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Implementation of Restorative Justice Practices within our Schools

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

This School Improvement Plan details the importance of implementing a restorative justice system for high school students amongst the current educational climate. Current research points to restorative practices for long term improvement of student behavior and eliminating racial disparities in exclusionary discipline policies. Research indicates schools that places value on empathy and growth foster positive student-teacher relationships leading to a positive school climate. With those findings in mind, this plan focuses on creating school policy that eliminates racial disparities in discipline, reduces office referrals, and improving school culture. The plan outlines an implementation guide for administrators and teachers along with details for all staff professional development.

Keywords: zero tolerance, racial disparities in discipline, restorative practices, school climate, school culture

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Implementation of Restorative Justice Practices within our Schools

School crime and safety is a current issue in education across America. Disruptive behavior, harassment, bullying, insubordination, profanity, fighting, vandalism, stealing, possession/use of drugs and/or alcohol, possession/use of weapons, and assault are all prevalent issues in the 21st century classroom. Students are experiencing bullying at unprecedented rates. In 2019, 22.2% of students reported being bullied at school and 18% identified cyberbullying as the vehicle for it (Irwin et al., 2022). When such issues arise, school discipline policies come into effect. In the 2021-22 school year, 62% of schools in the U.S. identified as having a *Zero Tolerance* policy as part of their disciplinary plan (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). The problem is zero tolerance practices have not proven to deter or change problem behaviors from re-occurring. Zero tolerance policies give punitive consequences that have led to many negative outcomes including disproportionately targeting students of color, thus creating an equity gap in discipline practices. Although students of color only make up about 15% of the total student population, they are expelled at a rate of two times their share – 38.8% (Office for Civil Rights Department of Education, 2021). Discipline policy issues are not isolated, this is a nationwide problem.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to revise and change school wide discipline polices from punitive to restorative. The hope is that knowledge gained from this project will help to change cultural belief systems within schools that will impact the way teachers and administrators go about disciplining students. When value is placed on learning from mistakes, growing character, and restoring relationships, the goal is that school climate and student behavior will improve simultaneously. Ideally knowledge gained from reading this improvement plan will spark change in discipline policies nationwide that will more accurately

represent our student populations, better address student behaviors, keep schools safe, and improve relationships.

Resources for this school improvement plan were compiled from the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa and through the ProQuest ERIC & Education Database. Apart from foundational research pertaining to the topic, to be considered for inclusion in this plan studies were current (predominantly within the last 10 years) and published in a peer-reviewed journal or report. Studies and reports regarding zero tolerance policies, restorative practices, racial disparities in discipline, and school climate were reviewed. Ultimately, 20+ sources were selected based on relevance and support given to the present school improvement plan. Resources were used to understand factors that influence school climate, the effects of exclusionary discipline, the historical background of restorative justice, and research supported affective restorative practices.

Restorative justice discipline practices change school culture, improve climate, and help to close exclusionary discipline racial disparities. Restorative justice practices help close exclusionary discipline racial disparities by creating discipline plans that do not take students out of class or school. A restorative program helps students to build 21st century skills such as effective communication and problem solving though mending damaged relationships between stakeholders. Students learn about their behavior, reflect on who was hurt, and are then able to make amends though this process. When schools adopt restorative practices, teachers, administrators and other stakeholders approach discipline with empathy first. Empathy breads compassion. A compassionate school culture is the basis of positive student-teacher/administrator relationships. Restorative practices emphasize repairing broken or hurt relationships between people, communities, or other stakeholders. Repairing these relationships

positively changes students' attitudes and mindsets which in-turn helps build a sense of community within schools, affecting school climate.

The literature review will address school safety, zero tolerance policies, racial disparities in discipline, restorative practices, school climate and culture. The review will begin by describing the current school safety climate and associated threats. This research will discuss the pertinence of harassment, bullying, and other safety concerns within our schools. The review will then focus on historic discipline for such offences, turning us towards zero tolerance policies. Research will show that zero tolerance policies have not been effective in deterring or changing behavior and have even created racial disparities in discipline. The review will then address the disproportionate number of students of color being disciplined and the negative effects associated with it. Finally, effective restorative discipline practices implemented across the nation will be highlighted. These practices include compassion-based responses to discipline, peacemaking circles, and behavior focused instructional lessons. In the last section of the literature review, factors that affect school climate and culture will be examined. Current studies will support restorative practices in positively changing school culture which will impact school climate and make schools a safer place for our students and staff.

Literature Review

The literature review will synthesize current knowledge and research on the effects of zero tolerance discipline policies, racial disparities in discipline, restorative discipline practices, and factors that influence a positive school climate. Better understanding of the pros, cons, and overall effects of these key ideas spearhead change and make up the framework for discipline policies and procedures in schools across the nation. The literature will expand on specific restorative practices that have been shown to improve school climate and therefore make schools

safer for students and staff. The research presented will present differing viewpoints from across the nation in K-12 schools from both big and small districts.

Effects of Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies have been a popular discipline model for both middle and high schools since the early 1990s when the idea was brought to light by governmental administrations war-on-drugs campaign to end illegal drug transportation. Zero tolerance policies use punitive discipline (i.e., suspension and expulsion from school) and severely punish **all** offenders regardless of other potentially relevant factors (such as circumstance, intent, severity, accident, etc.). The intention of zero tolerance policies is to send a clear message that such behavior(s) will not be tolerated regardless of the circumstance. Research supporting the effectiveness (in terms of changing or preventing behaviors) of zero tolerance is lacking but the effects of zero tolerance policies on students and schools have been well researched over the last decade.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), in the 2017-18 school year over 11,200,000 school days were missed due to out of school suspension from the 50,922,024 students enrolled in public school (Office for Civil Rights Department of Education, 2021). Zero tolerance is very much still alive and active; in the 2021-22 school year, 62% of schools in the U.S. still identified as having a zero tolerance policy as part of their disciplinary plan (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). This statistic aligns with the findings from a study done on the whole state of Texas where "59.6% of students experienced some form of suspension or expulsion in middle or high school" (Fabelo et al., 2011).

In a qualitative study completed in the Lower Rio Grande Valley perceptions of the effects of zero tolerance differed between administrators and former students. Administrators

believed zero tolerance policies were necessary for school safety, successfully taught student appropriate limits, and were an effective way to control behavior (Borrego & Maxwell, 2021). Students in this study responded quite differently, expressing they felt alienated, unheard, unimportant, and some were even sent into a downward social and emotional spiral following a suspension or expulsion (Borrego & Maxwell, 2021). These administrator responses were mirrored by teachers in a qualitative study looking at how zero tolerance policies effect school safety. In a survey collecting responses from over 11,200 Virginia secondary teachers and 118,000+ students, 74% of teachers supported the use of zero tolerance polices (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Ironically, schools with the strongest support for zero tolerance and higher rates of suspension also reported (by both teachers and students) feeling less safe at school as compared to schools with lower support of zero tolerance (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Additionally, the U.S. Secret Services Agency's findings from a national threat assessment align with findings from Huang & Cornell's study and validate student concerns from Borrego and Maxwell's study. The Secret Services Agency does not believe a zero tolerance discipline plan creates safer schools and is not an effective way to control student behavior (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Instead, they suggest "schools should employ disciplinary practices that ensure fairness, transparency with the student and family, and appropriate follow-up" (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) also warns that attackers who initiate school violence commonly have a history of school disciplinary actions involving suspension, expulsion, and/or involvement with law enforcement (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). It appears punitive discipline in these cases did not provide students with the tool set or skills necessary to deal with stress, frustration, or mental health concerns thus resulting in poor behavior choices.

Research indicates suspensions also effect academic success, dropout rates, and post-secondary enrollment (Balfanz et al., 2014; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). A longitudinal cohort study completed in Florida on a group of 180,000+ 9th grade students found having one suspension in the 9th grade almost doubled the chance of dropping out of high school from 16% with no suspensions to 32% for students who had, had 1 suspension during their ninth-grade year (Balfanz et al., 2014). One suspension in the 9th grade also had a strong correlation to attendance and course failure; 42% of these students had less than a 90% attendance rate and 73% failed a course as compared to students who had not been suspended in 9th grade; only 13% had less than 90% attendance and 36% failed a course (Balfanz et al., 2014). Not only was graduation rate affected, but enrollment in post-secondary education also dropped significantly from 58% enrolled with no suspensions to 39% of students with 1 suspension (Balfanz et al., 2014). In other words, keeping students in class as early as the 9th grade is imperative for students to learn, pass their courses, and eventually earn their diploma.

These findings are consistent with a meta-analysis research project done by Noltemeyer et al. (2015) where researchers examined trends within 34 studies and "revealed a significant inverse relationship between suspensions and achievement, along with a significant positive relationship between suspensions and dropout" (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Notably, Noltemeyer et al. (2015) distinguished that out of school suspension is more strongly associated with poor achievement than in-school suspension (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Noltemeyer did not examine the effects of suspension on attendance or post-secondary enrollment.

These recent studies have begun to provide insight into some perceived and actual effects of zero tolerance policies on students, teachers, and schools. Perceived effects included increased feeling of safety at school and controlling student behavior. The actual effects of zero tolerance

policies have proved to be a decreased sense of safety at school, increased student misbehavior, and negative academic outcomes for students including course failure and dropping out altogether. Together, this literature helps paint a clearer picture of the direction discipline polices need to move in.

Racial Disparities in Discipline

Research suggests there has been and continues to be racial disparities in discipline, specifically affecting students of color (Balfanz et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2014; Office for Civil Rights Department of Education, 2021; Skiba et al., 2011). A quantitative study including data from a national sample of 364 schools over a 1 year time period revealed that black students have two times the odds of receiving office referrals as compared to white students in elementary school and are four times more likely to be referred to the office in middle school (Skiba et al., 2011). This research did not include data on high school office referrals. However, Balfanz et al. (2014) findings, which were based off high school students, reveled similar data that recognized back students received twice as many suspensions as white students even though black students only made up 23% of the student population as compared to their white counterparts making up 42% (Balfanz et al., 2014). In addition, Gregory's et al. (2011) data from 5,095 ninth grade students also revealed Black suspension rates were more than double white suspension rates (Gregory et al., 2011).

The two studies findings from above also align with the Office of Civil Rights Department of Education's (2021) data on exclusionary discipline practices in public schools during the 2017-18 school year (Balfanz et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2011). The Office of Civil Rights Department of Education reported that "In 2017-18, Black students received one or more in-school suspensions (31.4%) and one or more out-of-school suspensions (38.2%) at rates that

were more than twice their share of total student enrollment (15.1%)" (Office for Civil Rights

Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, they reported disparities in school related arrests

and referrals to law enforcement; "In 2017-18, Black students accounted for 28.7% of all

students referred to law enforcement and 31.6% of all students arrested at school or during a

school-related activity—twice their share of total student enrollment of 15.1%" (Office for Civil

Rights Department of Education, 2021). It can be concluded that students of color are, in fact,

disproportionally disciplined.

Hoffman's (2014) research specifically looked at the effects of zero tolerance policies on

racial disparities in schools. In his study, the implementation of a district (composed of 50%

white and 24% black students) wide zero tolerance discipline policy led to an increase in the

number of black students who were recommended for expulsion from 2.2% to 4.5% whereas

white student expulsion recommendations only went from .3% to .5%. (Hoffman, 2014). After

three years of zero tolerance policy implementation; "During the 2009-2010 school year, more

than 33% of the District's approximately 3,000 Black secondary school students were suspended

from school at least once, compared to 5% of the District's 6,500 White secondary school

students—a racial disparity in the percentage of students suspended of more than 6 to 1"

(Hoffman, 2014, p. 75). Additionally, students of color were suspended on average 7 times as

many days as their white counterparts (Hoffman, 2014). In other words, zero tolerance polices

increased racial disparities in discipline.

Restorative practices have been shown to help close racial disparities in discipline (Jain et

al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018). In a research study conducted in Central Virginia, the

Tenakomakah Region Public Schools implemented a restorative program that encompassed

tiered restorative supports depending on student needs including social and emotional whole

school curriculum, targeted classroom and small group instruction, and intensive conferencing with mediation when needed. The results of these measure for students of color were most remarkable, decreasing the suspension of Black students from 26% suspended in the 2011-12 school year to 12% in the 2014-15 year (Mansfield et al., 2018). This is a decline in suspensions of over 50% in just 3 years' time. In another study, Jain et al. (2014) reports similar findings (Jain et al., 2014). The discipline gap closed 6% in 1 years' time with the use of restorative practices (Jain et al., 2014).

The studies reviewed show strong evidence that students of color are being disproportionately disciplined in school systems all the way from K-12. The research presented shows disparities across the board from less serious office referrals and in-school suspensions to serious out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and even law enforcement referrals. Fortunately, research also supports a potential solution to closing these racial disparities in discipline through restorative justice practices. Restorative practices have been shown to reduce the discipline gap between black and white students but further research is needed to determine the timeline for eliminating the gap.

Components of a Successful Restorative Practices Program

Restorative practices are a common alternative discipline method that utilize many methods of schoolwide positive behavior intervention support, restorative circles, small group remediation, and individual plans to repair relationships, build mutual respect, and positively change behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2018). Some restorative practices embedded in school culture while others involve a more formal process. Although restorative justice programs in schools across the nation all look a little bit differently depending on the specific needs of the school, the restorative approach usually

includes participation from all stakeholders including offenders, teachers, administrators, families, and may involve other students and/or staff members (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Hantzopoulos, 2013). Restorative practices require teachers, administrators, and families to do things *with* (rather than *to*) students that require high levels of control with high levels of support to teach and achieve lasting behavioral changes (Mansfield et al., 2018).

Restorative practices are twofold with both proactive and reactive components (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). Some schools only utilize proactive measures, others only utilize reactive practices, but the literature shows the most effective restorative practice programs utilize a combination of both (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). Hannigan and Hannigan's (2022) alternative discipline toolkit encompasses both proactive and reactive components through its multi-tiered system of support for discipline with a detailed restorative justice program serving 1-5% of the population reactively (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) describe a successful restorative justice program as having three key components; reflective, restorative, and instructional (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). These three factors work together to teach students, repair broken relationships, change behavior, and prevent future infractions from occurring (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). Hannigan and Hannigan's (2022) alternative discipline model utilizes a comprehensive method which involves laying out a plan, developing goals, frequent check-ins meetings, mentoring, remediation, and individualized instructional lessons based on behavior infraction (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).

Similar to Hannigan & Hannigan's (2022) model, results from a multi-tiered restorative program called *SaferSanerSchools* in Central Virginia at Tenakomakah Region Public Schools speaks for itself (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). The program implements

tier 1 support by incorporating daily social-emotional curriculum for students K-12 as well as

modeling classroom based restorative practices such as fair process and restorative questioning

(Mansfield et al., 2018). Tier 2 is a reactive component in this model, and it uses restorative

circles to teach students (Mansfield et al., 2018). Tier 3 involves restorative conferences and is

the most formal of the restorative practices (Mansfield et al., 2018). The program has been very

successful. After only 4 years of implementation, the in-school suspension rates dropped from

19% of the student body receiving at least one in-school suspension to 7% of the study body

(Mansfield et al., 2018). The out of school suspension rate also dropped from 12% in 2011-12 to

7% in 2014-15 (Mansfield et al., 2018). Suspension of Black students decreased by half during

this time as well (Mansfield et al., 2018).

Differently than Hannigan & Hannigan's comprehensive model, there are many other

schools that utilize single restorative practice components (Garnett et al., 2022; Hantzopoulos,

2013). For example, a New York City public high school utilizes a restorative justice model

called the *Fairness Committee* (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The *Fairness Committee* is made up of

stakeholders; typically two students, one teacher, and one teacher facilitator -- similar to how

juries are composed, that "hear" discipline cases (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The committee uses a

democratic system to resolve problems, restore relationships/wrong doings within the school,

and provide high levels of support for the student to recover from the infraction (Hantzopoulos,

2013). Contrasting to Hantzopoulos's (2013) reactive approach, Garnett et al. (2022) looked at

one school's proactive approach to restorative discipline that is utilizing classroom circles

(Garnett et al., 2022; Hantzopoulos, 2013). Talking circles take place every morning by sitting in

a circle and discussing a specific topic or lesson for the day. Through taking turns discussing the

problem or topic, students practice active listening skills, build empathy for peers, and learn

about equity through morning circles (Garnett et al., 2022). Morning circles help students build stronger relationships with peers as well as teachers (Garnett et al., 2022).

Lastly, stakeholder buy-in is an important component to restorative practice success (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Huang & Cornell, 2021). Stakeholders include students, teachers, administrators, families, and community. This claim is supported by Huang and Cornell's (2021) study that examined teacher support of zero-tolerance polices (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Huang and Cornell (2021) found that 74% of teachers support a zero-tolerance policy (Huang & Cornell, 2021). This is important because, "teachers are the frontline professionals who identify student misbehavior and decide when it rises to the level of an office referral for disciplinary action" (Huang & Cornell, 2021, p. 399). In other words, if teachers aren't on board with restorative practices, they are going to continue to send kids out of the classroom to receive punitive consequences and stand in the way of transformative discipline. Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) agree, stakeholder buy-in is essential to program success (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). They suggest absolute administrative support, clear communication, active listening to all participants, and teacher involvement in creating consequences are components that can lead to stakeholder buy-in and a shift from traditional to innovative belief systems about discipline (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).

In summary, the literature clearly articulates effective restorative practices incorporate key stakeholders including students, teachers, administrators, and families. The most effective restorative programs have proactive and reactive components. These components are often in a tiered format similar to how academia is scaffolded. And finally, the ultimate goals of restorative practices are to teach students how to change/behave appropriately, mend damaged or broken relationships, and set students up for success in their future.

Effects of Restorative Practices

A plethora of literature has been published on the effects of restorative practices (Acosta et al., 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2021; Garnett et al., 2022; Gregory, 2014; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Jain et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2019; Mansfield et al., 2018; Wassan et al., 2021). Several research studies have revealed one of the biggest effects of restorative practices are changes to school culture that improve climate thus making schools safer for students and staff (Acosta et al., 2019; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Kennedy et. al., 2019; Wassan et al., 2021). Bradshaw's et al. (2021) research on factors that influences school climate aligns with these findings, claiming school climate is most affected by peer, classroom, and school norms (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Bradshaw's et al. (2021) research indicates schoolwide approaches, social-emotional curriculum, and relationship-based programs are most influential on school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Restorative practices include all three of the above components; a comprehensive approach, SEL curriculum, and are relationship focused; thus, indicating restorative practices to be an effective vehicle for positive climate change.

The evidence of positive change can be seen in Wassan's et al. (2021) surveys from 59 school staff personnel including administrators, teachers, and support staff (Wassan et al., 2021). The results revel a positive correlation between restorative practices and school environment (Wassan et al., 2021). Wassan et al. (2021) concludes "restorative practices improve the school environment and relationships among the students, teachers, staff, and administrators; we must implement such discipline in our institutions" (Wassan et al., 2021, p. 31). Students also support the use of restorative programs. Student participants in the Fairness Committee, a restorative practice in a New York City Prep School, acknowledge similar feelings and experiences to Wassan's et al. (2021) research (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Wassan et al., 2021). Students expressed

that participation in the Fairness Committee lead them to feeling safer in their school, confident

in their personal growth, and learning lifelong skills to deal with conflict. (Hantzopoulos, 2013).

Aligned with these findings are Acosta's et al. (2019) results from study done on 14

middle schools in Maine. Acosta et al. (2019) looked at the effects of restorative practices in 7

middle schools that had implemented practices for 1 year and compared the results to 7 schools

that had not implemented restorative practices (Acosta et al., 2019). The schools utilizing

restorative practices including the use of circle time, saw an increase in school connectedness

and empathy skills (Acosta et al., 2019). The increase in empathy skills were linked to a decrease

in bullying across all 7 middle schools (Acosta et. al., 2019). Similarly, participants in

Kennedy's et al. (2019) study reported after their participation in a restorative program to have a

better understanding of their community, damage done to victims, and to have developed more

empathy towards others (Kennedy et. al., 2019).

These findings are also corroborated by school climate survey results completed by 5,095

9th grade students (Gregory et. al., 2014). Higher student reported restorative practices were

associated with greater teacher respect and fewer office referrals (Gregory et al., 2014). This data

proves that how students feel and the relationships they have with teachers impact their behavior.

It can be concluded that restorative practices create a school climate that causes students and

staff to feel more connected and heard. This positive school climate creates an atmosphere of

increased safety due to less bullying from the development of empathic skills.

Literature shows restorative practices also improve attendance, reduce discipline

referrals, exclusionary practices including suspension and expulsions, and reduce reoccurring

infractions from happening (Jain et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2019). Chronic absenteeism

dropped drastically by 24% in Oakland Unified School District middle schools, and 3.9% in high

schools (Jain et al., 2014). The high school dropout rate decreased by 56% (Jain et al., 2014).

Restorative practices reduced suspension by 62% over a 2 year period in a Nashville school

composed of 651 middle schoolers (Gordon, 2020). These findings are consistent with the

International Institute for Restorative Practices (2009) quantitative dada on restorative programs

around the United States (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2009). A diverse group

of 6 schools from around the country were analyzed. All schools showed a decrease in

disciplinary referrals and suspensions (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2009).

Additionally, a research study that implemented restorative practices on probationers showed

participants in the restorative program were significantly less likely to have a reoccurring

infraction even 6 years post initial offence. "Results indicate that the restorative justice

instruction significantly reduced the incidence of recidivism by 66%" (Kennedy et al., 2019, p.

9).

Literature has also revealed restorative practices help close racial disparities in discipline

(Jain et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018). Mansfield's et al. (2018) study showed a decrease in

the suspension of Black students from 26% to 12% after just 3 years of implementation; a

remarkable 50+% decrease (Mansfield et al., 2018). Results from Oakland Unified School

District in California had similar results (Jain et al., 2014). Jain et al. (2014) reports "the

Black/White discipline gap in 2011-2012 was almost 25 between African American and White

students and it closed significantly down to 19 in 2012-13" (Jain et al., 2014, p. 45). These

results suggest restorative justice practices can be an effective tool in helping reduce racial

disparities in discipline.

This synthesis of literature helps paint a clear picture of the overall aspects and effects of

restorative justice practices. The literature is clear; when restorative practices are implemented

with fidelity, the power to change behavior, improve academic outcomes, and create a safe school climate are all possible. Restorative practices should include a plan for stakeholder buy-in, adequate training for all staff, and a comprehensive schoolwide implementation plan for optimal benefits. According to the findings from the literature reviewed, restorative practices can help create safe school, reduce racial discipline disparities, and truly change student behavior.

School Profile

Community Characteristics

Muscatine High School is part of the Muscatine Community School District (MCSD), and is nestled in southeast, Iowa along the Mississippi river. Muscatine has a small town feel with many family-owned shops and restaurants along with the amenities of a larger town. With access to the river, Muscatine has become home to many large production plants and factories such as Grain Processing Corporation, Heinz, and the HON company. These large employers attract a diverse group of people that make up the community. This includes community members who are Caucasian (74%), Hispanic (13.7%), African American (3.9%), and Asian (0.97%) (Data USA, n.d.). Muscatine is the county seat and is home to over 23,000 people. The community has a strong Christian background with a K-8 Catholic school called *Saints Mary Mathias,* a large Catholic church and community, and many churches of other denominations as well.

Muscatine is an aging community, and the population is slowly declining. As the community has aged and employment opportunities have shifted towards the blue-collar industry, the people of Muscatine have grown into two drastically different social classes; one with a lot of *old money* and one without hardly any money at all. This shift poses challenges such as equitable access to housing, resources, technology, and food. With the awareness of these

issues, the community does a lot of outreach and mission projects within Muscatine. Muscatine

Center for Strategic Action (MCSA) provides food pantry services twice a week, low-income

housing options, domestic violence refuge, a shelter for homeless community members with

support to get them back on their feet, and free dental and eyecare clinics. Other resources

include a huge monthly mobile foodbank distribution site and free meals served daily at various

locations throughout the community.

School District Characteristics

Muscatine Community School District (MCSD) is the largest in the county, serving just

over 4,300 students each year. The diverse district is composed of students who are white

(60.5%), Black/African American (4.5%), Hispanic (29.5%), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (.1%),

Native American (.3%), Asian (.8%), and 4.3% are multi-racial. Male students make up 51.1%

of the district while females make up the remaining 48.9% (Iowa Department of Education,

2022). Students (13.1%) have been identified for special education services and have IEPs, and

5.4% are English language learners (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). An estimated 49.5%

are considered low socio-economic status and are eligible for free and reduced lunches.

MCSD is broken up into nine different school buildings; an early learning center which

houses three- and four-year-old preschool students, six elementary buildings (K-6), one junior

high (7-8), and one high school (9-12). Major renovations have been done to all school buildings

over the last 10 years to create updated spaces with current technology, comfortable learning,

and equitable opportunities for all students no matter which school they attend. Most recently, a

multi-million-dollar STEM Science wing was added to the High School building. Renovations to

the Fine Arts department, band and choir rooms were also included in this build. Muscatine

Community School District's mission states, "Every student will excel in thinking, learning,

achieving, and caring in partnership with our staff, families, and community" (Muscatine

Community School, 2023). Additionally, the district's vision is, "Every Student is a Success

Story" (Muscatine Community School District, 2023).

School Building Characteristics

According to the latest Iowa School Performance Profile (2022), Muscatine High School

enrolled 1,475 students 9th – 12th grades, of which just over half (51.1%) were female and 48.9%

were male (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Just over 10% have IEPs, while 5.7% are

English language learners. Just over 43% are considered low socio-economic status.

Additionally, 63.8% are white, 28.1% are Hispanic, 4.2% are Black/African American, 0.1%

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.2% Native American, 0.7% Asian, and 2.8% are multi-racial (Iowa

Department of Education, 2022). Muscatine's graduation rate is just above 84%, and the school

falls under the "Targeted" ESSA category according to the state of Iowa's rankings, scoring a

37.81 out of 100, which is about 17 points below the state average (Iowa Department of

Education, 2022).

The high school consists of 178 compassionate and dedicated educators, administrators,

councilors, secretarial, and support staff. Experience ranges from first-year teachers to veteran

professionals who have served in the high school and/or district for 30+ years. The

administrative team is composed of one head principle, three assistant principals, and an

activities director. This large team of staff work together to maintain the health and safety,

learning, and protection of our large student body. The high school has over a 78% staff retention

rate, which is significantly higher than the district average of 69% staff retention, yet still lower

than the state average of over 82% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022).

Student Performance

On the most current Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) available online, 56.38% of students at Muscatine High School were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) and 51.43% were proficient in math. These scores are well below the respective 70.84% and 64.97% state averages. Of those students who are considered low socio-economic status, 44.88% were proficient in ELA and 38.53% were proficient in math, again below the state average of 55.88% for ELA and 48.26% for math. Looking at students who are English Language learners, 12.5% were proficient in ELA, much lower than the state average of 20.81%; meanwhile, 20.83% of EL student were proficient in math, right at the state average of 20.97%. Looking at students with disabilities who have IEPs, 10.75% were proficient in ELA, falling well behind the state average of 25.18%. An even larger disparity appears when looking at students with an IEP's performance on mathematics; only 3.23% were proficient as compared to the state average of 23.95% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Students of all races underperformed the state average in ELA and mathematics. Overall, students at Muscatine High School performed well below average on the ISASP, which are directly tied to the Iowa Core Curriculum. Performance cannot be looked at through a narrow lens. There are many contributing factors to these results, starting with discipline policies that affect student's attendance and in-class time to learn such concepts.

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Students at Muscatine High School (MHS) are offered a wide variety of classes ranging from required core curriculum areas such as English and math to more specialized classes based on student-specific interest, for example, agriculture or family and consumer sciences classes. Students also have access to both dual-credit and advanced placement (AP) courses in some core as well as elective areas. Dual-credit courses are accredited though Eastern Iowa Community

College (EICC). Some of these courses are taught by qualified MHS teachers and others are

available on site at the Muscatine Community College. This gives students the opportunity to

experience collegiate campus life a little early. All core content areas follow the Iowa Core

Curriculum and students are suggested by teacher for AP courses based off essential standard

assessment scores in content areas. Students can also participate in work-based learning and even

earn credits for some jobs/internships. As our vision states, Muscatine aims to make sure "every

student is a success story". This wide variety of course opportunities ensure there is *something*

for *everyone.*

Students access their work both electronically and hard copy. Electronically, students are

part of a Google Classroom for each course. Assignments, notes, reminders, and eBooks are

accessible both at home and in school through Google Classroom. Students also complete work

in traditional ways such as taking notes, completing graphic organizers, and working out

problems in their notebooks. Most classrooms also involve hands on and project-based learning

where students complete labs, research projects, and presentations. Assessments are taken in a

variety of formats from tests and quizzes to projects and presentations. At the end of the

semester, students are required to complete a *Final* comprehensive assessment that is worth 20%

of their grade. Parents and students can access their grades on PowerSchool at any time. Face-to-

face conferences are held once each semester with the option for parents to meet in person at the

school or virtually through Google Meet with every teacher. Parents are also encouraged to reach

out to teachers as needed throughout the year via email or phone call regarding any questions or

concerns about their student.

"Muskie Time" is a 30-minute intervention scheduled daily between 2nd and 3rd period.

Teachers hand select students for specific days to provide additional support or intervention on

specific concepts. If a student is teacher selected, they are required to attend that teacher's session for the day. If students haven't been teacher selected, they are able to select different classes/teachers to go to for help, make up work, enrichment, or quiet study through an online adaptive scheduler program. Clubs, class meetings, and special events are also held during this time.

Professional Development Practices

Muscatine Community School District provides many opportunities for professional development in a variety of formats. These formats include online, in-person, small group, book studies, whole-school, and district wide. Professional development opportunities are focused on current issues in education and/or training on a topic relevant to our unique community. In the last five years, some topics covered include technology in the classroom, trauma informed practices, engaging instructional practices, classroom management, school safety, and creating memorable moments. The last two years have focused predominantly on aligning curriculum K-12 and building the district a digital curriculum house.

MCSD has instructional coaches available in each building. The high school has four coaches; three focus on instructional practices and one is a technology internationalist. The instructional coaches work with teachers throughout the year based on teacher specific IPDP goals. Teachers are required to meet with coaches at least twice throughout the year but coaches are also available upon request or as needed. Coaching cycles include goal setting, strategic planning, observation, co-teaching, and reflection portions.

Muscatine Community School district is a diverse community that continues to make us proud. Predominantly, MCSD utilizes solid research-based practices that ensure all student have exponential opportunity for growth and learning. However, there are a few areas where MCSD

could use improvement. These areas include graduation rate and teacher retention. I believe a restorative justice discipline system can help improve both areas.

Needs Assessment

Although Muscatine High School (MHS) has done a commendable job offering students a wide variety of courses that fit students' needs and interests, improving facilities, and providing a multitude of professional development opportunities for teachers; there is still room for improvement when addressing a few of MHS's biggest issues– school climate and culture, student graduation rate, and teacher retention. On Muscatine High School's 2022 *Conditions for Learning Survey*, which measures students' perception of safety, engagement, and learning environment, the composite score was 40.64 out of 100 which was almost 10% lower than the state average (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). This means less than half the students in our school have a positive perception of our school environment. My school improvement plan recommends implementing and maintaining a comprehensive restorative justice discipline system to help address these key issues. I believe this plan will yield positive results that influence the culture of Muscatine High School, improve our school climate, and create a safe environment for our students where they feel connected to and supported by peers and adults within the school. The shift in culture will also help retain teachers for the long run.

But *why* will a discipline system help change such a diverse set of issues; climate, culture, graduation rate, and teacher retention? The answer is simple; each issue is connected back to feeling supported, and a restorative justice discipline system does just that – provides support (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). School culture is formed by foundational morals, values, and policies that the school holds. When schools do not place value on empathy, growth, and forgiveness when a student makes a mistake; students feel alone, unforgivable, un-supported,

and *bad.* The self-fulfilling prophecy then takes over and students continue to misbehave. But,

when restorative justice practices are put into place, students are met with compassion, empathy,

and high levels of support to help teach and change their behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022;

Mansfield et al., 2018). Schools that utilize restorative practices incorporate pro-active measures

such as SEL curriculum to help students learn how to identify, regulate, and express their

emotions appropriately (Mansfield et al., 2018). MHS does not currently use a school wide social

emotional curriculum. When restorative practices are embedded in school culture, they have

been shown to help build a positive student body (Garnett et al., 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018).

        School climate is affected by how students feel about one another, the people they are

surrounded by, and their ability to form caring relationships with stakeholders in the building

(Bradshaw et al., 2021). If students don't feel supported by their teachers and administrators,

they may feel unsafe within the walls of the school. In spring of 2023, only 26% of MHS

students reported feeling emotionally safe at school and 49% felt physically safe (Panorama

Education, 2023). I don't believe it's a coincidence that at the same time only 28% of MHS

students reported having positive adult-student relationships, significantly lower than the state

average of 36% (Panorama Education, 2023). Students also indicated strained student-student

relationships with only 28% reporting positive relationships at school, as compared to the state

average of 38% (Panorama Education, 2023).

        In schools with defiance, misbehavior, and bullying, students will not likely feel

emotionally or physically safe at school. Restorative discipline focuses on mending damaged

relationships through high levels of support (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al.,

2018). Creating strong relationships with stakeholders will help students to build empathy,

change their behavior, and therefore feel safe at school (Wassan et al., 2021). Student-teacher

relationships not only influence feelings of safety but also academic success.

Regarding academic success, graduation rate is another area that needs improved at

MHS. 84.28% of MHS students graduate within 4 years, significantly lower than the state

average of 90.15% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Graduation rate is strongly influenced

by the amount of time students are in-class and engaged in meaningful content. When utilizing

zero-tolerance policies, students are given punitive consequences, with minimal support, that

take them out of the classroom for extended periods of time thus affecting their ability to learn,

pass classes, and essentially earn credits towards graduation. Restorative practices focus on

students getting back into the classroom as-soon-as-possible, rebuilding relationships with peers

and teachers to make learning possible, and learning from mistakes so that student's do not

continue to re-offend. Restorative components work together to help students be more successful

in the classroom to earn credits towards graduation.

Finally, MHS only retained about 78% of their staff in 2022, lower than the state average

of just over 82% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Teacher retention is affected by school

culture and climate. If teacher's personal morals and values don't align with the school's,

teachers are likely to leave. *Why* is teacher retention important? Teachers build strong

relationships with our students. Relationships can take months and even years to develop. As I

stated above, only 28% of MHS students reported having positive adult-student relationships

(Panorama Education, 2023). High teacher turnover leaves our students feeling disconnected and

unsupported. Restorative discipline involves the cooperation of all stakeholders; administrators,

teachers, support staff, students, and parents (Hannigan & Hannigan; Mansfield et al., 2018).

When everyone is on the same team, working towards the same goals, teachers and students feel

supported by administration and parents. This high level of support leads to teacher satisfaction and therefore will improve teacher retention from year to year.

My school improvement plan would implement a comprehensive restorative justice discipline system. Administrators, teachers, and staff would be trained on research based restorative practices, the implementation of SEL curriculum, and the focus on positive student-teacher relationships. This plan is needed to address MHS's somewhat negative climate and culture, insufficient graduation rate, and low teacher retention rate. Restorative practices will help students stay in class to learn essential content, built positive student-student and student-teacher relationships, change students' negative behavior, and help teachers feel supported.

Data Analysis

Data Summary

Each spring, students at Muscatine High School are asked to complete the statewide *Conditions for Learning* survey. In this survey, students respond to statements by strongly agreeing to strongly disagreeing via a Likert scale. The questions on the survey are divided into five categories: adult-student relationships, boundaries and expectations, emotional safety, physical safety, and student-student relationships (Panorama Education, 2023). In spring of 2023 students from MHS recorded composite scores lower than the state average in three out of five categories, most notably ranking 15% lower in the boundaries and expectations category (Panorama Education, 2023). This data provides a glimpse of student perceptions on school culture, climate, safety, and associated relationships. Additionally, the data below will outline student behaviors and the disproportionate population of students affected by the current discipline policies. Exclusionary discipline data, current graduation rates, and teacher retention

data will also be analyzed. The analysis of this data will show both challenges and areas of strength for students and teachers at Muscatine High School.

Culture and Climate Data

Figure 1 gives a visual of Muscatine High School's 2023 *Conditions for Learning* survey results as compared to the state averages. According to the annual survey, only 28% of MHS students reported having positive adult-student relationships at school, significantly lower than the state average of 36% (Panorama Education, 2023). Meanwhile, similar relationship findings were indicated from the results in the student-student category; only 28% reporting positive relationships at school, as compared to the state average just over 38% (Panorama Education, 2023). 26% of MHS students reported feeling emotionally safe at school and 49% felt physically safe, both right at the state average (Panorama Education, 2023). Based on the survey results alone, it is apparent that MHS has some work to do with building better relationships, both peer-peer and student-teacher. It is also clear that boundaries and expectations are lacking at MHS. The implementation of a restorative justice program will support the need of all three areas.

Figure 1

Conditions for Learning Survey 2023 - Composite Scores
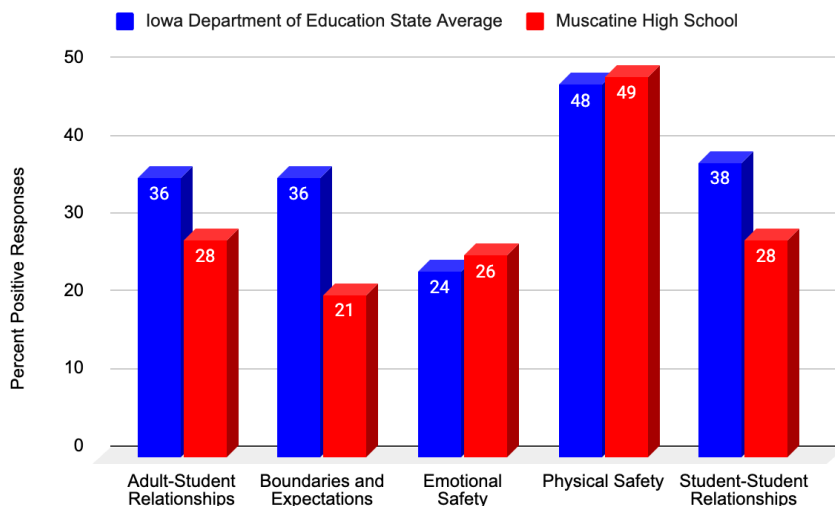
Figures 2 and 3 bring out both a strength and weakness at Muscatine High School. The positive is, on this year's *Condition's for Learning* survey many students felt that adults and teachers at MHS showed respect for all students despite their differences. As shown in Figure 2, over 73% of the student body agreed to some extent that teachers show respect towards all students (Panorama Education, 2023). Another bright spot in the data was that over 90% of students felt that there was "at least one adult at school that I could go to for help with a problem" (Panorama Education, 2023). This data speaks volumes to the compassionate and dedicated staff at MHS.

The challenge is, as shown in figure 3, over half the student body felt that students don't treat the adults at MHS with respect. Almost 56% of students disagreed in some capacity to the statement, "students treat adults who work at this school with respect" (Panorama Education, 2023). With this lack of respect for adults in the school, I don't think it's any coincidence that MHS only retained about 78% of their staff in 2022, lower than the state average of just over 82% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). This data is impactful because mutual respect is a cornerstone of relationship building and is foundational to a successful restorative justice system.

Figure 2

Adults in this school respect differences in students (for example, gender, race, culture, learning differences, sexual orientation, etc).
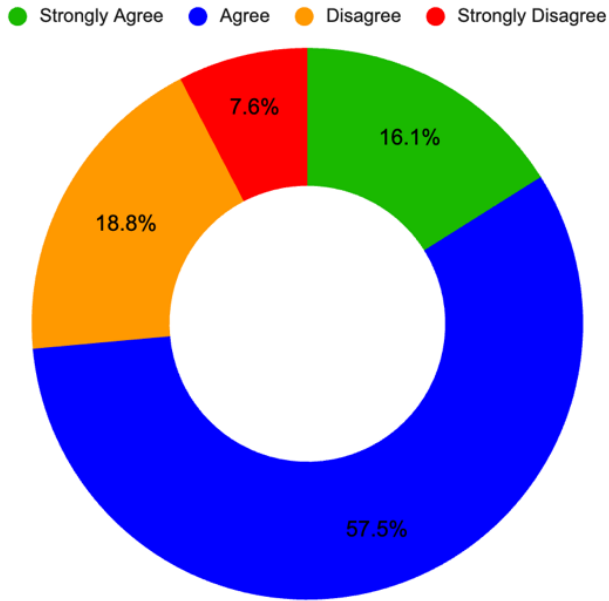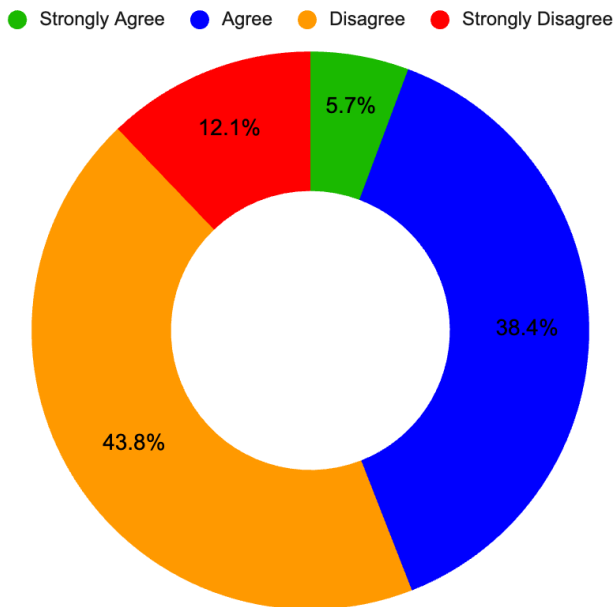

Figure 3

Students treat adults who work in this school with respect.

Student Discipline Data

Discipline referral data is collected and analyzed each year at MHS. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of office referrals into 5 main categories; possession and/or use of weapons, fights and/or assaults, vandalism, unexcused absences, and insubordination. Two big takeaways come from looking at this data. First, the vast majority of office referrals (93.7%) are not violent, dangerous, or destructive, and fairly minor in scale as compared to some of the more serious offences falling into the first three categories– this is good (Muscatine High School, 2023). This means our school is relatively safe and we aren't dealing with a large number of destructive students. The second big take away is the undeniable connection between insubordination and student-teacher relationships. As shown in figure 3, 56% of students don't believe their peers treat teachers with respect (Panorama Education, 2023). This belief is corroborated by the insubordination referral data in figure 4 accounting for 51.3% of office referrals (Muscatine High School, 2023).

Figure 4

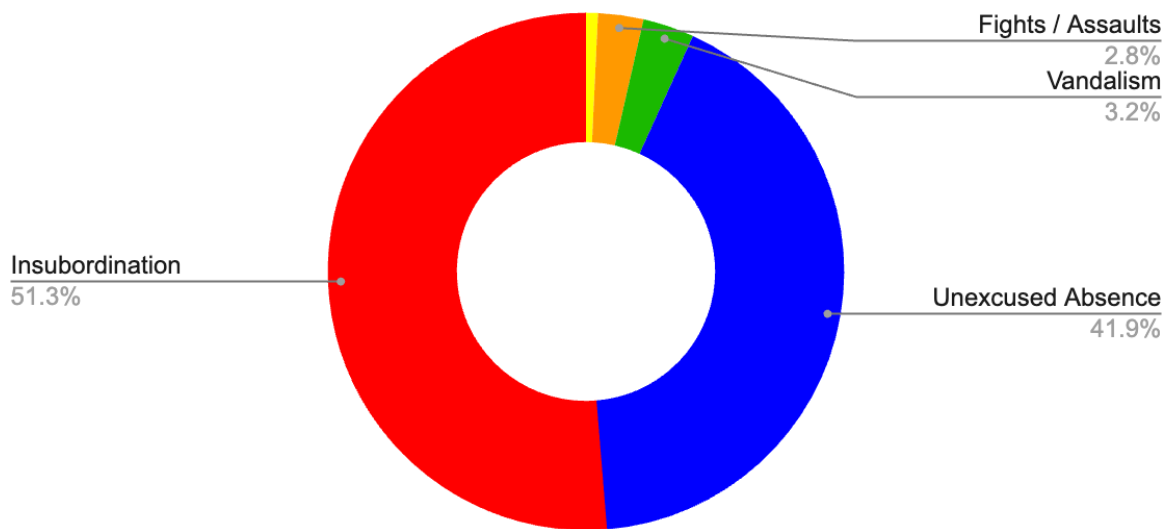*MHS Discipline Referrals 2022-23 School Year*

Figure 5 shows another challenge at MHS. In 2022, there were 135 students suspended and/or expelled from MHS (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Male students made up 72.6% of suspensions and expulsions but they only made up 48.9% of the student body (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, female students made up 51.1% of the study body but they only accounted for 27.4% of the suspensions and expulsions (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). This data is important because the implementation of restorative practices will help to alleviate disparities in discipline such as the one described below.

Figure 5

MHS 2022 Suspension & Expulsion Data by Gender
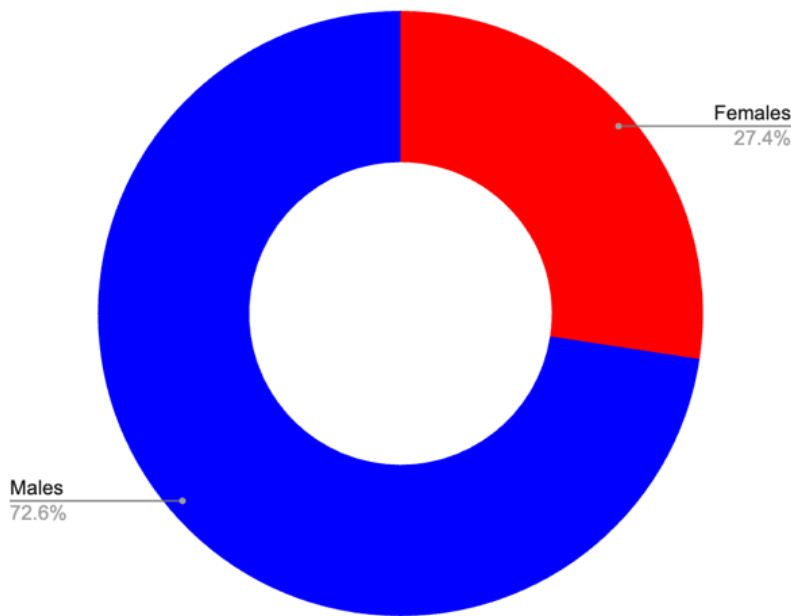
Academic Data

The final challenge MHS is facing is an inadequate graduation rate. 84.28% of MHS students graduate within 4 years which is significantly lower than the state average of 90.15% (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). One can't help but notice the connection between graduation rate and the large percentage of office referrals (41.9%) due to unexcused absences

(Muscatine High School, 2023). Out of class time undoubtably affects student learning, course failure rates, and therefore impacts graduation eligibility. There is also a connection to be drawn from peer-peer and student-teacher relationships affecting absences from class. It's no secret that students who have positive relationships with their peers and teachers are more likely to not only show up for class but also actively participate. Restorative practices help to build stronger peer-peer and student-teacher relationships through SEL curriculum and relationship mending during a disciplinary conference if damage has been done.

Future Data

Future research could include qualitative data in which students could elaborate on *why* they answered the *Conditions for Learning* survey in the way that they did. For example, students could anonymously elaborate on what made them feel like students did or did not respect peers and/or teachers. Students could also be asked for feedback on certain topics that would help develop solutions to these issues. Such as, *what can teachers do to earn more respect from students?* Future qualitative data could help to fill in a lot of gray area affecting school climate and culture.

Action Plan

Based on the reviewed literature and current data analysis, I am proposing the implementation of a comprehensive restorative justice program at Muscatine High School. This plan includes both proactive and reactive components and is based off Hannigan and Hannigan's (2022) book, *Don't Suspend Me! An Alternative Discipline Toolkit* (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). The plan also includes other research supported tiered restorative practices, including the implementation of a schoolwide SEL curriculum (Garnett et al., 2022; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Jain et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018). Together, these components will address Muscatine High

School's discipline policy and positively affect graduation rate, teacher retention, and school climate and culture.

Research Based Strategies

Creating stakeholder buy-in is essential to any discipline process and restorative justice is no different. Buy-in from administrators, teachers, parents, community, and students is foundational to the success of a restorative justice discipline system (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Huang & Cornell, 2021). For example, teacher buy-in is critical because teachers spend the most time with students at school and are typically the ones who deal with behavior issues when they arise (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Therefore, if teachers aren't on board with restorative practices, they are going to continue to send kids out of the classroom to receive punitive consequences and stand in the way of transformative discipline (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Buy-in from parents and community is necessary to adequately support the student during the restorative process. With this research in mind, one of the first obstacles to overcome is shifting the mindset of our staff from traditional to transformative. The literature is clear, when staff look at discipline though a new lens, one with empathy and compassion, a change in school culture will take place (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Wassan et al., 2021).

The next research supported strategy I want to put in place is a behavioral multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). Below, Figure 6 shows a visual representation of this system (Mansfield et al., 2018). Similar to how schools' address academics based on individuals' level of need, research has shown that behavioral MTSS have been successful in preventing and changing student behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018). The behavioral MTSS will include the implementation of a school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, restorative peacemaking circles, mediations, and

individualized discipline plans for tier three students (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Mansfield et

al., 2018).

Figure 6

Hierarchy of Restorative Multi-tiered Systems of Support
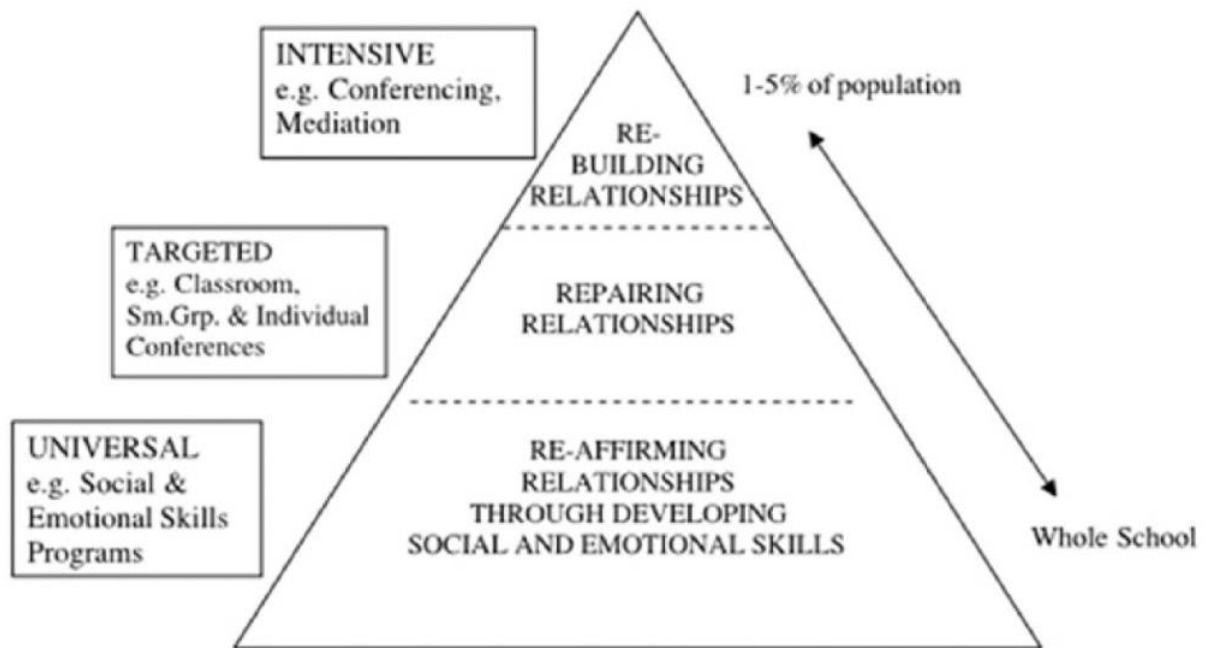
The behavioral MTSS has proactive and reactive discipline measures embedded within

the hierarchy. Research shows alternative discipline systems that include both components are

more effective than systems that only have one by itself (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022;

Mansfield et al., 2018). In this comprehensive system, all students will engaged in SEL

curriculum one day a week during their assigned *Muskie Time* – a 30 minute intervention

timeslot that it already built into our day. Targeted intervention will take place on a more case by

case basis but will largely focus on a skill, behavior, or incident that has taken place. Finally,

intense intervention will be applied to a small group of students who need re-direction and high

levels of support to learn from and change their behavior in the future.

The final component of my plan (described above) includes implementing an effective reactive discipline process for when students need tier three support. Research shows that reactive discipline measures that are successful in changing behavior include three key components: restorative, reflective, and instructional (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). The restorative component includes rebuilding relationships with stakeholders though apology, student contracts, community service, etc.. The reflective component gives students the opportunity to think about what caused them to make the decisions they did. They may complete reflection sheets, role-play, interview, etc.. Finally, the instructional component targets the function of the behavior and teaches students necessary skills to not engage in such behavior again. All three components should be closely monitored though a behavior contract with frequent check-ins with the supervising adult.

Next Steps

The first step in this action plan is to survey staff and students about their current belief systems. Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) suggest staff take a self-inventory survey which will provide insight from staff and help define current core beliefs around student discipline. Student survey data will help answer questions such as: *What do they need from staff to be successful?* And *How can we better serve them?* Analyzing these results and making a plan based off of both student and staff feedback will be key to developing stakeholder buy-in. Once stakeholder buy in is established, there will be a shift in culture with the re-allocation of focus on transformative discipline (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).

The next step will be to set up a discipline committee and select a school wide social-emotional curriculum. Research shows SEL is one of the top factors affecting school culture and climate (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Wassan et al., 2021). It's important that the SEL curriculum is

aligned K-12 so the committee should encompass a group of teachers from a variety of grade

levels and schools to ensure the curriculum will be implemented equitably across the district.

Consistency across the district will help students know and follow expectations regardless of

their geographical location. The committee should also make goals to track progress over time

(Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). These goals should be measurable via student discipline data as

well as climate and culture data.

Finally, *all* staff training including teachers, administrators, support staff, custodial,

coaches, etc. on restorative practices and discipline is needed (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).

Restorative justice is a whole school approach that takes every staff member being on board for

it to be effective (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). Transparence and training are needed to help

shift old beliefs about outdated discipline practices. Training should include the implementation

of SEL curriculum and explain the process of tiered behavioral support. Staff should be trained

on their role in the discipline process and given the opportunity to take workshops that help them

develop consequences that make sense and are impactful to students based on behavior. Lastly,

staff need training that details how to communicate with parents and families in order to

establish all stakeholder buy-in.

<center>**Implementation of School Improvement Plan**</center>

Timeline

The initial implementation of the proposed restorative justice discipline system will take

two years. After the first two years, continual revision, support, and progress monitoring will be

needed to keep the work focused on current student and teacher needs. The plan consists of

surveying staff and students on their current belief systems, developing a discipline team,

choosing an SEL curriculum for the district, and training staff through professional development.

Time is also allotted for teachers to meet in their PLCs and lesson plan for the new social-

emotional learning curriculum. Figure 7 below gives a breakdown of this process with detailed

actions shown in a timeline for the next two years. Although I have provided specific *goal*

months for each action to be completed in and/or by, this calendar may need to be flexible as

issues, obstacles, or unforeseen setbacks arise.

Figure 7

Two-Year Implementation Calendar

2023-2024 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
August 2023	At beginning of the school year professional development, staff will fill out the *Discipline Belief Self Inventory* (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).	Staff participation and reflective feedback about personal beliefs
September 2023	Analyze staff self-inventory results and create a Restorative Justice Discipline Team (RJDT) consisting of members whose scores aligned with the *Innovative Disciplinarian* category.	Ideal team would consist of 2 administrators, 5-6 teachers, 1-2 counselors,1-2 support staff, 1 behavior specialist, and SRO.
	Team develops a student survey to gather qualitative data on student-teacher relationships, student-student relationships, discipline procedure beliefs, school climate, and culture.	Survey consists of reflective questions that lead to insightful

2023-2024 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
		feedback from students
October-December 2023	Students are anonymously surveyed via Google Forms during *Muskie Time.* Results are analyzed by RJDT and plan is created.	Insightful survey feedback
	RJDT works with other district leaders to select K-12 SEL curriculum.	K-12 SEL curriculum is chosen
January-March 2024	Staff participates in monthly PD on Behavioral MTSS process, chosen SEL curriculum, and reactive restorative justice discipline practices.	Feedback from staff on Professional Development Google Form
	PD includes large group instruction, small group workshops, and behavior specific EdCamps.	
April-May 2024	Teachers meet in PLCs weekly to learn about SEL curriculum and create engaging lessons to implement the following school year.	Engaging SEL lessons and activities that captivate students
	Students take *Conditions for Learning* survey.	Student participation
May 2024	Letter is sent home to parents and families introducing the behavioral MTSS process and SEL initiative being implemented district wide (K-12) the follow school year. Social media pages will also	Parental support of discipline policy

2023-2024 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
	make the announcement to the community including the MTSS hierarchy graphic.	
June 2024	RJDT analyze *Conditions for Learning* survey results and 23-24 office referral data; Committee sets goals for 2024-25 school year.	Improving culture and climate survey results as well as declining office referral data.
2024-2025 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
August 2024	Reminder is sent home to parents and families about the new behavioral MTSS process and SEL initiative. District social media outlets will also send out reminder with MTSS hierarchy graphic.	Parental Support of Discipline Policy
	Staff fill out the *Discipline Belief Self Inventory* again. Results are compared to last year's data to see if there is growth.	More staff than last year have a transformative view on discipline
September – December 2024	Teachers implement weekly lessons and activities to teach SEL curriculum during *Muskie Time*	Students are engaged in curriculum
	RJDT meets bi-weekly to discuss progress, resolve problems and work through obstacles. The team also discusses who (teachers and/or students) who need	Teachers and students are provided

2023-2024 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
	additional support and develop a plan to provide that support in a timely manner.	appropriate support when needed
	Administrators set up reactive behavior contracts with students on an as needed basis. Contracts include restorative, reflective, and instructional components.	Students complete contractual obligations and don't repeat behavior
	Administrators and teachers check-in frequently with students on behavior contracts to make sure they are working towards their goals.	Student's feel supported and capable of recovery
January 2025	Teachers and students are surveyed anonymously about the Behavioral MTSS and new SEL curriculum.	Results revel the program's effects, benefits, challenges, and areas still needing additional support.
February 2025	RJDT meets to discuss the survey results and develop action plan to solve problems and/or provide additional support where needed.	Problems are addressed
February – May 2025	Teachers continue teaching weekly SEL curriculum	Student engagement
	Administrators continue behavior contracts with tier 3 students. Continue frequent check-ins to ensure completion of contract.	Students complete contractual obligations

2023-2024 School Year		
Month(s)	**Action(s)**	**Success Indicators**
		and don't repeat behavior
	Students Take *Conditions for Learning* survey	Student participation
June 2025	The Restorative Justice Discipline team meets at the end of the school year to discuss the results of the *Conditions for Learning* survey, yearlong discipline/office referral data, and whether their overall goals have been reached; a new goal is set for the next year	Improving culture and climate survey results as well as declining office referral data.

Resources

For this plan to be successful, a multitude of resources and data will need to be gathered and utilized. The first major resource is the *Discipline Self Inventory,* which is created by Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) and can be found in their book; *Don't Suspend me! An Alternative Discipline Toolkit* (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). The restorative justice leadership team will have access to the inventory results so they can have an idea of which teachers are on board with transformative discipline and those who still have reservations. This information will allow the team to give extra support where needed.

Another crucial resource is the *Conditions for Learning Survey*, which is created by Panorama Education. The survey is administered to students each spring and results are released in June. District and building councilors have access to the survey results and will be able to

provide this data to the disciplinary team. The data can then be used to track progress on school culture and climate goals as well as create new ones each year.

The district will need to settle on a K-12 SEL curriculum. It's important the curriculum is consistent across all elementary buildings though the high school because consistency helps all students to know and understand expectations regardless of their geographical location. Muscatine's low socio-economic population tend to have transient workers causing students to jump from one building to another during the school year depending on where their family can find work and housing. Consistent SEL curriculum will ensure all students are learning the same skills. Muscatine elementary buildings may already have a curriculum in place that could be built upon in the high school. If not, the *Move This World* (2023) K-12 curriculum should be a strong contender as it has been shown to decrease suspensions and incident reports in schools across the nation (Move This World, 2023). The disciplinary team will need to work with district leaders to select a curriculum that will work for the district as a whole.

Finally, we will need alternative discipline forms, contracts, reflection sheets, and lesson materials. Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) provide many ready to use resources in their book *Don't Suspend Me! An Alternative Discipline Toolkit* (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). Purchasing this book for administrators and leaders to read and utilize would be a wise idea. Resources from this book can be used directly or adapted to fit specific student needs (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022).

Roles and Responsibilities

The administrative team will spearhead this plan. Research shows that strong administrative support and leadership is the key to restorative justice success (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). Administrators will be in charge of overseeing the implementation of this plan,

part of the Restorative Justice Disciplinary Team, review goals and analyze data, and support

staff in any way that they can. They will also be primarily in charge of creating behavior

contracts for tier 3 students. Administrators will hold meetings with students, help students

develop goals, and create an action plan that encompasses restorative, reflective, and

instructional components. Additionally, the team is responsible for facilitating and monitoring

meaningful consequences for students who need them.

The *Restorative Justice Disciplinary Team* (RJDT) will create surveys and analyze

student/teacher data. This team will be in charge of facilitating PD throughout the first 2 years of

implementation. Additionally, RJDT will create school wide behavior and climate goals, monitor

progress, and provide support where needed. The team will check in with teachers and/or

students who need additional support and create a plan of action to ensure everyone can be

successful using the restorative justice model. Ideally the team will be made up administrators,

teachers, counselors, support staff, and an SRO.

Teachers will be expected to learn about the restorative justice discipline process and

eventually implement the system into their own classroom. Additionally, teachers will need to

lesson plan and collaborate with their PLCs to create meaningful SEL activities each week

(Mansfield, 2018). Every Monday these lessons will be taught during our *Muskie Time.* Ideally,

teachers will embrace restorative practices and be able to discipline students in a meaningful and

impactful way while still leaving space for a healthy student-teacher relationship in the future

(González, 2012; Mansfield, 2018).

Students have a large responsibility in this plan as well. Students will be expected to

participate in weekly SEL lessons during their 30 minute Monday *Muskie Time*. SEL lessons will

help students to build listening and empathy skills which will strengthen peer-peer and student-

teacher relationships (Garnett et al., 2022). Tier 3 students will be responsible for completing their behavior contract through thoughtful reflection, relationship building activities, and instructional modules all done outside of class time (Kennedy et. al., 2019). Students will need to complete the *Conditions for Learning* survey each spring. And finally, students will be expected to be honest and fair on their evaluations of their school, teachers, peers, and experiences when completing surveys.

Parents, families, and the community members play a support role in this process. Parental responsibilities include checking in with students on their contract progress, talking to students about the importance of changing their behavior, and sitting down with students 1-on-1 to aid in completing behavior contract obligations. Community members can partner with the school to assist with mentoring or providing volunteer opportunities for students. Families need to make sure students are getting to school on-time each and every day.

Progress Monitoring

Success will be measured by reviewing the results from the annual *Conditions for Learning* survey. The hope is that as alternative discipline is implemented, the school culture and climate will improve. Office referral data and exclusionary discipline data will also be analyzed to measure the effectiveness of the behavioral MTSS. Office referral data will tell us which students (what gender and race) are being disciplined, at what rate, and if the plan has affected this data from year to year. The plan will be considered successful if the goal set during the 2023-24 school year is met or exceeded by the end of the 2024-25 school year.

Potential Challenges

Regardless of the meticulous planning put into place, there will likely be booth seen and unforeseen challenges with the implementation of a restorative justice discipline system. The

first challenge highlighted by Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) is the lack of teacher and/or

student buy-in (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). As Huang and Cornell (2021) point out, teacher

buy in is critical because teachers are the front line workers – they are the ones who have the

most contact with students and the ones that are dealing with most behavior issues (Huang &

Cornell, 2021). Veteran teachers may feel restorative discipline is *soft* and doesn't really *teach*

students a lesson. It will be a challenge to reach these teachers and shift their mindset to support

transformative discipline.

Another potential challenge will be parental support. Overwhelmingly, parents want their

kids to be *happy.* Restorative justice makes it much more difficult for students to earn back their

privileges (sports, dances, extra curriculars, etc.) and takes a lot more work as opposed to zero

tolerance policies. Therefore, students may get very frustrated with the process and feel like the

punishment is *never-ending.* This can be difficult for parents to watch and support as they want

their kid out of trouble as much as anyone else.

The final challenge supported by Hannigan and Hannigan (2022) is the lack of resources,

man-power, and support for true restorative justice implementation. Restorative practices take a

lot more time and effort than traditional zero-tolerance policies. In a system where our teachers

and administrators are already stretched very thin, I can see it being challenging to implement

this system with fidelity. It takes a lot more time to meet individually with students, create goals,

an action plan with three components, as well as complete daily check-ins with these students to

monitor their progress. Especially in a large school like Muscatine, it is going to take all hands-

on-deck (including the help of support staff) to be able to check in with students and provide

support with completing behavior contracts.

Conclusion

School crime and safety continue to be a problem across the country. Students are facing record levels of bullying and harassment while at the same time teachers are facing defiance, outbursts, and overall disrespect from students. When behavior issues arise, 62% of our schools are still utilizing zero tolerance policies, regardless of the lack of research supporting these policies preventing or changing behavior (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Moreover, research has shown zero-tolerance policies to have more negative effects than positive ones by increasing racial disparities in discipline, creating a negative school culture and climate, and decreasing students' potential for academic success (Balfanz et al., 2014; Borrego & Maxwell, 2021; Gregory et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2014; Huang & Cornell, 2021; Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

Muscatine High School is facing all the above challenges. Suffering from a below average graduation rate (84%), a low teacher retention rate (78%), and mediocre school climate and culture scores, MHS is considered a *targeted* school in need of improvement according to the Iowa Department of Education (Iowa Department of Education, 2022; Panorama Education, 2023). Action is needed to create a change at Muscatine High School. Research points to comprehensive restorative discipline practices to combat these challenges (Jain et al., 2014; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Kennedy et. al., 2019; Mansfield et al., 2018).

This school improvement plan outlines the implementation of a total restorative justice discipline policy. The initial policy will take 2 years to implement and requires the cooperation from all stakeholders including administration, teachers, support staff, students, and families. The policy will create a behavioral multi-tiered system of support that provides students with varied levels of support depending on student need. The proactive portion of this policy will include a schoolwide SEL curriculum (Mansfield et al., 2018). While the reactive portion will place students on a behavior contract that includes reflective, restorative, and instructional

components to help teach and change their behavior (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Kennedy et. al., 2019).

With clear expectations and a standardized policy that focuses on repairing and maintaining relationships, student's will slowly start changing their behavior for the better. With the growth of mutual respect, school climate is sure to positively change creating a safer Muscatine High School. Shared respect in student-teacher relationships will create more satisfied teachers who will continue to teach in our schools for the long run. When a comprehensive restorative justice discipline system is implemented with fidelity, Muscatine High School students will have the support they need to be both academically and behaviorally successful, fulfilling the Muskie vision of making "Every Student a Success Story" (Muscatine Community School District, 2023).

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