

Study reveals the importance of parental trust in schools for reducing exclusionary discipline

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When a teacher refers a student to the principal's office or a principal suspends a student, parents might first receive a phone call and then have

a conference with administrators and teachers. But what role do prior interactions and the relationships between families and school personnel play in successfully minimizing these instances of exclusionary discipline?

A [study](#) published in *Educational Researcher* suggests parental trust of [school personnel](#) may be key. Findings indicate that strong parental trust of teachers and principals reduces the probability that a student receives exclusionary discipline, whether as an office disciplinary referral or a suspension. Additionally, school outreach and communication predict a lower likelihood of a student experiencing exclusionary discipline, with these factors more firmly predicting this outcome for Black students and students with [special education](#) needs.

"Our results demonstrate that strong school-family relationships, grounded in mutual trust, but especially the trust of the parent in the school, greatly improves a child's chances of thriving and remaining in the classroom, rather than being subjected to exclusionary discipline. These relationships are particularly important for helping to reduce disparities in exclusionary discipline, which is why schools should take action to strengthen relationships with families," said Richard Welsh, associate professor of leadership, policy, and organizations at Vanderbilt Peabody College of education and [human development](#) and co-author on the study.

Welsh and co-author Luis Rodriguez, assistant professor of educational leadership and [policy studies](#) at New York University, suggest that parents' increased trust in their child's school may lead parents to reinforce the school's behavioral strategies at home or remind their child to follow school personnel's directions.

The reinforcing relationships between parents and schools may make children more mindful of their behavior. Likewise, parents inquiring

about their child's academic and behavioral progress may increase a student's awareness of parental monitoring and improve school personnel's perceptions and expectations of the student. That could lead staff to show more leniency and understanding when the student misbehaves.

This study adds to a growing body of research that underscores the importance of investing in and implementing school-level policies and practices that welcome all families and that aim to strengthen trust and build cooperative relationships. For example, schools could work to improve programs to partner with parents, especially Black parents and parents of students with special needs. Schools could also invest in teacher and principal trainings on cultivating and sustaining relationships with families.

The authors note that future research should explore [racial inequality in school discipline](#) as an ecological issue—in other words, examining how school, home, community, and other environments are interconnected systems that affect child development and disciplinary outcomes.

As is the case with all good relationships, the one that binds schools and families is built on trust. It is up to researchers, educators, and parents to find the best path forward for cultivating that trust.

More information: Luis A. Rodriguez et al, The Ties That Bind: An Examination of School-Family Relationships and Middle School Discipline in New York City, *Educational Researcher* (2023). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X231203696](#)

Provided by Vanderbilt University

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