analysis is that white females miss significantly fewer days due to suspension ( $M = 60.02$ ). The interactions between these variables are addressed in the between-subjects effects.

Table 2 provides the mean and standard deviation for days missed in each district by race; more detailed descriptive statistics are included in Appendix A. This shows that in D1 White students are missing more days, but in D4 Black students miss significantly more days due to suspension ( $M = 214.21$ ) than their White peers ( $M = 28.53$ ).

**Table 2**

*Mean and Standard Deviations for Days Missed by District*

	Black	White
District 1	179.23 (SD= 214.90)	205.73 (SD = 196.84)
District 2	227.93 (SD = 167.84)	176.80 (SD = 157.75)
District 3	126.50 (SD = 102.92)	68.50 (SD = 61.03)
District 4	214.21 (SD = 224.47)	28.53 (SD = 53.25)

Table 3 provides the results of the between-subjects effects. The simple main effects analysis showed that gender (M, F) has a statistically significant effect on days missed  $p = .001$ , and Race (B, W) has a statistically significant effect on days missed,  $p = .002$ . The results of this analysis indicate that males miss more days due to suspension than females in a southeastern state. The analysis also showed that District (D) has a statistically significant effect on days missed ( $p = .001$ ). Specific to the first research question, the mean days missed for White Males in District 1 ( $M = 303.64$ ) and the mean days missed for Black Males ( $M = 301.53$ ) in District 2 is higher than the mean for any other district, race, or gender in this analysis. In fact, District 2 has the highest mean days missed for students regardless of gender or race ( $M = 202.37$ ). Additionally, an interaction effects analysis showed a statistically significant effect on Race \* District  $p = .003$ .

**Table 3**

**Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

Dependent Variable: DM

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1892478.2 <sup>a</sup>	15	126165.215	5.283	<.001
Intercept	4688717.55	1	4688717.55	196.351	<.001
DRace	224059.044	1	224059.044	9.383	.002
Gender	561643.656	1	561643.656	23.520	<.001
District	401319.030	3	133773.010	5.602	.001
DRace * Gender	949.483	1	949.483	.040	.842
DRace * District	353051.870	3	117683.957	4.928	.003
Gender * District	142022.360	3	47340.787	1.983	.118
DRace * Gender * District	26182.883	3	8727.628	.365	.778
Error	4775854.39	200	23879.272		
Total	11815967.0	216			
Corrected Total	6668332.63	215			

a. R Squared = .284 (Adjusted R Squared = .230)

To answer Research Question 2, a three-factor ANOVA was run to analyze the effect of race, gender, and district on student grade level retention. Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for race and gender in each district and the mean number of grade level retentions for those populations. These results indicate that in this southeastern state, males are being retained in a grade level more than their female classmates. Appendix C includes descriptive statistics for the complete analysis.

**Table 4**

*Mean and Standard Deviation for Student Grade Level Retention*

	Male	Female
Black	13.48 (SD = 12.33)	8.17 (SD = 8.54)
White	12.92 (SD = 15.74)	6.83 (SD = 9.09)

Table 5 provides the results of the between-subjects effect; the analysis revealed that there is not a statistically significant joint effect of race and gender on grade retention  $p = .84$ ; however, there is a statistically significant main effect of gender on student grade level retention  $p = <.002$ . Males are being held back because they have failed a course ( $M = 13.20$ ) more than their female classmates ( $M = 7.50$ ). Additionally, district and race have a combined interaction with days missed ( $p = .016$ ). Simple main effect analysis also revealed district has a statistically significant effect on grade retention ( $p = .001$ ). Students in District 1 ( $M=15.47$ ) are being held back due to failing a core class more frequently than in District 2 ( $M = 12.05$ ), District 3 ( $M = 3.63$ ), or District 4 ( $M = 8.21$ ).

**Table 5**

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Dependent Variable: Retained

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	5743.369 <sup>a</sup>	15	382.891	3.065	<.001
Intercept	15798.632	1	15798.632	126.457	<.001
Gender	1243.899	1	1243.899	9.957	.002
DRace	.013	1	.013	.000	.992
District	2622.052	3	874.017	6.996	<.001
Gender * DRace	4.900	1	4.900	.039	.843
Gender * District	135.554	3	45.185	.362	.781
DRace * District	1326.918	3	442.306	3.540	.016
Gender * DRace * District	50.204	3	16.735	.134	.940
Error	21988.251	176	124.933		
Total	48295.000	192			
Corrected Total	27731.620	191			

a. R Squared = .207 (Adjusted R Squared = .140)

Table 6 shows the results of Tukey post hoc tests; these results indicated a statistically significant interaction between grade retentions in D1 and D3 ( $p = <.001$ ). Students in District 1 are retained in a grade level more than those in District 3.

**Table 6***Multiple Comparisons*

Dependent Variable: Retained

Tukey HSD

(I) District	(J) District	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	3.42	2.282	.439	-2.49	9.34
	3	11.85*	2.886	<.001	4.36	19.34
	4	7.27*	2.227	.007	1.49	13.05
2	1	-3.42	2.282	.439	-9.34	2.49
	3	8.43*	2.700	.011	1.42	15.43
	4	3.84	1.980	.215	-1.29	8.98
3	1	-11.85*	2.886	<.001	-19.34	-4.36
	2	-8.43*	2.700	.011	-15.43	-1.42
	4	-4.58	2.654	.313	-11.46	2.30
4	1	-7.27*	2.227	.007	-13.05	-1.49
	2	-3.84	1.980	.215	-8.98	1.29
	3	4.58	2.654	.313	-2.30	11.46

Based on observed means.

The error term is Mean Square(Error) = 124.933.

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 7 provides the mean and standard deviation (SD) in D1 and D3 for grade level retentions for Black students. These statistics suggest that students in D1 are retained in a grade level more than in the other districts studied; statistical significance is found between D1 and D3.

**Table 7***Grade Level Retention for Black Students*

	District 1	District 3
Male	15.50 (SD = 15.20)	5.50 (SD = 7.91)
Female	9.30 (SD = 10.59)	1.67 (SD = 1.37)

Table 8 provides the mean and standard deviation for White students in Districts 1 and 3; again, students in D1 are retained more than those in D3.

**Table 8**

*Grade Level Retention for White Students*

	District 1	District 3
Male	23.20 (SD = 21.90)	4.83 (SD = 3.43)
Female	13.90 (SD = 13.84)	2.50 (SD = 2.51)

**Qualitative Sample**

The research study was furthered by interviews with administrators in one of the districts used in the quantitative analysis. This bound case study was created to take a contemporary phenomenon and study it within its real-world context because the connection between the data and what is actually happening in the school regarding discipline is unclear (Yin, 2018). This was a bound case study as proposed by Yin (2018). After analyzing the data, the district for the case study was selected and the interview script was created to try and gain a more thorough understanding of how discipline is impacting students in the district. The district used for this analysis has a mean number of days missed for suspension of 192.48; out of the four districts studied, this is the second-highest number of days missed for students. Student suspension has negative impacts on student success; in fact, "a single disciplinary event at any time during a student's secondary academic career has a profound relationship on the likelihood that she or he will repeat a grade" (Marshbanks et al., 2015, p. 66). This district was selected for the case study to further understand how suspension is impacting student grade level retention and to explore how discipline policies and procedures may be contributing to the number of suspensions. In

2018, the district reported employing over 65,000 teachers with over 50% holding advanced degrees (School Report Card, 2018). Demographically, about 90% of the population has a high school diploma; about 20% hold a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2021b). There are ten secondary schools in this district. Five of these have populations of over 1,000 students, and the largest secondary school has about 2,700 students. The remaining schools have populations between 300-700 students. Interviews were conducted with administrators of four of these schools to help understand how discipline occurs in their schools and to better understand the quantitative analysis. E-mails were sent to 10 secondary administrators within the district; from those e-mails, five participants agreed to be interviewed. My goal was to have a representative from each school; I had a 50% return rate on my interview request where participants were interviewed. Table 6 provides a breakdown of the characteristics of each school in this district.

**Table 9***Secondary School Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Student Demographic</b>
<b>Lucy</b>	1	1541	83	Black = 312 White = 951
<b>Charlie Casey</b>	2	1721	100.5	Black = 111 White = 1350
<b>Stella</b>	3	1657	90.5	Black = 139 White = 1082
<b>Ruby</b>	4	345	22	Black = 107 White = 150

Interviews were both in-person and remotely via Zoom; audio recordings were transcribed and entered into a word document. After transcribing all the interviews, I separated the answers by question so that each respondent's answer was listed under the question asked (see Appendix D). This case study investigated a real-life, bounded system through detailed in-depth data collection from multiple sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study was bound by interviewing administrators in one district with a high number of mean days missed for suspension. The data analysis spiral was used to design the study; this spiral includes five key activities; managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and accessing interpretations, and finally, representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To begin, to respect my respondent's anonymity, I kept the participant's indefinable information confidential and assigned each participant a pseudonym. This data management process allowed me to begin the coding process. I started by reading the responses several times without marking the text, next, I read each response and underlined what I felt were the key points of their answers. This form of memoing allowed me to begin to see patterns; I added notes next to the underlined passages to help me identify themes. After repeating this process to ensure I marked the text appropriately, I highlighted specific words or phrases repeated in those key parts. This process allowed me to begin the process of narrowing these concepts into smaller categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Four themes were identified in the analysis; these allowed me to provide the narrative to explain further how discipline works in schools.

The first theme I noticed was the student's perspective and rights in the discipline process, and that became the code *student voice*. From there, I identified the role teachers play in the discipline process as a theme because it was mentioned by all the respondents when I asked about teachers' participation in the process. Each participant mentioned the teacher as either being a part of creating discipline policies or being part of the discipline process by providing statements. From the responses and analysis, *teacher participation* emerged as another code. Policies emerged as their own theme as participants talked about specific policies and consequences in their school buildings. This specific discussion of policies was repeated; therefore, *policies* became a code to represent various school and district policies. The final theme, student support, includes both the support offered for students who have been assigned in school or after-school suspension. This theme also remains as the final code, *student support*. These codes were used to identify themes that were later used to further interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Preliminary Results

### *Student voice*

Student voice became an identified theme because throughout the interviews, each interviewee addressed the role that students play in the discipline process. All respondents referred to student statements as a vital part of the discipline process and a student's right to due process. It is notable that these answers are the only ones that were consistent in all participant responses; answers to questions about other aspects of discipline varied based on the school. While schools varied in their discipline policies, each participant mentioned the student's voice and rights. Table 7 includes answers that were provided based on student voice in the disciplinary proceedings.

**Table 10**

*Theme Statements: Student's Voice in Discipline*

<b>School</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<b>1</b>	" Statements . . . from the student who received the report. And from as many witnesses, whether it's a teacher or another student"
<b>4</b>	"Students are given the right to share their story and access to due process. There are three sides to a story – student/other student/teacher - and then there is the truth. It's important to get all sides"
<b>2</b>	"Students have a right to appeal – and the discipline committee follows through on those consistently"

Each person interviewed mentioned the importance of a student's voice in the discipline process; two schools mentioned a student's right to appeal the discipline referral. The common

language used in these responses provides some consistency in discipline procedures between schools.

The negative impacts of suspension do not just impact the suspended student; schools that have an overly punitive environment impact the feelings of trust and caring between students and staff (Perry & Morris, 2015). When asked about student participation in the discipline process, participants discussed student statements, appeals, and the right to due process. The inclusion of students in the discipline proceedings using a discipline committee or grade level administrator may help foster feelings of trust and caring. Stella described the impact of a grade level administrator when she stated:

I know when I do discipline, I do talk about grades. I do talk about attendance. You know, I do try to build that relationship because chances are, I'm going to see them again and again, in my office. So, I want them to know that they have an ally in me, even though I do have to be the disciplinarian sometimes.

Stella's investment in these relationships may contribute to better student outcomes. Students who feel cared for report that pay more attention in class, comply with teacher rules, and show up to class more often (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

### ***Teacher Participation***

Teacher participation emerged as another theme because all respondents discussed the teacher's impact on discipline proceedings, and three participants specifically discussed the teacher's role in the discipline process in their answers. Notably, Stella and Charlie spoke about the potential for discipline because of the teacher's perception of student behavior. These discretionary discipline incidents are where research has shown that Black students are more

likely to receive discipline referrals (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Stella stated that at her school, “sometimes supporting the teacher results in harsher discipline than we may like.” She also spoke of teachers and how she tries to prevent these more discretionary discipline incidents. Stella explained that she would “coach up teachers too. Cause there are some teachers that will use administration as their classroom management and for silly things, you know? And so we’ll try to come up with strategies to help the students in that classroom setting itself, to keep them out of discipline and missing class”. These responses demonstrate the subjective quality of discipline referrals; what one teacher sees as a discipline issue may not be the same for others. The differences in perceived disrespect or disruption can lead to disparity in discipline if school staff are not aware of their biases and how they may impact their perception of behaviors (Girvan et al., 2017).

Teacher participation in the discipline process is valuable; however, only one participant discussed the impact of relationships in discipline proceedings on the administrative level. Further, no participants included the importance of positive teacher-student relationships as an intervention or future intervention. This is important because the subjective nature of discipline can result in students being suspended for disruption and defiance (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Black girls are often the recipients of discipline referrals because of behaviors that are interpreted as defiant or disrespectful. Relationships are the key to improving outcomes for Black girls (and all students); Monquie Morris (2016) states that what should be developed and nurtured in schools is “a deeper awareness of the numerous social factors – related to race, gender, sexuality, disability status, or other identities – that have the power to trigger Black girls and shape their interactions with people in the school building” (p. 86). Relationships can help improve

outcomes for all students; in fact, when a teacher uses a relational approach to discipline there are fewer subjective discipline referrals (Gregory & Ripski, 2008).

### *Policies*

Another theme that emerged was policies because each school used in this study has different ones regarding student behavior. This shows a lack of consistency within the district when it comes to subjective discipline incidents. For example, Charlie explained that at his school, teacher disrespect is an automatic suspension. Stella described a similar policy at her school; however, there, teacher disrespect only results in suspension when it is warranted because the disrespect/defiance is really bad. Another difference in school policies is in their cell phone policies; only one school in this study has a no cell phone policy. Lucy explained that at her school there is a no cell phone use policy and after five infractions students are suspended. She also mentioned that they asked teachers if they wanted to revisit this policy before the most recent school year, and they all agreed to keep the policy.

Notably, only one school interviewed addressed the use of after-school detention rather than suspension. Table 8 provides the participant's explanation of after-school detention.

**Table 11**

#### *Alternatives to Suspension*

<b>School</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>3</b>	“We do have after-school detention at our school, and we see it as more of a deterrent for behaviors because it takes up the student/parent’s time. So, the students are missing their practices for a sports team they are on or a fine arts program they are in . . . so I would say after-school detentions are a stiffer punishment versus in-school suspension”

According to Stella, after-school detention is more effective as a deterrent than in-school suspension because it is an inconvenience to students and parents. Even more, students must miss any ex curricular activities and/or practices if they are assigned after-school detention. The use of an alternative to exclusionary discipline by the school is a positive step to reducing student suspensions. Although none of the participants identified a specific program to improve school discipline, the use of after-school detention is an intervention because it works to help decrease the use of exclusionary discipline. Skiba et al. (2015) discuss the importance of the school's principal in supporting alternative disciplinary approaches, and the use of after school detention as an alternative is an indication that is occurring at this school.

Students are missing instructional time because of suspension in this southeastern state. In District 1, students of both races studied missed a considerable number of days because of suspension; the quantitative analysis revealed that Black students miss  $M = 179.23$  and White students miss  $M = 205.73$ . Although there was not a statistically significant interaction between the district and race ( $p = 4.92$ ) it is still important for schools to examine their procedures to determine potential policies and/or programs to help improve student outcomes and prevent disparity.

### ***Student Support***

The final theme identified was asked as a specific question; however, participants included support in other parts of the interview. According to the district policy, students are not allowed to participate in school events or activities while suspended (District Handbook, 2022). Charlie and Stella mentioned that since Google Meets are considered an extension of the classroom, students cannot participate. However, at Ruby's school, students are permitted to attend Google Meets as a piece of support they offer students who are suspended. However,

students may receive support while serving in-school suspension (ISS). Participants discussed how their schools support students when given ISS in the interviews; one-way schools do this is by having students log into a google meet from ISS and attend their class virtually. Participants also discussed the use of counselors, community support, and teachers to help support students who have been assigned to ISS. Table 8 provides responses that address support for students in ISS.

**Table 12**

*Student Support When Suspended*

<b>School</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<b>3</b>	“The job coach and grad coach positions for this and the next two years have been a big help because they help the at-risk students, and we know the academic side and behavior side typically go hand in hand”
<b>2</b>	“They turn in assignments late without penalty with ISS or OSS unless the teacher assigns work specifically to be done while they are out of the classroom”
<b>1</b>	“When a SPED (Special Education) student is in ISS, we make sure we serve them their Literacy/Numeracy class, so they can get individual help”
<b>2</b>	“We have ISS set up so that counselors check in with students with repeated ISS”

When students are suspended and do not receive academic support they fall behind their non-suspended peers and experience course failure (Balfanz et al., 2015). Academic support may help students who are suspended continue their academic work while they cannot be on the school’s campus. The quantitative analysis revealed that students in District 1 are retained more

than their peers ( $M = 15.47$ ); statistical significance is found in the interactions between District 1 and District 3 ( $p = <.001$ ) and District 1 and District 4 ( $p = .007$ ).

This study did not examine the interaction between days missed for suspension and student grade level retention; however, when students miss school for discipline purposes, they miss the opportunity to learn and engage positively in school (Lacoe et al., 2019). In this district there is  $M = 15.47$  for student grade level retentions, and a  $M = 192.48$  of days missed due to suspension. Determining if there is an interaction between suspension and retention may benefit the district and support the need for an intervention program and/or an update to suspension policies. The implementation of these programs or revisions may help provide more support for students and help improve the number of student suspensions and grade level retentions.

## **Reflections**

The interview questions did not directly ask about disparity in the school's discipline but focused on the specific discipline procedures each school uses. The questions aimed to understand procedures and barriers in discipline policies. Further, participants were asked about their intervention policies and/or plans to implement them in the future. This question was designed to open the conversation up to what schools would like to see change in their policies or procedures to make them more equitable. None of the schools used in this data collection uses a specific intervention program. Interestingly, only one participant discussed the lack of intervention as a weakness in the discipline procedures and an area that needs improvement. This is interesting because the mean days missed for suspension is 192.48 which is the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the study.

**Table 13***Discipline Interventions in School*

<b>Reflections</b>	
<b>Casey</b>	“This is an area we need improvement – we need to work on it. We can’t forget the human element to discipline.”

Casey is the only participant who explicitly stated that improvement is needed in the current discipline practices at her school. Participants may have chosen not to discuss race and/or concerns with their discipline policies because of the political climate in the Southeastern United States. Even more, discussing race as an administrator of the district is difficult, and participants may have been reserved in their reflections because they were concerned about how they were representing their school and/or district. Despite this, the researcher intentionally designed the questions to reflect rather than criticize the school’s procedures. In discussing the procedures, the researcher connected what is happening in schools with the quantitative data and the review literature.

The schools used in this study have different policies that result in student suspension; these inconsistencies may create more opportunities for disparity. Even more, students who are suspended are less connected to school and less motivated to achieve academic success (Gregory et al., 2010). This district has the highest number of student grade level retentions, and the disparity is seen in its interaction with two other districts. The high number of student suspensions and the number of student grade level retentions indicate that there is a need for an intervention and/or practice such as PBIS or Restorative Justice. The impact of these programs can help with both the academic and behavioral issues that are resulting in student failure and suspension. For example, even one instance of in school suspension in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade increases a student's chances of grade level retention in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Marshbanks et al., 2015).

Interviews with administrators revealed that there are differences in behaviors that have exclusionary consequences within the district. The data used in this study is specific to the district and study; therefore, other districts may wish to if the data matches their student population and if it is beneficial to do their own analysis on student suspension and grade level retention.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides the results of this mixed method's sequential explanatory study. The chapter began by providing descriptive statistics for quantitative analysis. It continued by providing the between-subject effects to explain the statistical significance of variable interactions. The chapter continues with qualitative analysis based on participant interviews. Themes were identified and discussed; specific participant responses were shared to demonstrate the differences in discipline policies and perspectives based on the school.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This mixed method's sequential explanatory study was designed to determine if disparities exist in suspension and grade level retention in a southeastern state. Further, if disparities were found, examine how discipline is handled within school buildings in one of the districts studied. Through the purposive selection of participants in the qualitative stage of the study, I was able to answer questions about discipline within schools that statistical data could not provide (Yin, 2016). This study also aimed to determine if gender, race, and the district attended have a statistically significant interaction with student grade level retention. Statistical data provided to the public by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is not provided for the district studied for graduation rate; however, grade level retention is provided which is an indicator of an at-risk student. Failing a core class in 9<sup>th</sup> grade is used to help identify at-risk students (Rickles et al., 2018), so grade retention for each year of high school was used as the dependent variable used in this study. When students miss school, they are more disconnected from the school environment, and “the cycle of disengagement and receipt of disciplinary actions leads to lower academic achievement” (Toldson et al., 2015). Even more, school suspension is tied to several other negative student outcomes, such as not earning a higher education, getting arrested, and being incarcerated (Shollenberger, 2015).

### **Summary of Findings**

The quantitative data analysis revealed that there is not a statistically significant joint effect between the number of days missed for suspension and a student's race and gender. This tells us race and gender combined do not have a statistical significance when you examine the number of days students miss for suspension. However, we learn from this analysis that the

individual effects of race ( $p = .002$ ), gender ( $p = <.001$ ), and district ( $p = .001$ ) is significant. This means individually, each of the independent variables has a statistically significant interaction with the number of days missed for suspension. Even more, there is a joint effect of race and district on days missed for suspension ( $p = .003$ ). Consequently, the impact of each of those variables on discipline is important to explore. It is important because students who are suspended in high school are more likely to be incarcerated as young adults, and for males, one instance of suspension increases their odds of incarceration more so than females (Hemez et al., 2020). Notably, the three-factor ANOVA analysis revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between race and district and days missed due to suspension for two of the districts used in the study. Qualitative analysis revealed the following themes regarding discipline in schools: student voice, teacher participation, policies, and student support. It is also important to note that the conclusions drawn are based on this study and do not apply to all situations involving discipline and/or student grade level retention.

### **Interpretation of Quantitative Findings**

RQ1: Do race, gender, and district impact the number of days missed due to suspension for Black students?

Race, gender, and district do not have a joint effect on the number of days missed due to suspension ( $p = .778$ ); however, the main effect of race has an impact on days missed and the main effect of gender has an impact on the number of days missed because of suspension. This means that race interacts with days missed ( $p = .002$ ) and gender interacts with days missed ( $p = <.001$ ), but they do not have a combined interaction with the number of days a student miss for suspension. There is also statistical significance in the district and days missed due to suspension. This means that independently, race impacts the number of days students miss

school because they are suspended and the same is true for gender; Black students and males miss more days due to suspension than their peers. Despite the lack of statistical significance in their joint effect, it is still important for schools to examine their discipline policies and the way race and gender may impact decisions regarding behavior. The odds of a male being suspended are twice as great as the odds of a female (Finn & Servoss, 2015). In agreement with the Finn & Servoss (2015) study, males in this study (regardless of race) miss more days due to suspension than females. In fact, males miss a mean of 206.68 ( $SD = 207.87$ ) while females miss a mean of 102.08 ( $SD = 116.57$ ) days (Crist, 2022). These findings are important because school suspension is tied to a number of negative outcomes, but most relevant to this study is the academic impact. Racial inequalities in school suspensions contribute to racial inequalities that exist in achievement. Even more, students who are suspended score lower on end-of-the-year tests than students who have not been suspended (Morris & Perry, 2016). The impact of suspension is not just seen in the student who is suspended, non-suspended students who attend schools with higher levels of suspension have declining academic achievement (Perry & Morris, 2014) as well. Exclusionary discipline has negative impacts on all students, so higher numbers of days missed due to suspension should alert schools and districts to potential achievement concerns.

Black females experience discipline in inequitable ways as well when their behaviors are mislabeled as defiant or disrespectful. Monique Morris (2016) discusses how the behaviors that are expected from females may be different from the behavioral expectations and norms for females in the Black and African American communities. She states that “for Black girls, to be ‘ghetto’ represents a certain resilience to how poverty has shaped racial and gender oppression. To be ‘loud’ is a demand to be heard. To have an ‘attitude’ is to reject a doctrine of invisibility

and mistreatment” (p. 19). When referrals are issued for subjective infractions, it is behaviors similar to those Morris describes that are misinterpreted as defiant. This tells us that it is important for faculty and staff in schools to be aware of the cultural differences that exist in their students. Black females are not the only students who are impacted by behavioral expectations that do not match those in their home and community; this cultural discontinuity impacts how they feel about school. All students feel less connected to school adults when there are disparities in school suspensions; the feelings of a student’s connectedness are linked to academic outcomes (Anyon et al., 2016). This is important because in my study, race was found to have a statistically significant impact on suspensions. Culturally responsive classrooms and schools are one way that schools can begin the work of improving educational outcomes for all students.

Although no statistical significance was found in the joint effect, the analysis did reveal that the relationship between race \* district is significant. Each district used in this study is classified as urban which is important because research shows that in urban areas the demographic makeup of the school impacts student outcomes. In a 2018 study by Marshbanks et al., statistical significance was found in the number of Black students in a school being associated with higher rates of referrals to juvenile justice. This relates to my study because if a district already has a high number of suspensions, it may be an indicator of disparities existing within the schools. In my analysis it is also notable that the mean number of days missed due to suspension in the four districts is 154.38; however, in District Two the mean is 202.37. Although the quantitative analysis did not look at specific schools within the districts, the qualitative portion examined discipline in secondary schools within one district. Interviews with administrators revealed that there are differences in behaviors that have exclusionary consequences within the district. The data used in this study is specific to the district and study;

therefore, other districts may wish to if the data matches their student population and if it is beneficial to do their own analysis on student suspension and grade level retention.

Research Question 2: Do race, gender, and district impact the number of student grade level retentions in a Southeastern State?

Even a single instance of ISS in 9<sup>th</sup> grade almost doubles the probability of a student being retained (Marshbanks et al., 2015). Black students receive almost twice as many suspensions as their White peers (Balfanz et al., 2015). This study was designed to explore how race and gender impact student suspension and grade level retention in a southeastern state. Research Question 2 aimed to determine if race, gender, and district impact the number of student grade level retentions. Although there was no statistically significant interactions between race and gender with grade level retention in my study, the analysis revealed that males are retained more than females. This means gender impacts the number of days students miss due to suspension; Black males miss the most days and White females miss the least number of days. This is important because males are also more likely to receive disciplinary action (Finn & Servoss, 2015), and if males are missing more days because of suspension, it may impact their success in a core class. The result of that failure could be grade level retention; therefore, it is important for schools and districts to determine what is causing these grade level retentions.

A post hoc analysis showed a statistically significant interaction between districts and race. Students in District Three are more likely than those in other districts studied to be retained in a grade level. All four district studies have similar demographics and share urban qualities; the major difference is their location within the state. It is important for districts to examine why they see higher numbers of grade level retentions so that they can help determine what is keeping these students from academic success. The higher numbers of student grade level retentions in

District Three indicate a need for further research to determine the cause and begin work to improve academic outcomes for all students. In addition, it is important that districts see if there is a connection between grade level retention and exclusionary discipline. In this study the researcher found that districts with higher numbers of student suspensions also have a higher number of grade level retentions. For example, District One and District Two have the highest mean days missed for suspension and the highest mean student grade level retentions. Table 14 shows each district's mean days missed and mean grade level retentions.

**Table 14**

*Suspension and Retention*

	Days Missed for Suspension	Grade Level Retentions
District One	$M = 192.48$	$M = 15.47$
District Two	$M = 202.37$	$M = 12.05$

This may mean alternative discipline is also a drop out prevention method. When students are retained in a grade level, they are more likely to drop out (Marshbanks et al., 2015). In addition to improving graduation rates, alternative discipline may also help schools improve their academic outcomes. Students who are suspended have lower math and reading scores (Perry & Morris, 2016; Perry & Morris, 2014). Alternative discipline programs/policies may help improve academic achievement and lower grade level retentions.

**Interpretation of Qualitative Findings**

This study reveals that students in a southeastern state are missing a significant amount of instructional time due to suspension; the mean days missed for the four districts in this study is 154.38. This is important because just one instance of suspension can have long term impacts on student success both in and out of the school setting (Gregory et al., 2010; Hemez et al., 2020;

Toldson et al., 2015). Missed instructional time has a negative impact on student success, and the 2019 COVID pandemic removed students from the academic setting. Students are just returning to school from periods of remote and hybrid learning because of the pandemic, and learning loss is a concern for all levels of learning. When students miss school because of suspension, they are missing even more instructional time. Therefore, schools and districts must work to decrease the number of times a student misses school because of suspension; otherwise, the combined impact of missed time due to the pandemic and due to school suspension will leave students even more detached from the learning environment and less engaged in instruction. Even more, the same populations most impacted by school discipline are those most impacted by the pandemic (Einhorn, 2022).

One of the more surprising results of the qualitative analysis is that schools handle discipline differently despite being in the same district. Casey discussed that she believes that discipline should be consistent in the district; she believes that policies and procedures should be the same regardless of which school a student attends. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that the schools used in this part of my analysis handle discipline differently. There is consistency in objective infractions involving violence, alcohol, or drugs; however, subjective categories such as disrespect and disruption are handled differently. In fact, even the way schools handle discipline regarding attendance (skipping and school/class tardies) and phone violations are different based on the school attended. Lucy's school has a zero cell phone use policy, and when this policy is violated, students face disciplinary action. However, at Charlie's school, the teacher determines the phone policy in their classroom. This is important because there is no consistency in this district when it comes to school rules and policies and the suspension of students.

None of the participant schools use a specific intervention or alternative discipline program. The schools have various models of discipline procedures; Table 15 includes responses participants gave then asked what school wide intervention they use.

**Table 15**

*School wide intervention responses*

Participant	Response
Lucy	“Class wide meetings in the beginning of the year with each grade level to ensure they are aware of the consequences of behavior. We also have our student handbook posted online”
Ruby	“We have safety precautions and safety measures in place. For example, we have teacher duty stations, admins on duty, and RBHS & a guidance counselor”

Responses from the other two participants were notable because they differed from the others in their reflections. For example, although Stella’s response did not include a specific program, she did discuss alternative interventions in place that are designed to help students. The first is the job and grad coach positions that schools were allocated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second is a community resource the school uses to help at-risk students. Table 16 includes her description of how the coach positions and community are used to help with student discipline.

**Table 16***Interventions at School*

Job and Grad Coach	“this has been a big help because they help the at-risk students, which we all know the academic side and behavior side typically go hand in hand. So if they are failing academically they’re probably not doing so hot behavior wise as well. So they are instrumental right now in helping kids focus and boosting them”
Community Resources	“with some of my freshmen students, there’s a program [ . . . ] and they take at risk teens from all over the county and [ . . . ] they check on their grades and attendance [ . . . ] because again, a lot of times the kids that have repeat negative behavior may not have the most positive adult figures in their life. So this is one way they can get that outside of school”

Although not a specific program, Stella is the only participant that discussed interventions and the connection between discipline and academics. The district may want to examine the success of these interventions and if they impact the number of student suspensions and grade level retentions.

The qualitative analysis also found differences in the way two administrators in the same school feel about their intervention practices. Casey and Charlie work in the same building and their responses are included in Table 17.

**Table 17***Improvements Needed*

<b>Casey</b>	“this is an area we need improvement – we need to work on it. We can’t forget the human element to discipline. I would love to look at incentives we can offer for students who have no discipline or have discipline but then make changes and no longer gets in trouble”
<b>Charlie</b>	“It’s not the program it’s who initiates it; you have to have the time and effort, and someone designated to follow through and ensure it’s being implemented”

Casey is the only participant who identified the lack of intervention as something that needs improvement; it is interesting that an administrator in the same building had a different response. Charlie explained why the school did not have an intervention policy rather than describing a current program or discussing the need for one. It may be beneficial to explore the different perceptions of the current discipline policies within schools between administrators, staff, and students.

**Limitations**

COVID 19 has impacted data collection in the United States; one of the limitations of this study is that uses data from the 2017-2018 school year. Since this study is focused on four districts in one Southeastern state, generalizations about other states and districts cannot be made.

Another limitation of this study is that qualitative analysis was conducted through interviews with school administrators in one district. While the answers were valuable to this study, they may be reflective of a particular area’s culture and values and are not representative of another area in the state.

## **Suggestions for the Future**

Further research should be done to determine potential reasons for the grade retention of males. Some questions to be explored are: why are males being retained more than females? Is there a commonality in the course that students fail? Is this also occurring in other parts of the state and/or country? This study did not include socioeconomic status (SES) as a variable; however, determining the impact of SES on both retention and discipline would also be beneficial. Balfanz et al. (2015) examined the impact of SES on student discipline and found that it is the student factor most strongly related to suspension; however, even when controlling for SES, their study showed that Black students had significantly higher suspension rates. Examining how these interact in this southeastern state would provide meaningful data in the analysis of student discipline and its impact on academic success.

Future studies should be done using upcoming data; the OCR will release updated data in 2022. The impact of the pandemic on school operations may change the way discipline occurred and was handled in schools. Determining the impact of the closures on school discipline and retention will be beneficial as schools begin to help students readjust to the school environment and interact with their peers. The social emotional impact of the pandemic on student behavior and school discipline may also assist schools in keeping students in school and graduating. A report from CBS News (2022) discusses the rise in discipline concerns since students returned to school post-pandemic (Einhorn, 2022). Schools throughout the nation are seeing a rise in the number of physical altercations and do not have the resources to determine the emotional causes for these discipline issues. Further, the student population hardest hit by the pandemic is the same as the population most likely to experience discipline disproportionately (Einhorn, 2022).

Another extension of this research should be based on the qualitative analysis; this study focused on administrators and their opinion on their school's discipline policy; however, I hope to examine the principals' responses in relationship with those of staff and students. A differing opinion or perspective of discipline proceedings could benefit our understanding of school discipline.

### **Conclusion**

In a southeastern state, race and gender have a statistically significant impact on the number of school days students miss for suspension. Males in this state are being retained more than their female counterparts; Black males miss more days due to suspension than their White peers. The qualitative analysis revealed that schools handle discipline differently within a southeastern district; students face suspension for breaking policies and rules specific to their school and those objectively assigned through district/state policies. The district may want to examine the possible interaction between student grade level retention and the days missed for suspension. Suspension negatively impacts student success (Morrish & Perry, 2016), and with the return of students to the classroom after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that schools and districts work to find alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions used in Qualitative Research

1. Can you tell me about your school's discipline procedures?
2. How do students participate in the discipline proceedings at school? (Clarification: how do students find out what happens because of their infraction.)
3. What offenses at your school result in out of school suspension?
4. How does your school use In School Suspension?
5. What type of support do students receive while they have ISS or OSS?
6. What school wide intervention do you use to help prevent discipline infractions?
7. Is there anything you would like to add or change about this program?
  - a. Can you tell me more about that?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about how your school handles student discipline?

## Appendix B

### Descriptive Statistics for Research Question 1

**Descriptive Statistics**

Dependent Variable: DM

D Race	Gender	District	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
B	F	1	115.64	131.863	11
		2	154.33	115.266	15
		3	101.33	90.750	9
		4	172.89	172.791	19
		Total	144.15	137.764	54
	M	1	242.82	265.898	11
		2	301.53	182.923	15
		3	151.67	113.355	9
		4	255.53	264.793	19
		Total	248.41	224.374	54
	Total	1	179.23	214.904	22
		2	227.93	167.843	30
		3	126.50	102.922	18
		4	214.21	224.473	38
Total		196.28	192.563	108	
W	F	1	107.82	69.295	11
		2	95.47	85.493	15
		3	42.44	36.177	9
		4	12.68	19.411	19
		Total	60.02	69.625	54
	M	1	303.64	235.524	11
		2	258.13	173.380	15
		3	94.56	71.215	9
		4	44.37	70.152	19
		Total	164.93	182.612	54
	Total	1	205.73	196.836	22
		2	176.80	157.746	30
		3	68.50	61.003	18
		4	28.53	53.246	38
Total		112.47	147.296	108	
Total	F	1	111.73	102.871	22
		2	124.90	104.109	30
		3	71.89	73.549	18
		4	92.79	145.940	38
		Total	102.08	116.568	108
	M	1	273.23	247.086	22
		2	279.83	176.501	30
		3	123.11	96.419	18
		4	149.95	218.981	38
		Total	206.67	207.877	108
	Total	1	192.48	204.099	44
		2	202.37	163.532	60
		3	97.50	88.417	36
		4	121.37	187.060	76
Total		154.38	176.112	216	

## Appendix C

### Descriptive Statistics for Research Question 2

*Descriptive Statistics*

Dependent Variable: Retained

District	Gender	D Race	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	F	B	9.30	10.594	10
		W	13.90	13.836	10
		Total	11.60	12.223	20
	M	B	15.50	15.204	10
		W	23.20	21.898	10
		Total	19.35	18.768	20
	Total	B	12.40	13.145	20
		W	18.55	18.455	20
		Total	15.47	16.118	40
2	F	B	8.53	7.708	15
		W	8.67	7.088	15
		Total	8.60	7.276	30
	M	B	14.20	10.304	15
		W	16.80	12.565	15
		Total	15.50	11.368	30
	Total	B	11.37	9.394	30
		W	12.73	10.844	30
		Total	12.05	10.082	60
3	F	B	1.67	1.366	6
		W	2.50	2.510	6
		Total	2.08	1.975	12
	M	B	5.50	7.918	6
		W	4.83	3.430	6
		Total	5.17	5.828	12
	Total	B	3.58	5.775	12
		W	3.67	3.114	12
		Total	3.63	4.538	24
4	F	B	9.47	8.945	17
		W	2.59	5.374	17
		Total	6.03	8.062	34
	M	B	14.47	13.281	17
		W	6.29	12.868	17
		Total	10.38	13.529	34
	Total	B	11.97	11.435	34
		W	4.44	9.891	34
		Total	8.21	11.268	68
Total	F	B	8.17	8.541	48
		W	6.83	9.096	48
		Total	7.50	8.802	96
	M	B	13.48	12.334	48
		W	12.92	15.748	48
		Total	13.20	14.072	96
	Total	B	10.82	10.885	96
		W	9.88	13.152	96
		Total	10.35	12.050	192

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

#### 1. Can you tell me about your school's discipline procedures?

Lucy: Most of our discipline comes from tardies and cell phones. At our school we do not allow cell phones to be used in any way during the school day. When tardies and cell phones are logged, our secretary inputs the data into Review 360 and assigns the discipline. She sends out tardygrams and phone grams to the students to notify them of when their ISS time will take place. She sends out a phone dialer to those student's parents afterschool to notify them. The administrator over that grade level then processes the referral through Review 360.

Stella- So we have our level one offenses are listed in our faculty handbook in the student handbook, so that everybody is aware of what's to come. If you violate our level one, um, anything that's a level two or three that's brought to our attention. We get as many statements as we can, um, from the student who received the report. And for many witnesses, whether it's a teacher or another student, um, so that we can see the whole picture pretty much.

Charlie- It runs smooth – mechanics of it are very good. It is transparent, quick, and efficient. Students know the penalty – they use a rubric – may not be consistent, but it is fair. Teachers are responsible for 99% of the discipline – ownership of the process is on teachers. Teachers feel a part of it. There is a clear rubric for discipline proceedings– the rubric provides scenarios that bring the issue down to a specific behavior. A negative but it's also what we have to do – you have to support teachers and sometimes supporting the teacher results in harsher discipline than you may like.

Casey – discipline should be consistent in schools – and it should also be that way within the district and nation. Our schools is firm and equitable. Students are given the right to share their story and access to due process. There are three sides to a story – student/other student/teacher - and then there is the truth. It's important to get all sides.

Ruby: We follow Horry County School's Administrative Handbook. The teachers handle teacher-managed incidents in their classrooms; however, when they write a discipline referral for admin, admin handles administrative referrals.

**2. How do students participate in the discipline proceedings at school? (Clarification: how do students find out what happens because of their infraction.)**

Lucy - If it is a tardy or a cell phone, they will get a note in their 1st block class. If it is any other discipline, they will be called by their respective grade level administrator to give them due process.

Charlie- Students have a right to appeal – and the discipline committee follows through on those consistently. Teachers also feel comfortable providing feedback on these proceedings.

Stella- if they have any evidence that they would like to present that with cell phones, being everywhere, a lot of students do have recordings and then that's unfortunate, but also beneficial at times, um, to help state their cases.

So we notify them. Um, we have a strict policy at our school that while we are doing our investigation or while we are discussing their discipline, their phones are not to be in their possession so that they have our undivided attention. But we also need to make sure as administrators, that we are the ones who are notifying the parents and guardians and not the kids via.

Or something ahead of time. So we never want them to leave the building without making that parent contact as well.

Casey – if they know what they are going to beforehand (discipline committee) they can talk to all parties and students directly. Then it depends on the circumstances – you have to do your research. Also, you need to process personal emotions so that you can take the emotions out of assigning consequences.

Ruby - All students are given due process. They are told at the moment in time a discipline consequence occurs.

### **3. What offenses at your school result in out of school suspension?**

Lucy - Using the “f” word, Vaping, Most Level 3 offenses (fighting, weapons, etc.), not following the rules of ISS, and cell phone violations past 5 offenses.

Charlie - Drugs and alcohol, bullying, vaping, smoking but also disrespect is an automatic OSS, and for a specific number of tardies there is an automatic suspension.

Stella - Definitely the level threes. Um, so those are gonna be your drugs, your fighting, um, vapes, um, you know, that type of stuff, pornography.

Um, but sometimes the level twos will, um, if it's like really bad defiance district, Towards a faculty member. Um, or if we just need the time to do our full investigation, we will actually have like a temporary suspension until we have notified them in the parents that we have concluded our investigation.

Um, cause sometimes it's just too hostile to keep a child there. You know, especially if it's with a teacher in particular, we don't want them seeing them in class, you know, to make anything

worse than what it is. Um, or if there's a potential of a friend or something like that. Um, so we just want to give them a chance to not get themselves in further trouble.

Casey – fight, kick, hit, punch, teacher disrespect, F word, repeat offenses, drugs, alcohol assault. There is a list of offenses that automatically get OSS – also, there can be incidents off-campus that impact a student in school.

Ruby: Level 2 & 3 offenses Vaping, Tobacco, Fighting, Hit, Kit, Punch, etc.

#### **4. How does your school use In School Suspension?**

Lucy - We use ISS for students who are offenders of Level 1 or Level 2 offenses. We also use ISS as a holding area when a student is kicked out of class.

Charlie - It is a deterrent for student behavior – the tough part is it's a hard job position to fill and maintain. The teacher in that room often grows sour and unhappy and so keeping a consistent adult in there is a problem. I wish it were more – if it were done right – we have a plan for guidance counselors to be involved when students have repeatedly been placed in ISS. We also are able to make a place students do not want to go when we have a consistent person in that job.

Stella - So in school, the suspension is not our go-to. Um, we do have after-school detention at our school, and we see that as more of a deterrent for behaviors because it takes up there. So, the students are missing their practices, you know, for a sports team they're on or a fine arts program that they're in the parents, it's an inconvenience to them because they will then have to come to pick the kid up if they don't drive, you know, for the younger students.

So I would say after-school detentions are more of a stiffer punishment versus the in-school suspension. So, but once a student has had a couple after-schools, then we use that whole day ISS. So it's definitely not our go-to.

Casey – a deterrent for kids who may not repeat offenses after they have a consequence. It keeps them in the building but not in the environment where they got in trouble. It also can give them a good chance to make up work while in ISS – also, guidance is used for repeat offenders. The hope is that ISS helps them learn from their mistakes.

Ruby- We really do not have ISS. We have to create ISS when we have no other option to send a student home.

#### **6. What type of support do students receive while they have ISS or OSS?**

Lucy - When a SPED student is in ISS, we make sure we serve them their Literacy/Numeracy class, so they can receive individualized help. Our ISS room is fitted with privacy desks with desktop computers.

Charlie - In ISS we have it set up so that counselors check in with students when they have ISS – students on OSS are not allowed to participate in school events so they are not given any direct support.

Stella - Um, so with the ISS, we do allow students to attend Google meets. If their teachers are holding them, um, without a school suspension, we do not. Um, because during that you are not to be on Orie county schools' property, and we see that virtual as an extension of being in the classroom. So for OSS, they can't, but ISS.

And meet with their teachers, um, and be part of the class. And then they have Google classroom for in-school and out-of-school suspension to keep up with their work. If we know ahead of time that a family doesn't have internet, um, or doesn't have those resources, we do ask the teachers to kind of get something together.

Um, even if it's just a worksheet to keep them caught up when they're out of school. Um, and then for our special ed students, when they have in-school suspension, we do attach their case, man. To our notification for two teachers that they're going to be in school so that they can pop in, you know, for, you know, 10, 15 minutes just to make sure the students are getting whatever their special needs requirements are for the day as well.

Casey – They can turn in assignments late without penalty when ISS or OSS – unless the teacher specifically assigns work that is to be done while on ISS or OSS and they didn't do it.

Ruby: They have teacher support and online support through Google Meet or Google Classroom.

### **8. What school wide intervention do you use to help prevent discipline infractions?**

Lucy - We have class meetings in the beginning of the year with each grade level to ensure they are aware of the consequences of behavior. We also have our student handbook posted online.

Charlie - It's not the program its who initiates it/you have to have the time and effort and someone designated to follow through and ensure it's being implemented.

Stella = We don't have like one per se strictly for discipline, but with the new. Job coach and grad coach positions or the Sr funds, um, for this year in the next two years, that has been a big help because they help the at-risk students, which we all know the academic side and behavior side typically go hand in hand.

So if they're failing academically, they're probably not doing so hot behavior wise as well. So they are instrumental right now in helping kids focus and boosting them. They can be successful in school. Um, and I also use with some of my freshmen students, there's a program [...] um, out of [...] where they're based out of.

And they take at risk teens from all over the county and they get parental rights to like power school and things like that. So they will check in on their grades and their attendance. They can have, they can pop in at the schools because they have the parental rights. They do college tours with the kids and they'll do field trips and they'll do like karate classes and stuff as an incentive as well.

Because again, a lot of times the kids that have repeat negative behavior may not have the most positive adult figures in their life. So this is one way that they can get that outside of school.

Casey- this is an area we need improvement – we need to work on it. We can't forget the human element to discipline. I would love to look at incentives we can offer for students who have no discipline or have discipline but then make changes and no longer gets in trouble.

Ruby: We have safety precautions and safety measures in place. For example we have teacher duty stations, admins on duty, and RBHS & a guidance counselor.

**9. Is there anything you would like to add or change about this program?**

Lucy- We regularly ask for student and teacher input on discipline and consequences. For example, 2 years ago we asked teachers whether they would like us to revamp our cell phone policy to give the students a little bit more freedom. The teachers all said no, they preferred to keep the policy as is. It's working well. I like that we do it by grade level, as I have all 10th graders, so when I am dealing with a student with multiple offenses, I know the details of each situation.

Charlie - Our policy is consistent and fair – the same language is used so that it is common between teachers, administrators, and students.

Stella - (last *TWO QUESTIONS ARE COMBINED*)

I think that as an administration, we need to be doing a more consistent job of reminding students of policies. Like now that the weather's warming up dress code, you know, things will start getting shorter. Um, you know, for guys and girls. Um, so just things like that and reminding them of the tardy policies and because you get complacent, you know, and it's just good to have those reminders.

Something I'd like to see happen more often. It's just having that open line of communication so that everyone's on the same page. Um, we, I mean, honestly, part of the, what I love about my team is we really do look at the child holistically.

Um, and we're not there just to be the bad guy. I know when I do discipline, I do talk about grades. I do talk about attendance. You know, I do try to build that relationship because chances are, I'm going to see them again and again in my office. So I want them to know that they have an ally in me, even though I do have to be the disciplinarian sometimes.

And you know, the other side of that is too I'll coach up teachers too. Cause there are some teachers who will use administration as their classroom management and. For silly little things, you know? And so we'll try to come up with strategies to help the students in the classroom setting itself, to keep them out of, you know, disciplining, missing all their stuff.

Casey - We are preparing students for post secondary success – giving them life skills like communication and working skills. I like the discipline committee it helps with consistency – due process and appropriate actions.

Ruby - Our school is unique in the sense that students have to meet certain criteria to apply and be accepted in our program. They have to be first generation college students.

I think we are very flexible with our tardy policy because we have to be mindful of our students taking dual enrollment classes. Over half take college classes and assigning students ISS or OSS can be very tricky.

