

REDUCING OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS IN TITLE I MIDDLE SCHOOLS: AN  
APPLIED STUDY

by

William Hatten

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

Out-of-school suspension is a growing concern in the United States education system and affects students at the three Title I schools in the Central School System at a particularly high frequency. The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in the Central School system and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multi-method design was used, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was structured interviews with two administrators from each school. The second approach was the analysis of archival data using the discipline data from the school system. The third approach was a teacher survey using a Likert scale to determine teacher perspectives on out-of-school suspension. These tools were used to develop a focused program that will allow the schools to meet student needs while also maintaining safety, order, and a positive school climate. The results of the data showed that administrators and teachers were aware of the negative implications of out-of-school suspension but were experiencing tension between the need to maintain discipline within the school and teacher support while also desiring to reduce out-of-school suspension. The data showed that administrators identified significant differences in most of the student body and students who have frequent behavioral concerns and multiple suspensions. An alternative to suspension program was developed and proposed as a solution to reduce out-of-school suspension.

*Keywords:* Out-of-School Suspension, School Discipline, Title I, Alternative to Suspension, School within a School

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who supported me through this academic endeavor. My wife, Leslie, went above and beyond in supporting me during the research and writing process and I could not have completed this dissertation without her love and support. My son, Palmer, has always been an encouragement as he has reminded me that even when I have work to do, there is a time to play and have fun. He is the reason I am committed to working and growing and I hope to share my passion for learning with him. I am thankful for their commitment and understanding when I was working, and I was blessed to have them with me during this process.

## Acknowledgements

It is only by grace that I was able to complete this study and I must give all glory to God. Looking back, I can see how God placed me on a unique path that led me to education administration and enabled me to complete this work. I am grateful for all my experiences and thank God for guiding me and providing for all my needs. I have been blessed beyond anything I could deserve.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Out-of-school Suspension (OSS)

In-School Suspension (ISS)

Central School System (CSS)

General Strain Theory (GST)

Choice Theory (CT)

Operant Conditioning Theory (OCT)

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Social Ecological Model (SEM)

Socio-Economic Status (SES)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

School Within a School (SWS)

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina. Research supports that out-of-school suspension often leads to negative school outcomes and that it can also negatively impact innocent bystanders (Black, 2016). Title I schools, which are defined by their percentages of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, generally have a higher population of at-risk students. Higher frequency of out-of-school suspension compounds these risks. Cruz and Rodl (2018) found that there are student and school contextual factors that impact the likelihood of out-of-school suspension and that some, but not all, interventions are effective in reducing student suspensions.

This chapter establishes the need for this study based on historical, social, and theoretical arguments. It defines the problem that the three Title I middle schools included in this study are facing and the shared characteristics with national norms. This chapter will also include the rationale for, and significance of the study based on the statistical evidence that out-of-school suspension is significantly harming students and schools (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

### **Background**

The issue of out-of-school suspension is complex and should be viewed through three distinct lenses; historical, social, and theoretical. Each facet of the issue will provide insight that will be necessary to address the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension in the Central School System (CSS).

### **Historical**

Suspension has been present in the American education system for most of its existence

as a discipline technique. However, there has been a sharp increase in the number and percentage of students effected by suspension since the 1970s (USDOE, 2014). While the practice of suspension has been present in some form for decades in the US education system, Evenson, Justinger, Pelischek, and Schulz (2009) noted that the purpose of out-of-school suspension has shifted in recent years from correctional to punitive due to the increased concern for school safety. In many cases, suspension is not limited to issues of school safety and can be used for minor incidents. This recent shift in mindset has contributed to the “pipeline to prison” mentality in which students are set on a course for court involvement or prison from an early age. Harsh and exclusionary discipline practices for offenses that are not dangerous are intended to be a deterrent for future offenses. However, the practice has shown to be ineffective and can increase the problem (Mallett, 2016).

Out-of-school suspension is a common disciplinary action in schools throughout the United States (USDOE, 2014). The exclusionary practice prevents a student from attending class and generally prevents the student from being present on school property for all or part of a school day. The practice is widely used in secondary education despite being linked to negative outcomes (Noltemeyer, 2015). The effects of suspension in middle school are likely to be highly impactful throughout a student’s academic career and beyond (Skiba & Losen, 2015).

The use of out-of-school suspension in public education increased with the wide adoption of zero tolerance programs. In these programs, behaviors that may not be deemed dangerous on their own were identified as grounds for suspension or expulsion. This policy emerged out of the federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s (Pigott et al., 2018). The increased concern for safety that was brought about by fears of drugs and school-based violence made exclusionary discipline more common. The constitutionality of zero-tolerance policies has been called into

question and challenged in court, leading many school systems to back off some of the language of zero-tolerance (Black, 2015). Tension has existed between the need to protect student's rights and maintain school safety and discipline for decades. *Goss v Lopez* (1975) established student rights in schools and laid out guidelines for exclusionary discipline. However, despite this landmark court case protecting student's rights, the frequency of out-of-school suspension has steadily increased since that same time (Curran, 2019). Zero-tolerance policies were generally adopted to control serious safety concerns such as weapons and drugs on school campuses, but there has been no proof that these policies were effective, and they may have been directly counterproductive (Hoffman, 2014). The term is often generally applied to infractions that usually lead to suspension to the point that they are considered automatic. There has been a great deal of research in recent years to point out the errors associated with zero-tolerance and the overuse of discipline (Berlowitz, 2017; Curran, 2019; Hudson, 2017; Mallett, 2016). The term has been dropped from many school systems and is defined differently by many organizations, but there has been little research supporting positive changes in the application of disciplinary practices.

## **Social**

Student suspensions have an impact on the entire school environment, not only those who are directly impacted or involved with the infraction (Black, 2016). Out-of-school suspension impacts student perceptions and relationships with adults in the school building (Henderson & Guy, 2017). This strain on positive relationships may be detrimental to the development of student perceptions and attitudes toward school and may damage social connections with adults in the school building influence student outcomes. The lack of social connectedness can lead to long term behavioral problems

and can be a predictor of drug use (Bond et al., 2007).

Out-of-school suspension is correlated with lower perceptions of school climate (Heilbrun, 2018). Helibrum also found that schools in which teachers and students describe the environment as highly structured typically had lower levels of out-of-school suspension and fewer racial disparities in discipline incidents. One study found that if students with behavioral disorders perceived teachers as hostile, they were statistically more likely to be assigned to in-school suspension (Hartman & Stage, 2000). The social implications of out-of-school suspension can be self-defeating as a negative school climate can lead to higher frequency behavioral issues. In one study, a positive school climate was shown to compensate for variables that would typically result in a higher likelihood of out-of-school suspension (Huang & Cornell, 2018).

Out-of-school suspension does not typically impact the targeted behavior that precedes the disciplinary action and can negatively impact the school climate and environment (Evenson et al., 2009). Out-of-school suspension can also have a negative impact on the students who are not suspended and has a negative effect on school climate (Black, 2016). Suspension from school is also a predictor for future delinquent behavior and is linked to court or juvenile justice involvement. This was true even if the offenses that led to the suspension were relatively minor (Council of State Governments, 2011).

Along with the negative outcomes for individual students, the application of suspension as a punitive consequence is problematic, as many studies have shown that specific subgroups of students are more likely to be affected with similar behavior. Suspension is likely to impact African American students disproportionately compared to their white peers; and male students at a disproportionately high level compared to female students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). This trend



has been supported in multiple studies and persists when actions, attitudes, and cultural norms are taken into consideration (Huang & Cornell, 2017).

The specific data from the CSS is similar to the national trend. The school system consists of seven middle schools. Three of the schools are Title I and four of the schools are not Title I. The number of student suspensions in the Title I schools is higher than the number of student suspensions in the non-Title I schools and African American males are suspended at a higher frequency and percentage than other subgroups of students.

High levels of out-of-school suspensions can also lead to student stress and strain. Agnew's (1985) General Strain Theory (GST) connected criminal delinquency to the inability to achieve one's goals. Agnew also connected delinquency to the inability to avoid painful or undesired stimuli. Students who do not wish to be in school or to comply with a school's authority may develop a negative association with school. This is an important concept for education because it suggests that students may willfully engage in behavior that will lead to suspension if it is an opportunity to avoid the undesired setting. General Strain Theory is also important to educational settings because it suggests that perceived unfairness is also likely to lead to an increase in delinquent behavior. African American males are much more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than their white peers (Losen & Skiba, 2010). This inequality and real or perceived unfairness could lead students to choose delinquent behavior intentionally.

### **Theoretical**

In most cases, disciplinary practices are put in place to control student behavior and maintain a safe and supportive educational environment. Teachers most often associate discipline with order and rules in the classroom (Ugurlu et al., 2015). In order to maintain a controlled

environment, most organizations implement some form of a behavior management system. There have been many theories concerning human behavior that are essential to understanding school discipline and problems with behavior management. Skinner's (1963) Operant Conditioning Theory (OCT), Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT), and Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory (CT) have been utilized as a foundation for this study. The theoretical support for this study can be divided into two sections, behavior modification, and the social impact on behavior.

While each theorist had unique elements and a different focus, they all examined human behavior concerning coercion, behavior modification, and the applied learning process. Skinner (1963) suggested that when dealing with intelligent learners, it is possible to influence behavior through the manipulation of stimuli and that the effects could be either positive or negative. The paradigm shift towards discipline as a punitive measure rather than a corrective measure is aligned with the tenants of behaviorism that suggest that human behavior can be influenced through the manipulation of stimuli. If undesired behavior is negatively reinforced and the desired behavior is positively reinforced, students will begin to operate in desired patterns; however, there could be additional costs to the use of negative reinforcement (Tauber, 1982). A common misconception prevalent in schools is that out-of-school suspension will discourage other students from misbehaving and will, therefore, improve the learning environment and increase learning (Green et al., 2018). There is a lack of research pointing to the effectiveness of out-of-school suspension on overall school behavior.

Bandura (1977) emphasized the importance of socialization in the learning process. Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals can learn from one another and through the experiences of one another. In Bandura's theory, students would not need to personally receive a suspension or other disciplinary action in order to learn desired behavior patterns. Instead,

students would be able to learn through the experiences of others. The social implications of out-of-school suspension are far-reaching. Schools desire to set high behavioral standards and communicate to the entire student body what actions are acceptable and unacceptable through the application of out-of-school suspension. Research has shown that there is a social impact of out-of-school suspension, but that it is generally negative rather than positive. High suspensions can lead teachers and staff to feel less safe and increase violent behavior (Hargreaves & Hemphill, 2009).

Glasser's (1998) CT is important in understanding why disciplinary policies are effective or ineffective. The theory suggests that people are responsible for their actions and own level of happiness or unhappiness, and that attempts to coerce others to lead to unhappiness and discontentment. People may be willing to comply with coercion, but they will build resentment and will be more inclined to undermine the coercive systems actively. If schools provide for the basic student needs through structure and environment, they can help students to embrace and accept positive behavior (Louis, 2009).

All three of the theories postulate that external environmental factors can influence behavior. They also all acknowledge that people will naturally resent and work against manipulation and coercion. Schools that implement coercive practices will likely see reactions against control, which could lead to increased delinquent or defiant behavior.

### **Problem Statement**

This applied research study addressed the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension. Out-of-school suspension is an increasing problem throughout the country and specifically in the three Title I middle schools in the CSS.

The CSS has identified out-of-school suspension as an area of concern. For the past two years, the school system has encouraged schools to focus on reducing out-of-school suspension as well as other exclusionary discipline practices. They have focused on building nurturing environments and restorative practices.

This research will help to solve the problem because it will seek to determine a solution to high-frequency out-of-school suspension by understanding administrator and teacher perspectives and analyzing the archival data. The synthesis of the three data sources will allow the researcher to determine a solution that is grounded in recent literature while addressing the specific needs of the three Title I middle schools in the CSS.

The three Title I schools in the CSS were analyzed for this study because they have a higher frequency out-of-school suspension than the non-Title I schools in the district. The district has similarities with the national trends concerning disparities between subgroups of students. African American males are significantly more likely to be suspended than their white peers, and males of all subgroups are significantly more likely to be suspended than females.

The current research on this issue suggests that out-of-school suspension is detrimental to the well-being of middle school students (Black, 2016; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba & Losen, 2015). However, the trend of increasing reliance on out-of-school suspension has persisted in the United States (USDOE, 2014). In the case of out-of-school suspension, there is a known factor that is detrimental to the student educational outcomes, but it continues to increase. The current research has shown that out-of-school suspension is a problem, but the data from the school system and national trends have not shown improvement. One study found that students and educators tend to use criminal justice language when discussing events involving out-of-school suspension (Kayama et al., 2015). This reinforces the punitive aspect of out-of-school suspension

and reinforces the concept that out-of-school suspension is primarily used as a punishment rather than a solution to solve or restore student practices in schools (Evenson et al., 2009). The literature agrees that suspension is a problem, but in the CSS as well as in the United States education system, there have been few solutions that have led to change.

This multimethod applied study explored the perceptions and input from key stakeholders in order to solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension. The data were analyzed in order to develop themes and patterns. Through administrator interviews, archival data, and a teacher survey, the researcher developed a solution that can be applied to CSS organization.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this applied study is to solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in the CSS and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multi-method design was used, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was structured interviews with two administrators from each school for a total of six interviews. The second approach was an analysis of archival data using the discipline data from the school system. The third approach was a teacher survey from two schools using a seven-point Likert scale to determine teacher perspectives.

### **Significance of the Study**

The primary significance of this study is the impact that it could potentially have on student outcomes. Out-of-school suspension is detrimental to student outcomes academically, socially, and legally (Black, 2016). Students who are suspended from school are also more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018). The entire community

surrounding the CSS could also be impacted as suspension rates have been linked to criminal activity and court involvement for students (Mowen & Brent, 2016).

The three specific Title I schools that were examined for this study may also be significantly impacted if the proposed solution is implemented. The solution that was proposed offers schools a plan that could be implemented in order to decrease the number of out-of-school suspensions, which could, in turn, increase test scores, improve student outcomes, and positively impact school climate (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018). Teachers will also benefit from the results of this study. One study showed that teacher burnout and stress are correlated with student aggression and behavioral incidents and that an improved school climate can impact those areas (Berg & Cornell, 2016). Solving the problem of high-frequency suspension in the targeted schools will help to influence student behavior and improve the school climate. The results of this study could be used to develop professional development, guide practices, and influence policy concerning the use and implementation of out-of-school suspension.

On a wider scale, this study could help to improve local society through a reduction in delinquency and crime. Students who are suspended have a much higher risk of being arrested, and the frequency of suspension further increases the likelihood of arrest over time (Mowen & Brent, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

**Central Research Question:** How can the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension be solved at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 1:** How would administrators in an interview solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 2:** How would archival data inform the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 3:** How would quantitative survey data from teachers inform the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

### **Definitions**

1. *Out-of-school Suspension (OSS):* The practice of excluding students from school grounds and school activities as a consequence for student misbehavior (Skiba et al., 2014).
2. *Pipeline to Prison:* The concept that the use of harsh discipline practices and the presence of sworn school resource officers in schools leads to an increased likelihood that students will be involved with the criminal justice system and prison (Owens, 2017).
3. *Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS):* A systematic approach to addressing school culture, climate, and environment using positive reinforcement. In this system, expectations must be defined and explicitly taught. Desirable behavior is reward, and a system of interventions is implemented for students who are not demonstrating the desired behavior (Horner et al., 2015).
4. *Title I:* This designation refers to schools that qualify under Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA). Title I schools are designated to provide support economically disadvantaged students, which

is measured by the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Participation in the program provides schools with access to federal funds that are earmarked for specific student-centered purposes (USDOE, 2018).

5. *Zero Tolerance*: A district-wide policy outlining student behavior that will automatically result in exclusionary discipline, including suspension, expulsion, or transfer to an alternative school (Dunning-Lozano, 2018). This term is often used generally to refer to behaviors that almost always result in exclusionary discipline, even if they are not directly outlined by district policy (Curran, 2019).

### **Summary**

Out-of-school suspension is a problem throughout the United States and in the three Title I middle schools in the CSS. Out-of-school suspension results in lost instructional time, negative school climate, lower test scores, and decreased academic outcomes. Out-of-school suspension also negatively impacts student outlooks outside of school and increases their likelihood of court involvement and arrest.

This applied study proposed a solution to the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at three Title I middle schools in the CSS. The study consisted of interviews with administrators at the three schools, analysis of archival data, and teacher interviews. After data were collected and synthesized, a plan of action was proposed that will help schools to decrease the frequency of out-of-school suspension.

This study builds on current literature that strongly supports the negative impact of out-of-school suspension for middle school students and released information from the CSS that supports the specific need for intervention in these schools. Current research has emphasized the



need for reform in disciplinary practices. This study contributed to the wider educational environment and could lead to improved outcomes in the CSS.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The purpose of this applied study is to solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in the CSS and to formulate a solution to address the problem. Several key theoretical concepts impact this study. The first theoretical concept was the effect of behavior modification systems. This construct is heavily based on the works of Skinner and Glasser. The second theoretical concept was the social nature of learning environments, which is supported by the work of Bandura. In connection with social learning and the influence of cultural norms on student behavior, the social-ecological model (SEM) was also examined. The SEM, which was first developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), is also considered as it examines the need to consider the impact of larger systems on the behavior of students. These systems could include family groups, peer groups, and larger social or cultural systems. The larger concepts of behavior modification and social learning are manifest in the issue of high-frequency out-of-school suspension. Schools need to control student behavior in order to maintain safety and facilitate learning while also taking into consideration the social impact that behavior can have on the learning process and school environment. Schools must find a philosophical balance between the needs of the whole school and the impact that punitive consequences can have on individual students and subgroups. Schools must find a way to balance the need for control and safety while also creating a welcoming and emotionally secure environment which may require alternative disciplinary strategies (Green et al., 2018).

Cultural implications of out-of-school suspension will also be considered. African American male students receive a disproportionately high number of out-of-school suspensions (Skiba & Losen, 2010). Students with disabilities are also more likely to face exclusionary

discipline practices (Allman & Slate, 2013). The theoretical literature supports the cultural and social adaptation of behaviors in adverse environments, and it is possible that increased disparity in disciplinary practices could propagate a sense of rejection from the majority culture (Kelly, 2008). Similarly, frequent student misbehavior must also be addressed within the context of the overall school climate. Studies have shown that student misbehavior increases teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, and teacher burnout (Bottiani et al., 2019). The presence of misbehavior in a classroom is also likely to have a prolonged impact on student behavior throughout their education. Students with disruptive peers who are placed in an aggressive environment are likely to develop aggressive and disruptive behaviors themselves (Thomas et al., 2011).

This problem is important for the CSS as well the larger educational community due to the negative impact that out-of-school suspension can have on students (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). The increasing frequency of out-of-school suspension in Title I schools is another area of concern. This chapter will examine the theoretical constructs of behavior modification and social learning through an examination of foundational theories. Second, this chapter will examine the related literature and current research supporting the need for further research. The related literature is divided into four categories; effectiveness of suspension, a general rejection of manipulation and coercion, alternative consequences, and cultural implications. These areas of concern will support the need for further study in the CSS as well as the larger educational environment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is founded on two concepts, behavior modification, and the impact of social pressure on behavior. The theories of Skinner, Glasser, and Bandura were the primary foundation for the study. The related studies of Skiba and Losen,

(2015); Agnew (1985); Noltemeyer et al., 2015), along with contributions of many current studies, shaped current literature. There are trends and consensus in the literature concerning the negative impacts of out-of-school suspension and the negative consequences of using punishment as a coercive tool to change student behavior. There is significant evidence that a dynamic change is needed. This study builds upon the existing body of knowledge to formulate a solution to the high frequency out of school suspension at three Title I schools in the CSS.

### **Operant Conditioning Theory**

Operant Conditioning Theory (OCT) suggests that human behavior can be influenced through the manipulation of stimuli but that the response may be contingent on other external factors such as prior stimuli or scheduling systems (Skinner, 1963). Operant Conditioning Theory moves beyond Pavlovian classical conditioning and considers the impact of stimuli both positive and negative on an intelligent learner. This theory has been foundational in the institutionalization of education and behavior management. Teachers desire to control behavior in the classroom; therefore, they must determine a system in which the will of the teacher or administrator can be imposed on the student.

Many early studies of the effects of OCT examined young learners in laboratory settings to determine if student behavior can be impacted using positive and negative stimuli. Once it was established in the literature that OCT could impact student behavior, the theory was tested with older students in a general classroom setting. One early study showed that through targeted praise and discouragement of negative behaviors, a teacher could effectively change the targeted behavior of secondary students (McAllister et al., 1969). In this study, a teacher targeted specific behaviors of students talking and turning around in their seats. The teacher monitored and tracked their comments and targeting of this behavior and found that the number of incidents

decreased in comparison to a control classroom that did not apply targeted and intentional feedback. This was an important study because it showed that changes in behavior over time were linked to the feedback the teacher provided her students about their behavior. It also established the need for teachers to supply social contingencies for classroom behavior. As the research on social and behavioral conditioning in classroom settings has developed, there have been additional theories to explain student behavior and their response to stimuli. One recent study found that there is a difference in response to behavior modification based on student age (Coşkun, 2019). Coşkun found that students in kindergarten and first grade respond favorably to classical conditioning, whereas students who are nine to ten years old tend to respond favorably to OCT. Another application of Skinner's OCT is the use of immediate rewards as a reinforcer of student behavior. The use of tokens, tickets, points, or other external rewards has become popular in school settings as a method to encourage positive behavior (Bucher & Manning, 2001).

The heart of this issue is student motivation. This issue is complex because student attitudes towards school are varied. Many students do not view school as a desirable location or activity and therefore are not internally motivated to change their behavior. Student behavior is impacted by teacher interactions and is likely to manifest negatively if students feel that they are treated unjustly (Díaz-Aguado & Martínez, 2013). A study of middle school perceptions on school climate showed that if there is a higher perceived friction, there will be higher student conduct issues (Loukas & Murphy, 2007). Students' responses are impacted by their perception of the environment and people who are in control. Many students carry baggage from previous school experiences and may have preconceived negative expectations of a teacher before entering the classroom.

Skinner (1971) determined that stimuli, both negative and positive, can influence human behavior. The use of punitive actions in schools is on the rise both in the CSS and the United States (USDOE, 2014). Formalized programs such as zero-tolerance policies and other strict reactionary practices are designed to send a swift and clear message to students that certain actions will not be tolerated (Mowen, 2017). Positive teacher actions that are based on behaviorism have also been shown to decrease targeted student behaviors when implemented with fidelity (Owens et al., 2018). Skinner (1971) also described positive reinforcement as a desirable method of manipulation that will guide individuals to choose a positive targeted behavior.

In recent years, educators have sought to increase student ownership and voice in the education process through the use of character education and prevention programs such as Capturing Kids' Hearts Campus by Design model (Holtzapple et al., 2011). This has also been applied through the use of social contracts and student-driven rule-setting practices. Increasing the influence of voice for students increases student buy-in and participation in school activities (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017). Teachers who serve as guides rather than authoritarians do not force students to take specific actions, but they apply pressure and rewards that will encourage students to make their own choices.

The use of punitive consequences as a system of behavior modification and classroom management is grounded in behaviorism and OCT. Acker and O'Leary (1987) demonstrated that the use of reprimands early in a school year is effective in decreasing the frequency of off-task behavior. They also found that if the reprimands are removed and replaced with praise, the off-task behavior will decline. This general trend has been challenged in recent years as studies have shown that teachers who use harsher reprimands without the use of praise or positively stated

classroom rules are more likely to have off-task behavior and classroom disruptions (Reinke et al., 2013). While there is some contradiction among scholars concerning the best practice in behavior modification, there is a majority consensus in the literature that teacher behaviors and response to student behavior will impact future student actions. This consensus is consistent with Skinner's (1971; 1974) theoretical position that student behavior can be changed or influenced based on the stimuli they receive from teachers.

Operant conditioning and the ability to influence behavior has also developed into an applied and practiced social science. Applied behavioral analysis is a behavioral therapy that developed as a tool to help people change undesirable behavior. This system generally focuses on a trained mental health professional analyzing a patient in order to understand motivation, reinforcement, and emotional states and the impact they have on social behavior (Leaf et al., 2016). Applied behavioral analysis developed as a science out of the seminal article by Baer et al. (1968). This applied field examines the development of a mechanism for influencing the behavior of social importance. This practice emphasizes the difference in behaviors that are convenient to observe and those that are societally important. It goes beyond the laboratory level study of changing output through the manipulation of stimuli and engages participants in a dynamic environment. Baer et al. sought to understand and implement a system that could consider complex subjects and understand their motivation and behavior through discovery and reflection. As this field developed as a science, it has been heavily applied to individuals who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, it has much further reaching applications and implications for students with a wide variety of behavioral concerns (Demchak et al., 2019). Applied behavioral analysis has been implemented in many schools by

psychologists and influenced the development of the widely popular implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support systems.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) systems are common in public schools (Horner et al., 2015). PBIS systems have been implemented in over 25,000 schools in the United States and have become a standard practice in many school systems (Pas, Johnson et al., 2019). In PBIS systems, schools designate a set of positive targeted behaviors and provide training for staff and students on the necessity of these behaviors with a focus on research-based practices and interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Common rule sets might include 1) be respectful, 2) be engaged, 3) be safe, and 4) be responsible. The agreed-upon rules will then be applied to all areas of school and student interaction. Students receive positive stimuli ranging from verbal or visual approval to tangible rewards or experiences when they demonstrate the targeted behavior. Schools that implement these systems with high fidelity are likely to have lower rates of suspension and truancy and have higher achievement scores (Pas, Johnson, et al. 2019). PBIS systems do not emphasize negative reinforcement; however, these programs are generally applied in addition to school disciplinary policies. PBIS seeks to improve on the traditional implementation of increasingly adverse consequences for rule violations (Sugai et al., 2000). In a successfully implemented PBIS system, teachers or other staff will use preplanned responses that direct students back to specific rules and why their actions are a violation of the rules using a common language and emphasis on positive behaviors (Reinke et al., 2013). The combination of positive and negative reinforcement fits within Skinner's theory and has been implemented with some success. As more schools have adopted PBIS systems and are emphasizing student behavior as a cornerstone for academic success, there is an increased



opportunity to combine formal PBIS programs with school mental health services in order to meet student needs (Anello et al., 2017).

There is debate among scholars as to the effectiveness or appropriate designation of PBIS systems as applied behavioral analysis (Critchfield, 2015). Some have criticized traditional PBIS systems for its differences from applied behavioral analysis and note that PBIS systems are often created for larger systems in which those responsible for the implementation of the program lack formal training in social sciences (Johnston et al., 2006). Horner and Sugai (2015) argued that the development of PBIS systems came directly from applied behavior analysis. They noted that there had been criticism of PBIS for a perceived lack of validation through behavioral science; however, their tiered system of behavior analysis has been experimentally connected with decreased frequency of office referrals.

Skinner (1974) noted that although the process of behavior modification can give educators control over students, the imbalance of power in favor of educators often leads to long term disadvantages for students. Noncompliance could also represent a student's desire to gain attention, avoid or escape, or extreme aversion (Cipani, 1998). Over time, this power imbalance could lead students to take counter control actions that lead them to oppose and undermine the influence of the teacher or controller. Overt student resistance to a teacher's authority is often the result of the student social networks and informal structure within the educational environment (McFarland, 2001). Skinner (1974) also pointed out that there are strong ethical dilemmas to behavioral control due to the natural tendency of people in power to oppress or mistreat those without power. He also postulated that counter control actions are beneficial to students who are being controlled because systematic resistance is the only power that those being controlled have. One study found that African American students are less likely to engage in defiant

behavior in the classroom if they perceive the teacher as fair and trustworthy (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). This is an important consideration for school administrators as it could prove that strong negative stimuli such as out-of-school suspension could propagate a cycle of discipline and rebellion between teachers and students.

### **Choice Theory**

Another theory that is relevant to the discussion of behavior modification is CT. Choice theory (Glasser, 1998) contends that the use of coercive tactics to influence the behavior of others is generally detrimental to the wellness of others and posits that people should take accountability and ownership of their own decision making. Glasser developed a method of psychotherapy called Reality Therapy that encourages people to take ownership of their own decisions and recognize that, although there are societal pressures to conform, everyone is responsible for their own choices and satisfaction in life. Students who are empowered and included in the educational process are more likely to engage and learn (Zeldin et al., 2018). Educators can apply CT in schools by structuring tasks and the school environment in a manner that supports the basic needs of students (Louis, 2009). Some of these concepts of reality therapy have become integrated into restorative practices in which students are encouraged to take ownership of their actions and consequences through relationships, repairing damage from misbehavior, and planned reentry after consequences have been issued (Garnett et al., 2019). These same theories offered insight into teacher-student relationships and a general resistance to schooling that manifests in many students. Suspension could potentially become a negative catalyst in the career of a student (Pyne, 2019). According to CT, students have four fundamental needs, the need to belong, the need for power, the need for freedom, and the need for fun (Glasser, 1997). The use of coercion to control students stifles and frustrates these fundamental

needs and leads to dissatisfaction. Students who are assigned out-of-school suspension may experience psychological attitude changes toward school, which could lead to greater resistance to school and influence their self-perception and identity as a student (Pyne, 2019). Freedom may be limited through the exclusion from school and the inability to participate in school functions. Power dynamics are challenged when students are coerced or forced to take actions that they find disagreeable. When students disengage, they are less likely to perceive school as a welcoming or fun environment.

Reinke et al. (2013) conducted a study to identify classroom issues that could impact or enhance PBIS implementation. They studied 33 elementary schools that were implementing PBIS with high fidelity. They found that teachers in individual classrooms that used general praise tended to report feeling more efficacious in the classroom. They also found that when teachers sought to control behavior with harsh reprimands, they generally felt less efficacious and reported more emotional exhaustion.

Redl (1975) also examined the choices and behavior that students display in classroom settings from a psychoanalytic perspective. He discouraged the common practice of formally or informally labeling children as disruptive children because he viewed the behaviors that students display as a sign or communication with deeper meaning. He urged teachers to refrain from assigning students an identity associated with misbehavior and argued that their behavior usually stems from some other cause and not simply a decision to break the established rules. Redl discussed the possible motivation for disruptive behavior to include boredom, anger, a desire for help, frustration with a lack of sympathy, or a normal reaction against classroom mismanagement. Redl proposed that when students perceive that the adults with power over them are negatively motivated towards them as individuals, they are more likely to disrupt the

system. He also noted that this reaction against mismanagement could have an impact on student behavior even if the issue is a product of the student's perception and not based on the actions of the teacher.

The common mislabeling students as disruptive children rather than viewing them as dynamic and complex individuals has been supported by recent literature. One study found that when students misbehaved in the Fall of a school year, their teachers were prone to view them as less likely to be successful academically in the Spring of the school year (Hafen et al., 2015). This study also demonstrated that there are strong benefits for teachers who receive professional development focused on understanding an appropriate developmental context for students. It is important to understand the concept of teacher perceptions of student disruptions and the classification of disruptive students because studies have shown that teacher perceptions and expectations impact teacher behavior and can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies about a student's likelihood to succeed (Brophy & Good, 1970).

In a study focused on teacher interactions with students identified with different levels of risk of aggression, researchers found that students who are higher risk tend to receive negative reprimands at a higher rate than students with a lower risk of aggression for similar rule violations (Acker et al., 1996). The authors of this study also found that students who were at a higher risk of aggression group responded negatively and acted out against these reprimands, especially if there was a perceived difference in the application of the rules.

For marginalized groups of students, an increased sense of rejection by the school could lead to the development of a social identity that is based on a rejection of school (Kelly, 2008). Social identity theory suggests that individuals in societies will generally seek to be a part of a group and will make connections and associations within their group. An important practice

within this theory is a group member's comparison of characteristics of an in-group and out-group and a desire to conform within a group (Tajfel, 1982). The formation of these groups can be based on internal or external characteristics, but generally involve a shared system and comparable features. This is especially relevant when considering the impact of disparity in the application of school discipline. Students may seek to be a part of a subgroup whose identity is formed around counter control measures in opposition to school rules and expectations (Kelly, 2008). If a group perceives acceptance and compliance as a negative characteristic, students may be inclined to intentionally reject school expectations in order to gain acceptance within the subgroup.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) conducted a study that showed that some African American students might underachieve academically due to a fear of being labeled 'acting white.' In a later study, Ogbu (2004) clarified that this should not be used to support the classification of African American students as an oppositional culture, but noted the importance of recognizing historical challenges and disadvantages that African Americans have faced and the consequences of acting white in terms of a lost culture, physical danger, and other societal and economic disadvantages. Social identity theory is relevant to this study due to the sociological implications of student groups and the possibility that students would intentionally undermine school rules and procedures due to the desire to be accepted by a subgroup that has adopted defiance of school rules as a group norm or desired attribute. Kelly (2008) pointed out that students will seek to improve their social status either by individual improvement or through the relative improvement of their social group.

The philosophical basis of most traditional discipline systems suggests that negative reinforcement of undesirable behaviors and positive reinforcement of desirable behaviors will

effectively change student willingness to behave according to the standard rules. This theory is consistent in OCT as well as CT. Naderi et al. (2015) found that teaching CT through group settings led to increased student self-efficacy. Self-efficacy increases student perceptions of control and could potentially offset some of the student reaction against the formal power system. When student psychological needs are considered, students are more likely to take part in their own education willingly. Student engagement is one of the most impactful elements of student learning, and schools should capitalize on the opportunity.

Teachers may be resistant to implementing CT as student misbehavior is often viewed as rebellion or disrespect, and teachers do not want to relinquish control in their classrooms (Glasser, 1997). Student coercion through a response to stimuli has been the norm in school systems and societies for hundreds of years, and it works for the masses even though it is the basis of dissatisfaction and suffering in school. Teachers frequently describe student misbehavior as a leading cause of stress and burnout; therefore, it is pertinent and relevant to consider how psychological theories that account for student needs could impact learning environments (Lopes & Oliveira, 2017; Hastings & Bham, 2003).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977) suggests that the learning process is social, and that people learn in community and from the experiences of others. People observe others around them and will imitate the observed behavior based on the consequences they witness. According to SLT, firsthand experience is not necessary for people to adopt new behaviors. The use of out-of-school suspensions is often intended to negatively reinforce undesirable behaviors in students by punishing those who break the rules and influencing the overall climate it can be counterproductive in pushing students towards riskier behavior and

increase their likelihood of committing a crime (Evenson et al., 2009). The overuse of out-of-school suspension could potentially have an adverse effect on student behavior as it could create negative perceptions for students who misbehave as well as bystanders (Black, 2016). Social learning can impact and reinforce delinquent behavior. If the bonds with teachers are weakened due to negative treatment from teachers and students feel an increased association with misbehaving students, they are more likely to adopt disruptive behavior patterns (Bao et al., 2014).

An important component of SLT is the concept of the self-system and self-efficacy. Bandura (1995, p. 2) defined self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations.” Teacher and student self-efficacy can have a profound impact on academic outcomes, including increasing test scores (Cook, 2012). Bandura pointed out that people act or respond to their surroundings based on their belief in their abilities to do so and their potential effectiveness in the situation.

This theory was influenced by Rotter’s (1966) Locus of Control Theory. Locus of control can be described as internal or external and describes an individual’s belief about their control over an outcome. People with an internal locus of control believe that they are empowered to impact outcomes. This theory is especially important for educators because beliefs about locus of control have been proven to impact teacher behaviors (Cook, 2012). Teachers who believe they are empowered to make a difference in the academic or behavioral outcomes will implement new strategies and work harder to find solutions to challenges in the classroom.

Conversely, people with an external locus of control tend to believe that outcomes are outside of their control. Bandura (1997) suggested that teachers with an internal locus of control will work harder and make a greater effort to impact their students. The actions these teachers

take as a result of an internal locus of control are more likely to lead to positive student academic outcomes.

Recent research has been unable to prove a correlation between teacher self-efficacy and teacher discipline referrals (Highberger, 2015). However, recent literature has shown that there are social implications of suspension and discipline. Students who have positive social relationships in school with teachers and peers are less likely to exhibit negative behavior (Cornell & Huang, 2016). Another quantitative study of high school teachers found that there was a weak negative relationship between teacher self-efficacy and the number of office referrals a teacher writes, however, the study did not produce a statistically significant correlation between the variables (Conary, 2019). Conary noted that despite the weak statistical correlation between teacher self-efficacy and discipline referral numbers, there is reason to believe that increasing teacher self-efficacy could impact student discipline referrals indirectly. Teacher self-efficacy improves teacher practices, which in turn impacts student engagement. Higher levels of student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships have been statistically linked to decreased student misbehavior (Gregory et al., 2016).

Students are also impacted by the social cues they receive from their teachers. As African American males are subjected to higher frequency out-of-school suspension, it is relevant to consider the implication that this could have on student perceptions. One study showed that students pick up on non-verbal social cues from teachers as early as preschool and that the exposure to biased cues could lead to altered student behavior (Skinner et al., 2017). The social nature of learning suggests that behaviors will change based on the perceived actions and consequences of others. If students believe that one group of students will be held to a different standard than their peers, they are likely to respond through changed behaviors or through



rebellion against the system that is treating them unfairly. They may rebel against this system through non-conformance to the established rules and at the peril of their educational outcomes.

### **Social-Ecological Model**

When considering the issue of school discipline and the impact on students, it is also important to consider the social-ecological model (SEM) and social-ecological-systems. The SEM was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) as a theory of human development and behavior. The model focused on the impact of human growth and the impact of social settings on development and behavior. The theory suggests that both the immediate setting a person lives in, as well as the larger social and cultural environment will impact the development of behavior and action. The SEM is generally applied to issues of health and wellness that consider attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs from an individual's larger social and cultural settings. McLeroy et al. (1988) also noted that different interventions could be implemented to address a health issue at each social level. While there are differences in the implementation of health promotions and student misbehavior, the connection to cultural and social predictors of behavior could be important in the development of policies and practices aimed at decreasing out-of-school suspension in Title I middle schools.

Golden and Earp (2012) pointed out that in an ecological approach to public health, community-focused intervention helps address areas of concern that impact the larger community. The strategies for reaching individuals will be different from the strategy for creating change in a community. Agencies and organizations in the community can be utilized as partners to address issues of public health, information, and changing practices. Student engagement in extracurricular activities has been linked to increased school bonding, and it is

possible that out-of-school suspension could weaken community bonds, thus compounding student behavioral concerns and discipline issues (Umeh et al., 2020).

The SEM has also been applied to school settings. In a study on the social-ecological implications of involvement in fighting incidents by immigrant students, it was determined that issues such as parent detachment, language barriers, and feelings of discrimination led to an increased likelihood of fighting (Hong et al., 2016). Another study examined bullying and victimization of African American youth in school settings (Patton et al., 2013). In this study, the researchers found that parental involvement and peer groups play a significant role in the likelihood of bullying victimization. Negative peer groups and interactions were shown to lead to increased risk of bullying, and it is possible that positive peer group interactions could decrease the risk. The authors also noted that a great deal of the research on decreasing bullying focused on the individual level and suggested that an increased focus on larger systems could impact a school's effectiveness in decreasing the behavior.

Parental involvement and other societal systems have been linked to student outcomes. One study showed that parental involvement in a student's education leads to improved behavioral outcomes (Neymotin, 2014). This study also pointed out a greater need to understand ecological systems and their influence on student behavioral outcomes. Neymotin measured parental involvement in secondary schools through the reports of teachers, students, and parents and measured their impact on student behavioral results. In gathering this data, the researcher also found that there were variables that impacted a parent's likelihood to get involved with a child's education, such as socio-economic status, dual or single parenting, and the number of children of which a parent is responsible. Neymotin found that a parent's background, including socio-economic factors, impacts the degree in which their involvement affected students. Parents

with low income and low education levels tend to see a lower impact on their involvement in their child's education. This study points out the need for educators to gain a better understanding of ecological systems outside of individual student actions because it is likely that there are other predictors of student behavior that are larger than individual choices. This is important because punitive out-of-school consequences may not have a significant effect on deterring student behavior if the antecedent behavior is a result of larger sociological factors.

### **Related Literature**

School discipline practices have been largely shaped by the theories of Bandura, Skinner, and Glasser, but the changing landscape of education also leads to theoretical and practical problems that must be addressed. Trends have emerged in recent literature concerning the effectiveness of suspension, psychological implications of manipulative and coercive tactics, alternatives to suspension, and cultural implications of suspension. The literature supports the need to decrease suspension frequency and the need for schools to use alternative practices for behavior modification.

### **Effectiveness of Suspension**

Out-of-school suspension is often implemented with the desire to change student behavior. School policymakers often seek to apply the broken windows theory in which police seek to reduce major crime by stopping the apparent acceptance of relatively minor crimes such as broken windows (Kelling & Coles, 1994). While the theory has merit for police in some circumstances, it is not effective in helping individual students to succeed. Plank et al. (2009) noted that there is a correlation between physical disorder and social disorder in schools. They also noted that there is disagreement among scholars as to whether a causal relationship exists or merely a correlation between physical disorder and social disorder. While there is not enough

evidence to suggest causation between perceived disorder and social disorder, it is relevant to consider how the school disciplinary practices and behaviors impact overall student behaviors and actions. Educational leaders need to understand how student and teacher perceptions impact the behavior and interactions of students. Sampson and Rausenbush (2004) noted that once a stigma is associated with a group of people or neighborhood concerning social disorder, the perception tends to remain even after the original elements that led to the perception are removed. They summarized their study, noting that “social structure proved a more powerful predictor of perceived disorder than did carefully observed disorder (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).” Decision-makers are likely to be impacted by their preconceived notions about a neighborhood than they are by their direct observations concerning social disorder. There is a need for further research to determine if the findings hold in school systems. The application of harsh punishments for relatively minor incidents does not decrease the frequency of major incidents and can potentially lead to increased incidents. Instead of preventing serious school offenses, the application of policies such as zero tolerance and suspension for non-violent crimes increased the likelihood that a student would eventually be involved in the court system (Goldstein et al., 2019).

There is no current research that supports the effectiveness of out-of-school suspension programs (Green et al., 2018). They found that a common misconception concerning out-of-school suspension is that it can improve academic outcomes through improved student behavior. Classroom disruption is a significant issue to many teachers and has been cited as a possible factor in high rates of teacher turnover (Figlio, 2007). Conversely, there is research that suggests out-of-school suspension is detrimental to student outcomes due to missed instruction and other factors. Ratcliff et al. (2010) found that classroom climate is impacted by a teacher’s ability to

manage classroom behavior and prevent student disruptions. They also noted that classroom disruptions are distracting to non-misbehaving peers but found that a teacher's ability to prevent classroom misbehavior proactively led to positive outcomes. Their research showed that classrooms classified as strong were more engaging, offered more interaction with students, and created a more active environment. In the same study, the researchers observed that teachers in these classrooms stopped instruction less often to assert normative control and retreated in frustration less often. The only proven reduction in discipline incidents that comes as a result of out-of-school suspension is due to a propensity for dropping out. An increase in drop-out rates of students with high-frequency suspensions would effectively reduce the number of student incidents, but at the cost of at-risk students (Massar et al., 2015).

Black (2016) noted that out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on students, both the suspended parties and bystanders. Peer delinquency has also been linked to negative academic outcomes for students who were not disciplined as well as those who committed the behavior (Ahn & Trogon, 2017). Figlio (2007) examined one specific precursor to misbehavior and found empirical evidence that student misbehavior impacts the academic outcomes for non-misbehaving students. He also found that peers of students with disruptive behavior are more likely to engage in disruptive behavior themselves. Based on the results of his study, Figlio suggested that schools should identify and implement a proactive approach for students who have an increased likelihood of misbehaving. Figlio's study examined middle school boys with feminine first names and theorized that their likelihood of being teased would lead to disruptive behavior. The findings of the study are impactful beyond the specific circumstance of boys with feminine first names because it showed that these students with a proclivity for misbehavior negatively impact the academic experiences and outcomes for all students in their classrooms.

School suspension rates influence student perceptions of school climate, which in turn can influence overall student success, especially if students believe that the application of policies is unfair or unequally applied (James et al., 2015). One study showed that decreasing out-of-school suspension rates can have a positive impact on school-wide test scores (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018). Out-of-school suspension is not only detrimental to the students who are suspended, but it can have a negative impact on the entire school. If out-of-school suspension were proven to be an effective deterrent to student misbehavior, the argument could be made that out-of-school suspension is a necessary cost for the good of the larger educational system. However, the lack of evidence to support out-of-school suspension as a deterrent to student misbehavior supports a need for discipline reform.

There are several important trends in suspension application that should be considered. Suspensions have been sharply increasing since the 1970s (USDOE, 2014). The general rise in suspension data is concerning considering the increasing number of studies that have shown it to be ineffective. There have been local and national initiatives to decrease the frequency of suspension (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). There has been success in decreasing suspension trends in some areas, but not on a national level. It should also be noted that there has been no research to point to a decrease in the gap between racial and ethnic groups despite the increasing research that is emerging (Gregory et al., 2017). The research may be behind the changes in application, but at present, it seems that there is consensus on the problem, but a lack of action steps to solve the issue.

As schools seek to build equity among all students, the out-of-school suspension must be addressed due to the unequal impact on student groups. Discipline reform must also be considered with the issue of overall student achievement in mind as well. Ahn and Trogden

(2017) showed that peer disruption has a statistically significant impact on math scores on end of grade testing. High stakes testing is also connected to high levels of teacher stress and can increase pressure for teachers in an already stressful profession (Kruger et al., 2007). The response to student misbehavior is a multifaceted issue. Peer delinquency impacts student achievement on high stakes testing, which in turn impacts the stress of teachers and can lead to the implementation of authoritarian or zero-tolerance policies in classrooms. The implementation of zero tolerance and other highly punitive policies can propagate student resentment and lead to further disruptive behavior and rejection of coercion.

Real and perceived implicit bias also complicates the issue and points to a need for reform. Consequences are assigned at a disproportionate level for African American students (Skiba & Losen, 2015; Skiba et al., 2014; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Suspensions for students with disabilities are also more impactful on their education. Students with disabilities who are suspended typically have lower test scores than peers in the same disability group (Allman & Slate, 2013). There is a need for further study on the impact of exclusionary discipline for English language learners. One nation-wide study found that students whose primary language is not English are at higher risk for dropout, retention, and other academic metrics, but also found that there are mixed results concerning exclusionary discipline (Whitford et al., 2019). The differences at-risk categories for English Language learners support a need to understand school misbehavior and academic performance from an ecological perspective. Their study showed that 16 out of 51 states, including the District of Columbia, assign exclusionary discipline at a higher rate for English language learners than they do for students whose first language is English. North Carolina is not one of the states with this tendency, but there is a need for further study to

determine if this at-risk group is impacted in a significantly different way by an out-of-school suspension.



## **Rejection of Manipulation and Coercion**

General Strain Theory is a theory of criminology and behavior modification that suggests that delinquency is more likely to occur when people are unable to meet their goals (Agnew, 1985). This theory is connected to the pipeline to prison concept, which describes the likelihood of students who have behavioral issues in school to be incarcerated. The term pipe-line to prison also acknowledges that through the use of sworn school resource officers, students are more likely to be subject to official court involvement rather than disciplinary actions that are designed to correct negative behaviors (Owens, 2017).

Agnew (1985) suggested that the inability to avoid pain or unpleasant situations can also increase delinquency. Agnew (1985, p. 151) wrote, “Adolescents are compelled to remain in certain environments, such as family and school. If these environments are painful or aversive, there is little that adolescents can do legally to escape...and may lead to illegal escape attempts or anger-based delinquency.” If students find school unpleasant, they will try to avoid it. If a student’s goal is to avoid school, the use of suspension as a negative reinforcer will be counterproductive.

General Strain Theory is relevant to the discussion of high-frequency out-of-school suspension for several reasons. If the school becomes a pain-inducing environment that students are compelled to attend, their delinquent actions could be an attempt to escape. Harsh punitive environments are more likely to create a painful and negative association and could create cyclical unhappiness and delinquency in school. Students who are at a higher risk of failure or dropping out are also more likely to disengage and experience weak school bonds as a result of harsh punitive disciplinary actions (Mallett, 2016). General Strain Theory also suggests that the perception of fairness in the application of rules impacts delinquent behavior. James et al. (2014)

found that students who perceive their teachers are unfair are more likely to participate in violence in school. Schools seem to be stuck in a cycle of student misbehavior that leads to suspension, which leads to student dissatisfaction and resentment, which then leads back to increased student misbehavior. Teachers are often less likely to give positive praise and reinforcement to students who exhibit negative behaviors, which can lead to increased negative behavior (Díaz-Aguado & Martínez, 2013).

### **Alternative Consequences**

The research is clear that out-of-school suspension is not effective in changing student misbehavior. The solution to the problem of student misbehavior is not as clear. There are several trends in educational practice that have been successful, but there has been a wide range of implementation practices.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) systems are increasing in popularity in the United States. PBIS systems focus on positive reinforcement, explicit teaching, and reteaching of expectations and providing interventions for students who fail to meet expectations (Sugai & Horner, 2006). A study of 1,316 schools showed that the implementation of school-wide positive behavior intervention and support systems led to significantly fewer suspensions (Pas, Ryoo et al., 2019). Replacing negative behaviors with positive options and teaching expectations can help students to adopt practices that will break the cycle of frustration and misbehavior.

Another potential solution is the adoption of trauma-informed practices. The use of trauma-informed practices can also increase positive student outcomes (Howard, 2019). Trauma-informed is a broad term that generally refers to professional development aimed at helping teachers to understand the impact that trauma can have on students and how their actions may

trigger or support these students. During the 2013-2014 school year, 61% of students reported having been exposed to violence or abuse in the past year (Kataoka et al., 2018). The majority of the students affected in this report were ethnic minorities and considered at risk due to income or other factors. By training staff to understand the impacts of trauma on youth and revising discipline policies based on restorative practices, schools can serve students who may have been the victim of or witness to violence. Exposure to violence at an early age can impact the ability of students to regulate and trust adults in a school setting (Osofsky, 2018).

For this reason, the implementation of trauma-informed school practices can benefit students and help to avoid escalating student behaviors and consequences. One study of court-involved female students with an alternative to suspension program focused on trauma-informed practices found that student perceptions of the alternative to suspension program were positive (Crosby et al., 2018). Students in that study felt that they had the opportunity to grow as a result of the trauma-informed practices rather than simply another punishment.

An alternative to suspension programs is another potential solution, but there must be specific criteria in place. There is not a consensus definition or set practices for an alternative to suspension programs, but there has been some movement among schools to develop programs that provide a structured and supportive system that will prevent students from receiving out-of-school suspension (Stovall, 2017). The development of these programs may provide an option for students to address their behavioral concerns without jeopardizing their academic outcomes. Programs typically include a structured system for addressing behavioral concerns, discussion to help students accept responsibility for their actions, and restorative practice to negate the targeted behavior. A recent study at a therapeutic high school found that the use of a structured alternative to suspension programs that emphasized building coping and relational skill resulted in

decreased frequency of office referrals (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016). Students who complete such programs may be less likely to engage in the same behavior in the future.

For some schools, an alternative to suspension consists of what is typically known as an in-school suspension in which students are excluded from interacting with other students but have access to school materials and teachers. Some of these programs may be effective. However, in some cases, they may still be detrimental to student outcomes and can have the same disproportionate application as out-of-school suspension (Hinojosa, 2008). If in-school suspension is simply a substitute for sending the students home but has the same implications, it will not serve the purpose of improving school climate and student outcomes.

As the technology to enable virtual learning environments has evolved, opportunities for online education as an alternative to suspension have emerged. The Evergreen Education Group (2016) reported that there were 553,000 students enrolled in state virtual learning environments in 2016 in addition to millions of students who participate in virtual learning as part of their traditional educational environment. The Lafayette Public School system has adopted the use of a virtual learning environment for students who are expelled from the regular setting school. In this system, students have an option to attend a traditional alternative school, but if expelled from the alternative setting, they are enrolled in the virtual setting. In this setting, students have access to classes and coursework, but the responsibility to monitor and supervise students falls to the student's guardians. One study found that students who are assigned to the virtual learning environment through the Lafayette Parrish School System feel a high degree of self-efficacy and are empowered to complete their coursework (Champion, 2015) successfully. In this study, students reported that they felt free from distractions and stringent requirements or reprimands that are often present in traditional schooling. Other studies on virtual learning high schools have

found that there is a high rate of attrition and wide-ranging problems with the implementation of quality education through virtual learning (Zhang & Lin, 2019).

Another strategy and alternative approach to discipline is to increase community relationships and partner programs. One example of a community partnership that led to positive results was a partnership between a school system and the Philadelphia Police Department (Goldstein et al., 2019). In this case, the police department sought to reduce student incidents by increasing community relationships and replacing severe punishments with opportunities to build relationships with responsible adults. Another study found that students who participated in a community-based alternative to suspension felt positive about the programs and described increased self-efficacy, youth-youth relationship, and youth-adult relationships. The study failed to show a statistical increase in resiliency, but the narratives from students showed that the program helped students to build bonds with adults and peers (Henderson & Green, 2014). Schools may choose to implement programs that connect students with responsible adults. Schools and communities will benefit when the larger community takes an interest in helping students and school. Some have argued that the community should have an economic interest in the school as the school is the producer of the future workforce for the community. Others have argued that community involvement in school systems will help students to increase social capital and the ability to interact with and improve society (Sanders, 2003). Students will still need to be accountable for their actions, but the community partnerships could provide positive reinforcement rather than punishments that can be detrimental to student outcomes.

## **Cultural Implications**

The cultural implications of out-of-school suspension are heavy due to the disproportionate assignment of out-of-school suspension for African American students (Skiba & Losen, 2015). There are cultural strains that may be obvious for students who have been suspended, but there can also be deep and long-lasting psychological implications (Jackson, 2016). Perceptions of disciplinary practices will impact how students see themselves within the school and how they react to their surroundings. Both the culture of the school and the larger community will be impacted as the suspension is also linked to incarceration and arrest likelihood (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Exclusionary discipline practices will also impact the local culture of the school.

Conflicts in educational settings are often the result of cultural differences or challenges. If these cultural differences are not recognized or identified, students who are part of the majority culture may receive greater benefits than members of the minority culture (Gregory et al., 2017). This problem can create a negative cycle of behavior as student impressions are shaped by their perceptions of fairness and application of school policy. Harsh reprimands without the presence of structure and perceived fairness, students are often more likely to react negatively and increase off-task behavior (Acker et al., 1996). Students who feel connected to school staff and perceive the application of school rules to be fair are less likely to misbehave (Free, 2014). Free also noted that fairness in written policy does not impact student behavior, but that their perceptions of fairness in practice have a strong impact.

School culture is another factor that influences student discipline outcomes. While a student's family connectedness and outside culture have been shown to impact student behavior, students with strong school connectedness can compensate for negative factors outside of school

(Mayworm, 2016). Schools with positive school climates are likely to have fewer incidents of violence and more positive outcomes. Students are also more likely to drop out in schools with a negative school climate. While many determinants can lead to dropping out decisions, the strongest indicator or predictor of dropping out is school discipline incidents (Peguero & Bracy, 2015). The culture of a school also impacts job satisfaction and a sense of self-efficacy (Collie et al., 2012). Collie et al. found that when teachers have a negative perception of student behavior, they are less likely to report being satisfied with their jobs and feel less effective. Student behavior tends to impact teacher stress and emotional exhaustion.

Exclusionary discipline also has an impact on student connectedness to a school and can damage the bonding process (Umeh et al., 2020). This can be damaging for the individual student as well as the overall school culture as a lack of connectedness, and perceived relationship can be a predictor of student behavior in school and out-of-school. Out-of-school suspension has the potential to set students on a trajectory for negative academic outcomes. A lack of connectedness to school has also been linked to future student drug use (Bond et al., 2007). The severing of student relationships through the use of exclusionary discipline can increase a student's likelihood to disengage from the school and result in an increased likelihood of misbehavior.

### **Summary**

The theoretical framework and related literature support the need for reforming the out-of-school suspension practices. The theories of Skinner, Bandura, and Glasser support the foundational practices of behavior management and modification. They are in general agreement that behavior can be targeted and changed, but that manipulation and coercion can lead to undesirable outcomes. The social science of applied behavioral analysis has made strides since

its inception in 1968 and has been implemented in various forms throughout the United States education system. There is a need for increased education in social sciences to promote understanding of the dynamic needs of complex students. Teacher behavior and action in the classroom will impact student outcomes and perceptions (Acker et al., 1996). Skinner and Glasser agreed that people will resist manipulation and that they may rebel against authority seeking to impose control.

The trends in the current literature supported the detrimental effects of out-of-school suspension, the natural desire for people to avoid painful situations, alternatives to out-of-school suspension, and the cultural implications of out-of-school suspension. Rather than imposing harsh consequences for negative behavior, schools can influence student behavior through the use of PBIS systems and an emphasis on positively reinforcing desirable behavior (Horner et al., 2015). Trauma-informed practices and alternative to suspension programs are also potential options that school systems can utilize to reduce out-of-school suspensions more effectively.

The cultural implications of out-of-school suspension and exclusionary discipline should also be of concern. School culture is connected with school misbehavior and expectations. Teacher expectations of students will impact their actions towards students. Also, when students believe that the people in power at the school are negatively motivated towards them, they are more likely to rebel against the operation of the organization. Teacher efficacy and understanding of student development can positively impact the school culture and increase student engagement and a sense of belonging.

There is a need for further study to understand how the theoretical literature can be implemented and applied in a way that will lead to structural change. Student misbehavior negatively impacts academic performance for all students and is associated with teacher burnout



and an overall negative school climate. There has been significant research that demonstrates the ineffectiveness of out-of-school suspension as a method of reducing student misbehavior.

However, despite the research that suggests the need for reducing out-of-school suspension, schools continue to use out-of-school suspension as a common consequence for non-violent behavior that does not pose a threat to other students in the school (USDOE, 2014).

## CHAPTER THREE: PROPOSED METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this applied study is to solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension in three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina. Out-of-school suspension can be detrimental to a student academically and serve as a predictor of negative outcomes outside of school, including an increased likelihood of arrest (Mowen & Brent, 2016). High-frequency out-of-school suspension is an area of concern throughout the United States (USDOE, 2014). Out-of-school suspension at Title I schools is also problematic because students from lower socio-economic status tend to be affected by out-of-school suspension at a higher rate than their peers (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). The majority of the foundational studies concerning student characteristics and school exclusionary practices were conducted around the year 2010. However, Welsh and Little (2018) determined through a synthesis of recent literature that socio-economic status is one of many predictors of student discipline. They acknowledged that there might be school and classroom factors that have a significant impact on discipline statistics. One study showed that when mapping suspensions and expulsions across a school district that there was a correlation between income and suspension and expulsion (Shabazian, 2015). Higher-income areas had lower rates of suspension or expulsion, and lower-income areas had higher rates. The study suggested that socio-economic status is one of several predictors of exclusionary practices in schools.

This chapter includes information about the methods that were used to complete an applied research study. The section includes the following sections: design, research questions, setting, participants, researcher's role, procedures, and data analysis.

## Design

This study was an applied research study. A multi-method design was utilized, consisting of interviews with school administrators, archival data, and teacher surveys. Applied research is described as the use of “scientific methodology to develop information to help solve an immediate, yet usually persistent, societal problem” (Bickman and Rog, 2009, p. x). Bickman and Rog (2019) also noted that applied research is valuable in understanding real-world problems with multiple stakeholders and multiple outcomes. Out-of-school suspension is a complex issue that involves many stakeholders and variables. Student behavior, teacher attitudes, school policy, administrator perspectives, and community relationships are all impacted by school discipline decisions. Multimethod research also allows researchers to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand dynamic and emerging problems (Stange et al., 2006). The issue of high-frequency out-of-school suspension is a societal problem that has been identified both in the CSS as well as the larger educational environment in the United States (USDOE, 2014). A multimethod design which will include both qualitative and quantitative elements will allow for the triangulation of data and systemic analysis of the problem (Fielding, 2012).

## Research Questions

**Central Research Question:** How can the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension be solved at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 1:** How would administrators in an interview solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 2:** How would archival data inform the problem of high frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

**Sub-question 3:** How would quantitative survey data from teachers inform the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?

### **Setting**

This applied research study was conducted at three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina. There is a total of seven traditional public middle schools in the district. The total populations of the three Title I schools for the 2018-2019 school year were 936, 757, and 706 compared to an average population of 703 for the non-Title I schools. In order to be classified as a Title I school, more than 40% of students must be low income and qualify for free or reduced lunch (USDOE, 2014). All middle schools in this study meet the minimum threshold of low-income families.

The organizational leadership for the middle schools consists of a superintendent, chief secondary officer, departmentalized leadership within specific subgroups for curriculum and instruction, technology, exceptional children, student support services, and human resources. Every school in the study has a principal who has building level authority and multiple assistant principals. Each school has autonomy in the allocation of assistant principals. Some schools utilize grade level administrators, and other schools departmentalize assistant principals by

function. Each school has a leadership team within the school, consisting of administrators, teachers, and support staff.

The three Title I schools in the school district were studied due to the increased risk for students in Title I schools and the high frequency of out-of-school suspension for students in Title I schools compared to the non-Title I schools. Teacher attitudes and beliefs concerning school discipline can have an impact on overall school climate and teacher satisfaction (Oneschuk, 2007). The pseudonym Central School System (CSS) was used to protect the identity of the school system and participating schools and administrators.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study included two administrators from each of the three Title I middle schools in the CSS. There are a total of 10 administrators who work in Title I middle schools in the CSS. Six administrators were selected to participate in interviews.

Teachers were asked to participate in an online survey. Purposeful, nonprobability sampling was used. All teachers from both schools were invited to participate voluntarily. Teachers from the researcher's organization were excluded from the teacher survey in order to protect the integrity of the responses and avoid bias. The survey consisted of questions that were answered on a seven-point Likert scale (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The seven-point Likert scale measured how strongly teachers agreed or disagreed with statements concerning out-of-school suspension and the effectiveness of punitive disciplinary actions.

The survey participant demographic data were expected to mirror the demographic data of the school. The survey was anonymous; therefore, this assumption could not be tested. Self-selection in the survey process often leads to bias in the results and will need to be monitored and addressed during analysis (Lavrakus, 2008). The researcher did not divide the sample groups for

administrators or teachers by demographic categories. The objective of the data analysis was to gain an accurate insight into the perceptions of the entire school. The racial and ethnic student data is not released publicly by the school district. Demographic data for students who received out-of-school suspensions were reported. The percentages of economically disadvantaged students are 54%, 84%, and 65%. All three of the schools are Title I, which requires that a minimum of 40% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch based on financial need (USDOE, 2015).

### **The Researcher's Role**

The researcher worked in one of the Title I schools and has personal insight and interest in solving the problem. As an administrator at a Title I middle school, it was the intention of this researcher to understand the problem and formulate a possible solution to address the discipline needs of the school and address the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. The researcher is an administrator at one of the three Title I middle schools. No participants were selected who were under the authority of or evaluated by the researcher.

The researcher had five years of experience working in the CSS as both an administrator and a teacher. As an administrator, the researcher was responsible for assigning out-of-school suspension. The researcher believed that his assignments of out-of-school suspension were per the student code of conduct. The researcher was also aware that the district tracks student discipline data and that there had been pressure to reduce the number of student discipline incidents, especially concerning differences in the frequency of suspension assignments by race.

The researcher was the primary data collector. The researcher conducted the interviews, analyzed the archival documents, and delivered the teacher surveys through email. The researcher was also the primary data analyst. Member checking was utilized to check the

accuracy of thematic elements that emerge as the data is analyzed (Birt et al., 2016). The participating administrators were asked to review the findings from the coded interview data and were given the opportunity to provide feedback, ask questions, or clarify their positions. All the administrator responses confirmed the findings and results.

### **Procedures**

This chapter includes information about IRB approval, data collection methodology, and any issues that may arise during the data collection process. The order of the interviews was to be conducted based on convenience and schedule availability of participants. The online survey was delivered electronically and was open for two weeks. The survey was limited to 10 questions in order to keep the expected survey time below the maximum suggested time of 20 minutes (Revilla & Ochoa, 2017). The transcription of the interviews was done with a naturalistic approach in which all utterances, expressions, and conversational pauses are recorded for analysis (Oliver et al., 2005). The transcriptions were created from an electronic voice recorder application.

### **IRB Approval**

This research study posed a minimal risk as students did not directly interact with the researcher, and no experimental practices will be implemented. IRB approval was granted to conduct interviews with administrators, survey teachers, and collect archival data (See Appendix A). A semi-structured interview format was approved and utilized (See Appendix B). The teacher survey was approved to be delivered online through Qualtrics (See Appendix C). The participating school administrators generated the archival data in accordance with the IRB guidelines established in the IRB application. No identifying information was included with the archival data. The program utilized by the CSS has an option for printing reports with redacted

student information. The CSS provided approval to conduct the study per IRB approval. Each administrator signed consent forms before conducting the interviews (See Appendix D). The survey was anonymous, and the greatest risk to participants was a breach of confidentiality; therefore, signed consent forms were not collected. The participating teachers were sent a copy of the consent form in the invitation email (See Appendix E). The consent form for teachers was also included in the directions for the online survey. The signatures were gathered electronically; therefore, the content from the stamped IRB forms was used in an unaltered form. The administrators were invited to participate via email (See Appendix F). Teachers were invited to participate in the study through an email forwarded by one of their administrators (See Appendix G).

### **Sampling**

Purposeful nonprobability sampling was utilized (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Teachers from the researcher's school were eliminated from the survey because the researcher is an administrator at this location, and their inclusion could have led to a conflict of interest or bias that could have skewed the results. All teachers from the other Title I middle schools in the district were invited to participate in the survey. The invitation was sent through email to the entire teaching staff. The survey was open for two weeks.

### **Logistical Considerations**

Three data collection methods were utilized that required different logistical considerations. Interviews with six administrators across three locations were conducted at the administrators' worksite or through video conferencing for their convenience. Interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder application. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed for follow up questions and clarification. The archival data were collected through



digital reports available from an administrator from each participating school. The data were entered into a spreadsheet in order to create reports and specific analysis of data points. The surveys were administered in an online format. Teachers on the email lists for each school were contacted with a link that they can follow to the survey (Couper, 2000). Teachers selected to participate in the received an email link that allowed them to complete the survey anonymously. The survey results were available to the researcher through an online portal.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary sources of data included administrator interviews, archival data, and a teacher survey. The data were coded and analyzed to determine thematic elements among all data sources or if there are conflicting views between the two stakeholder groups and the archival data. Interviews with six school administrators at the three Title I middle schools will be conducted. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to access rich data that would not be available through a standardized survey (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The researcher asked a standard set of questions but also allowed time for clarifying follow up questions. Archival data of school discipline incidents were gathered that demonstrated the frequency of out-of-school suspension and trends and patterns in the purpose of the out-of-school suspension. Archival data supported the need to reduce out-of-school suspension in the CSS and provided insight into alternative solutions that could allow the school to address discipline or behavioral needs without the use of exclusionary discipline. When an out-of-school suspension is entered into the school computer system, demographic information and categorization of the incident are recorded. This information was used to look for patterns, trends, and other inconsistencies. Surveys were administered to teachers that will gather information about their perceptions of the use of out-of-school suspension and their perception of the impact of discipline procedures.

## Interviews

The first sub-question for this study asked the following question: How would administrators in an interview solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina? Administrators from each of the three Title I middle schools were interviewed. The interviews were synchronous and semi-structured to address this question. The interviewer allowed the opportunity for clarification and follow-up to answers. A semi-structured approach was appropriate for this study because it allowed respondents to reflect and respond to issues that arise during the interview (Bickman & Rog, 2009). This study sought to solve a complex problem that had roots in student behavior, teacher practices, safety, and school policy. A semi-structured approach allowed participants to give full answers. The researcher was able to analyze and code the transcription after the interview. The purpose of the interviews was to understand administrator perspectives towards the use and effectiveness of out-of-school suspension, barriers to reducing out-of-school suspension, and perceptions of equitable practices concerning discipline. Naturalistic transcription of the interviews was utilized in order to determine the administrator's affect and non-verbal signals that could provide insight into their responses (Oliver et al., 2005).

An interview guide, as described by Bickman and Rog (2009), will be used with the following headings and sub-questions:

1. Effectiveness of out-of-school suspension
  - 1.1 What is the goal or objective when students are assigned out-of-school suspension?
  - 1.2 How do students respond to out-of-school suspension regarding academic outcomes, reentry to the classroom, future behavior?

- 1.3 How does out-of-school suspension influence your school climate?
2. Barriers to reducing out-of-school suspension
  - 2.1 How do school policies impact your use of out-of-school suspension?
  - 2.2 What factors influence your decision to assign out-of-school suspension?
  - 2.3 What problems could arise in your school if out-of-school suspensions were intentionally limited?
3. Equitable practices
  - 3.1 Why do you believe that out-of-school suspension at Title I middle schools are used with higher frequency than non-Title I schools?
  - 3.2 How does out-of-school suspension impact school safety?
4. Solution focus
  - 4.1 What alternatives to suspension have been successful at your school?
  - 4.2 What resources would you need in order to reduce the frequency of out-of-school suspension?

The first subheading was important because numerous studies have shown that out-of-school suspension is ineffective in solving student behavior, and it results in inequality for many subgroups of students (Gregory et al., 2017; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba & Losen, 2015). It was important for this study to understand if administrators are aware of the current research that is overwhelmingly in opposition to high-frequency, out-of-school suspension.

The second subheading was important to this study because it provided insight into why high-frequency, out-of-school suspension was persisting in the Title I middle schools in the CSS despite the national attention that the topic has received and the initiatives within the school system to change practices. Principal leadership is a highly impactful element in school

performance and change regarding school discipline; therefore, it was essential to understand current principal perceptions about the effectiveness of out-of-school suspension (Sanchez et al., 2019).

The third subheading was valuable to this study as it gathered administrative perspectives on issues of equitable practices. Research shows that African American students are the recipients of out-of-school suspension at a disproportionate rate nationally and possibly in the CSS (Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba & Losen, 2015). It was important to understand how administrators viewed the issue of inequality in out-of-school suspension and if there were any actions in place to mitigate the problem.

The fourth subheading was important to the study because the purpose of the study was to solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension in Title I middle schools in the CSS. Administrators are primarily responsible for the assignment of out-of-school suspension in the CSS, and their ideas of solutions and needs provided valuable insight into the solution. Principals are also key stakeholders in effective school improvement and other organizational change (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). Principal perceptions of potential solutions to the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension provided insight into the types of change that were supported and led by principals.

The interviews sought to obtain a genuine understanding of administrator perspectives while using trustworthy and objective questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted on the school campuses or through video conferencing in order to allow for demonstrations or clarification if the physical layout plays a role in the disciplinary policies. The interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis (Skjott et al., 2019). Open coding was utilized

in order to combine and understand the categories that emerged in the data during the analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Archival Data**

The second sub-question for this study asked the following question: How would archival data inform the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina? The CSS collects data from school suspensions and requires administrators to code the reason for the suspension. The data included student demographic information, the reason code for the suspension, the length of the suspension, the number of unique students who receive out-of-school suspensions, and the number of suspended students who received more than one out-of-school suspension. The aggregate data from the school suspensions were analyzed in order to look for trends and patterns. The CSS requires administrators to code all suspensions based on the type of rule infraction. The CSS tracks 26 types of infractions which include, noncompliance; dress code; integrity; trespassing; attendance; inappropriate interpersonal behavior; use of tobacco; electronic devices; bus misbehavior; bullying or harassment; threats, false threats, and acts of terror; profane, obscene, abusive, or disrespectful language or acts; gambling; sexual harassment; hazing; unjustified activation of a fire alarm or other alarm system; fighting or physical aggression; assault on an adult; assault on a student; extortion; theft or destruction of school or personal property; possession of a weapon, firearm, dangerous instrument, or destructive device; narcotics, alcoholic beverages, controlled substances, chemicals, and drug paraphernalia; violations of North Carolina criminal statutes; gang and gang-related activities; and aiding and abetting. These predefined groupings were used for analysis along with student demographic

information. The researcher determined the frequency of each category of infraction that resulted in out-of-school suspension (Lavrakas, 2008).

Results from the teacher, working conditions surveys were also utilized. The survey was directly referenced by one of the administrators to demonstrate the impact that student behavior has on teacher stress and job satisfaction. The survey results from all three schools were analyzed.

### **Survey**

The third sub-question for this study asked the following question: How would quantitative survey data from teachers inform the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina? Qualtrics Research Core, an online survey tool, will be utilized to gain teacher perspectives concerning the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. Through the Qualtrics Research Core software, the survey can be distributed to participating teachers who will have the option to complete the survey on a mobile device or computer. The software compiled the responses for data analysis. Teachers at two of the Title I schools responded to the following statements using a seven-point Likert scale, which asked teachers to select a degree of agreement or disagreement ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly. The survey was limited to 10 questions in order to keep the time required for the survey. Ideally, online surveys should have a median time requirement of 10 minutes and a maximum time requirement of 20 minutes (Revilla & Ochoa, 2017). All teachers at the selected schools were invited to participate in the survey through an online link. Teachers from the third school in the study were not surveyed due to the researcher's position at the school and potential bias that could have been created.

1. Students in my school typically receive appropriate out-of-school consequences for violations of the student code of conduct.
2. School administrators in my school adhere to the policy provided in the student code of conduct when issuing out-of-school suspensions.
3. Out-of-school suspension is necessary to maintain order within the school building.
4. Less restrictive alternatives to out-of-school suspension are utilized in my school.
5. Student behaviors are typically improved when a student returns from an out-of-school suspension.
6. Out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on the suspended student's academic achievement.
7. Out-of-school suspension of students with frequent behavioral incidents has a positive impact on the classroom environment.
8. Out-of-school suspension should be issued more frequently at my school.
9. Out-of-school suspension should be used less frequently at my school.
10. The possibility of suspension decreases the likelihood that students will engage in dangerous behavior such as fighting or drug use.

The data were analyzed to look for patterns in the Likert responses. The data from the Likert scale were used to determine teacher perspectives. Mean scores for each item were generated, and the trends were noted to show the level of agreement or disagreement among participating teachers. This data was analyzed in connection with the archival data and administrator interviews in order to triangulate and understand the larger picture in the school environment (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). The primary analysis was open coding to identify thematic elements in the data. The primary goal of the coding was categorization. Bickman and Rog noted that in

qualitative research, coding and analysis “should be conducted simultaneously with the data collection” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 236). The purpose of continuously coding and analyzing themes is to focus on and refine the interviews and observations throughout the study.

### **Data Triangulation**

Fielding (2012) described illustration, convergent validation, and analytic density as the primary reasons to utilize a multimethod approach. Fielding and Fielding (1986) described data triangulation as a method of ensuring validity, especially against threats such as reactivity and bias on the part of the researcher. The synthesis of data from multiple data sources helps to ensure the validity of the findings, especially in research in which the field is constantly changing (Fielding, 2012). For this study, three sources were used to triangulate the data and provide a clear analysis. Coding is defined as “Extracting concepts from raw data and developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 159).” This coding was not intended to create counts or a statistical correlation, but to explain the data in a generalizable manner. The data were divided into themes, and these themes were analyzed. Member checking was utilized to ensure the validity of the thematic developments.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical concerns were limited for this study as students were not directly observed and did not interact with the researcher. There were not be any changes to the student’s instruction or academic day during the research, although it is possible that the school administration could make changes based on the outcome of the study. It was important that student information is kept confidential. The archival data was scrubbed to ensure that student information was not exposed. The information was recorded in a way that already had safeguards to protect student data. The researcher ensured that the reports did not include student identifying



information. Along with IRB requirements, the data gathered from this study met the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which provides regulations for reporting school records (Elliott et al., 2014).

The researcher maintained confidentiality with teacher surveys to prevent real or apparent retaliation because of teacher responses to the surveys (Bickman & Rog, 2009). For this reason, surveys were not collected from the school where the researcher was employed. Teachers submitted the surveys anonymously and were not identified by name in any of the reports.

### **Summary**

An applied research study was conducted to solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at Title I middle schools in central North Carolina. A multimethod approach was used that consisted of interviews with administrators, teacher surveys, and archival documents. The Title I middle schools in the CSS had a high frequency of out-of-school suspension compared to the non-Title I schools in the district. Research suggests that out-of-school suspension can be a predictor of other challenges for students (Black, 2016) and can also increase teacher burnout and turnover (Lopes & Oliveira, 2017). This study addressed the issue by providing an examination of factors that impact out-of-school suspension. The data were triangulated to determine if there are themes that emerged between administrator and teacher perceptions as well as data from discipline incident documentation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in the CSS and to formulate a solution to address the problem. The problem was the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. High-frequency, out-of-school suspension is problematic because of the negative effect it can have on student outcomes and patterns of inequality. A multi-method design was used, which consisted of quantitative and qualitative data to formulate a solution to this problem. A survey of teachers and archival documents made up the quantitative data. The qualitative data consisted of interviews with two administrators in each of the Title I schools in the CSS.

This chapter presents the results of the research and the data analysis of each section. The administrative interviews are broken down based on the themes that emerged and the frequency of the thematic elements. The survey data were analyzed to look for themes and general trends. Statistical analysis was not used to understand the data, but the general trends and patterns were used to inform the research and to understand teacher perspectives on the issue of out-of-school suspension. The archival data were compiled for the three schools that are included in the study, and the trends were identified. The data were presented and analyzed for all three schools in total to understand the trends within the district. The data were not analyzed for comparison between the three schools.

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were all employees Title I schools within the CSS. Two administrators from each school were interviewed for the qualitative data. The archival data reflected the discipline data that was gathered throughout the current school year to code

discipline incidents. The survey was sent to teachers from two of the three schools. The school in which the researcher is employed was not surveyed in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

### **Interview Participants**

The principal and one assistant principal were interviewed from each school. Principal 1 was interviewed in person in their office. Assistant Principal 1 was also interviewed in person in their office. Principal 2, Assistant Principal 2, Principal 3, and Assistant Principal 3 were all interviewed through video conferencing. The Principal Number and Assistant Principal number correlate with the same school. For example, Principal 1 and Assistant Principal 1 were employees at the same school. The same was true of Principal 2 and Assistant Principal 2. Some themes emerged within the data that reflected similar lines of thinking in the same school.

### **Survey Participants**

The survey was distributed through the teacher listserv for each school. The demographics for the sample were unknown, and the data has been aggregated to reflect both schools in one survey instrument. The sample size was 17. The participants were not asked to provide demographic or identifying information in their survey, and the survey was anonymous. The purpose of the survey was to understand trends and themes in teacher perception. All participants were confirmed to be adults by their employment status, but the exact ages and other demographics were not collected.

## **Results**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators from the three Title I middle schools in the CSS in Central North Carolina. The purpose of the interviews was to answer the question, "How would administrators in an interview solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in

central North Carolina?” Several themes emerged from the research. They were: the need to increase cultural understanding, the need for better communication, the need for teachers to feel supported, the necessity of maintaining discipline, the perception that suspension is not an effective deterrent, the need to build relationships, the effectiveness of alternative to suspension programs, and the need for additional staffing to address the issue effectively.

Archival data were also analyzed to understand the current discipline data at the schools participating in the study. The archival data were used to answer the question, “How would archival data inform the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?” The data included student demographic information, the reason code for the suspension, the length of the suspension, the number of unique students who received out-of-school suspensions, and the number of suspended students who have received more than one out-of-school suspension. The aggregate data from the suspensions were analyzed in order to look for trends and patterns. The trend emerged that the highest frequency code for out-of-school suspension that was used in each school was fighting and physical aggression. In one school, profane, obscene, abusive, or disrespectful language or acts, was the second-highest code. In the other two schools, noncompliance, which includes disrespect of faculty and staff, insubordination, and disruptive behavior, was the second highest.

A second form of archival data was also utilized. In one of the interviews, the administrator pointed to the teacher working conditions survey as a key indicator about how teachers feel about the school and noted that it is one of the metrics used by the district to gauge how teachers feel about their school and include an emphasis on attitudes and feelings about discipline. The reports were public information and were also pulled to validate and support the

points made in the interviews and the discipline data reports. The teacher working conditions survey confirmed the administrators' perspectives that discipline weighed heavily on teachers and that they were concerned about receiving support from administrators.

A survey of teachers was also used to understand teacher perspectives concerning out-of-school suspension and to answer the question, "How would quantitative survey data from teachers inform the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?" Teachers read 10 statements all concerning out-of-school suspension and stated their level of agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert scale.

### **Sub-question 1**

Sub-question one for this study was, "How would administrators in an interview solve the problem of high-frequency out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?" Interviews were conducted with administrators from each of the Title I middle schools in the CSS in order to identify themes related to finding a solution for high-frequency out-of-school suspension. The themes that emerged in the qualitative data were: the need to build relationships, need for cultural understanding, need for better communication, suspension is necessary to maintain order and discipline, suspension is not an effective deterrent (with qualifications), teachers need to feel supported, need to look at whole child/use professional judgment, suspension has negative impacts, additional staffing is needed, socio-economic status is a factor.

The overarching theme that emerged out of all the codes and categories was the level of care and concerns that all the administrators had for students and the need to monitor and reduce out-of-school suspension closely. All the administrators appeared to be familiar with some level

of current research about the effects of out-of-school suspension and appeared to have a sincere desire to help students. In some of the current literature, there was often an implied lack of compassion by administrators as the numbers of suspensions were often used to speak for the beliefs of educators. The data in the literature showed that administrators suspend at high levels and that this is damaging to students, but the interviews revealed that even in schools with high levels of out-of-school suspension, there is a sincere desire to help students work through their issues and to put them in a position to succeed. Suspension is used frequently, but it is not done so without a sense of caring or a deep understanding of the seriousness of the action.

The top three codes that emerged in the interview data were the need to build relationships, the need for cultural understanding, and the need for improved communication between teachers and students. Most of these themes emerged as the administrators talked about what strategies have been effective in addressing student issues or needs that could have been lacking that led to out-of-school suspension. For some of the administrators, cultural understanding, communication, and relationships could be used interchangeably. They could be effectively grouped into one larger category that emphasizes the need to understand students and empathize with their wants, needs, and circumstances that may be informing their decision making in school.

The next three themes that emerged emphasized the tension that exists between the desire not to suspend and the issues that often make suspension necessary in the minds of administrators. It is necessary to maintain order in the school, and the presence of consequences, specifically out-of-school suspension enables administrators to do so. The administrators generally stated that suspension is not an effective deterrent to negative behavior with the qualification that this refers to the frequent offenders. Many of the administrators noted that for

most students, the consequences are effective deterrents and noted that students are usually afraid of suspension. The comments and consensus about the ineffectiveness of out-of-school suspension refer to the impact that out-of-school suspension has on repeat offenders. Repeat offenders make up a large portion of the total discipline incidents, and they tend to react differently to the application of harsh school consequences. There was also a strong consensus that teachers need to feel supported and that if students were not suspended, especially for offenses committed against teachers or in their classrooms, it could lead to discontentment, frustration, and higher teacher turnover.

Other themes that emerged pointed to the administrators' levels of understanding of the complex issue of out-of-school suspension. The administrators discussed the need to look at the whole child and the larger incident rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to distributing discipline. They talked about the need to understand the whole child and balance the tension between fairness in the application of discipline and the need to show understanding of the larger factors that could be influencing student behavior and flexibility. All the administrators noted that they generally feel that they have the flexibility to assign a fitting consequence. Most noted that they sometimes feel like their hand is forced in the application of a consequence, but that generally, they can assign a consequence with which they agree. The administrators made it clear that they understood the negative implications that suspension can have on students and that they desired to reduce the amount of out-of-school suspension.

The most common theme that emerged concerning the resources that would be needed to solve the issue is additional staffing. The administrators had different ideas for how the staffing could be used to help solve the issue, but there was a consensus that additional staffing or funding for positions would help them to decrease out-of-school suspension. The impact of

socio-economic status on discipline and the out-of-school suspension was present but did not emerge as frequently as some of the other themes. This is important to note because the unifying factor that qualified each of the schools to participate in the study was their status as Title I, which is based on the percentage of the school that is from a lower socioeconomic status. The administrators did not emphasize this point heavily, but it did emerge in the interview dialogue. Table 1 shows the frequency of the themes that emerged.

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Codes*

Codes	Frequency
Need to build relationships	33
Need for cultural understanding	27
Need for better communication	25
Suspension is necessary to maintain order and discipline	23
Suspension is not an effective deterrent (with qualifications)	18
Teachers need to feel supported	15
Need to look at whole child/use professional judgment	10
Suspension has negative impacts	7
Additional staffing is needed	6
Socio-economic status is a factor	6

**Theme #1.** The need to build relationships was the most common theme throughout the interviews. It occurred 33 times in the interview dialogue and was part of the response in multiple sections. Assistant Principal 2 referenced the need to build relationships 10 times. They stated, “If teachers and administrators are not building relationships with [students who have experienced trauma] and they don’t trust you, then you know they don’t see the need to actually pay attention or try to do what you are asking them to do.” Multiple administrators referenced the concept that relationships lead to trust and understanding and that without trust as a baseline, it is unlikely that out-of-school suspension can be reduced.

Several of the administrators also noted that building relationships takes time and that



high turnover rates can lead to a lack of relationships in the school because students assume that teachers aren't there for them and that they will move on when they can. The need to build relationships over time is important and should be taken into consideration when considering practices to retain staff.

**Theme #2.** The need for building cultural understanding was similar to the issue surrounding student relationships but qualified that teachers from different backgrounds need to understand where their students are coming from in order to build the relationships properly. Themes 1, 2, and 3 are linked concepts but have specific differences in application. Principal 3 gave an example of how a lack of cultural understanding can lead to increased discipline referrals and increased possibility of OSS. They discussed a time when a teacher was extremely upset because a student had called them a dog in front of the class and felt that it was significantly disrespectful. The teacher felt that the student should be removed from the classroom. Upon investigating, they determined that the student did not have any idea that they had been perceived as demeaning. The student explained that by saying, "What's up dog?" when the teacher greeted them in the classroom was truthfully meant to be more endearing. Assistant Principal 2 similarly noted that they believe that the higher frequency of out-of-school suspension in Title I schools compared to non-Title I schools is due to the teacher's lack of understanding of the cultural differences from different backgrounds. If they do not understand where the student is coming from and what might be acceptable at home, they might see actions or comments as more disrespectful than the student intended them.

**Theme #3.** The need for better communication was also connected to the concepts in Themes 1 and 2. Nearly all the administrators discussed the need to talk to students, understand them, and to help teachers to understand the students. They seemed to agree that without

communication and intentionally building communication skills in staff members and students, the frequency of incidents would continue to grow. Principal 2 talked about the impact that using administrative conferences and talking through issues with students had on the school climate. They talk with students about how they can communicate their needs more productively and found it was successful in helping them to reduce their out-of-school suspension numbers. When emphasizing the impact of communication with students, Principal 2 noted that although their school has a high number of total office referrals, he is proud of the fact that they have been able to address most of the referrals through administrative conferences without having to more restrictive discipline practices. Principal 2 stated, “With roughly 800 referrals, almost 400 of those were handled with administrative conferences. We took our time to sit down and talk to the child.” Principal 3 similarly noted that they actively coach teachers on how to communicate with students and emphasize that students will respect them more if they have open and honest communication with them. When referring to teachers talking openly with students, Principal 3 stated, “And if some of [the incident that led to a student being suspended] was your fault just admit I made a mistake and it got out of hand...because students respect and appreciate when teachers or adults take ownership and responsibility for things.” Principal 3 went into detail about how if teachers are willing to be honest with students, even if it reveals their insecurities, the students will build trust and start to understand where the teachers from which they are coming.

**Theme #4.** All the administrators agreed that suspensions are necessary to maintain discipline and order and that these are important elements within the school. There was some disagreement concerning the level to which suspension was needed to maintain order and discipline, but they agreed that at some level, it was necessary. Different philosophies emerged.

Some of the administrators viewed the need to establish hard lines in the sand that will always lead to suspension, and other administrators noted that they refrain from suspending whenever possible and that they never see it as a good option even though it may be necessary. Assistant Principal 3 stated, “Discipline is an all-day job and its exhausting. I want to be in classrooms with kids learning, but I have to take care of discipline. I don’t want to just do this, but if I turn a blind eye, it's not going to get better.” Assistant Principal 3 also stated, “We have an issue with rule-breaking.” They clarified that they do not want to suspend, but that they must have some type of accountability or the school would get out of control.

**Theme #5.** Administrators acknowledged that suspension is not effective, although there were significant qualifications to this statement. It is interesting to note that the themes 4 and 5 appear contradictory in some ways as they present different sides of the same issue. All the administrators were aware of this tension, and most acknowledged it directly. They want to maintain order and discipline in the school, but they also understand that there are negative implications if they suspend students. They suspend in order to maintain discipline but can see that there are factors that mitigate the effects of the consequence.

The qualification that most of the administrators made when noting the ineffectiveness of out-of-school suspension was that while it did not influence their frequent offenders, it does affect most of the student body. A relatively small percentage of the students make up a large percentage of the discipline incidents. So, while the use of out-of-school suspension does not change the total numbers because it does not seem to affect the high-frequency offenders, it is effective for a high percentage of students who are afraid to get suspended. Assistant Principal 1, when asked about the likelihood of suspension leading to change in student behavior, answered, “For those who are really remorseful, I think so, but for those who are repeat offenders, no, I

don't think they do.”

**Theme #6.** The need to support teachers was heavy on the minds of the administrators. All the administrators acknowledged that teachers need to feel that they are being supported and that student behaviors with which they are being dealt. Assistant Principal 1 saw it as an issue, but it was not of extreme importance. The other five administrators noted that this was an important point when considering what consequences to assign. Principal 1 stated, “We need to send a message clearly to our staff that we support what they are doing, and if a student is causing them not to be able to do their job, we will remove that barrier from them so that they can do their job.” Assistant Principal 3 stated, “I can tell you as a former teacher, that if a kid curses me a blue streak and we just slap him on the wrist, that’s not a place I want to work.” Assistant Principal 3 went on to discuss how teacher turnover is a major issue and that their recent teacher working conditions survey showed that a high percentage of their staff do not feel like their school is a good place to work and that discipline issues heavily influenced their responses. Teachers need to be supported, and the general perception of five out of the six administrators was that without out-of-school suspension, teachers might not feel fully supported. Principal 2 noted that they thought that it could be communicated in a way that teachers would understand the reduction in out-of-school suspension. However, they clarified that without significant communication and education of staff, it would not be accepted well and would leave teachers not feeling supported.

**Theme #7.** All the administrators noted that the assignment of out-of-school suspension needs to be done with professional judgment and that issues are not usually just black and white. They all stated that they generally feel they can assign consequences that they agree with within the confines of the school policy, but that multiple factors determine the severity of the

consequences that are issued. Assistant Principal 2 stated, “You have to follow the school policy and if the child is supposed to get suspended, but you have to take other things into consideration and factor in when suspending a child. Especially that actual child and what’s going on in its life.” They related the need for understanding the whole child with their training as a trauma-informed school and the implications that trauma can have on how students and teachers respond to situations differently.

**Theme #8.** All the administrators were also aware of the negative implications that suspension can have. They discussed the tension between doing what is best for the whole school and doing what is best for the individual offending student. Several of the administrators specifically referenced their fears of the dangers that students are placed in when they are suspended from school. Some of the students do not have supervision at home because their parents are working or out of the house, and they are left to their own devices. They also noted that students generally do not do their academic work during a suspension. Assistant Principal 3 noted, “We just don’t get much bang for our buck when we give out paper and pencil work during a suspension.” Principal 1 stressed that they did not believe that suspension was the best consequence and that it needs to be decreased because of the negative implications.

**Theme #9.** When discussing the resources that they would need in order to reduce out-of-school suspensions, the most common solution theme was increased staffing. They had different ideas about how the staffing could be implemented but noted that staffing would greatly enable them to solve some of the discipline issues. The relationship building, communication, and cultural training can be implemented but would require additional support in the school. They also noted that discipline takes up a significant portion of administrator’s time and that if they had more people, they could increase their focus on relationship building and other practices that

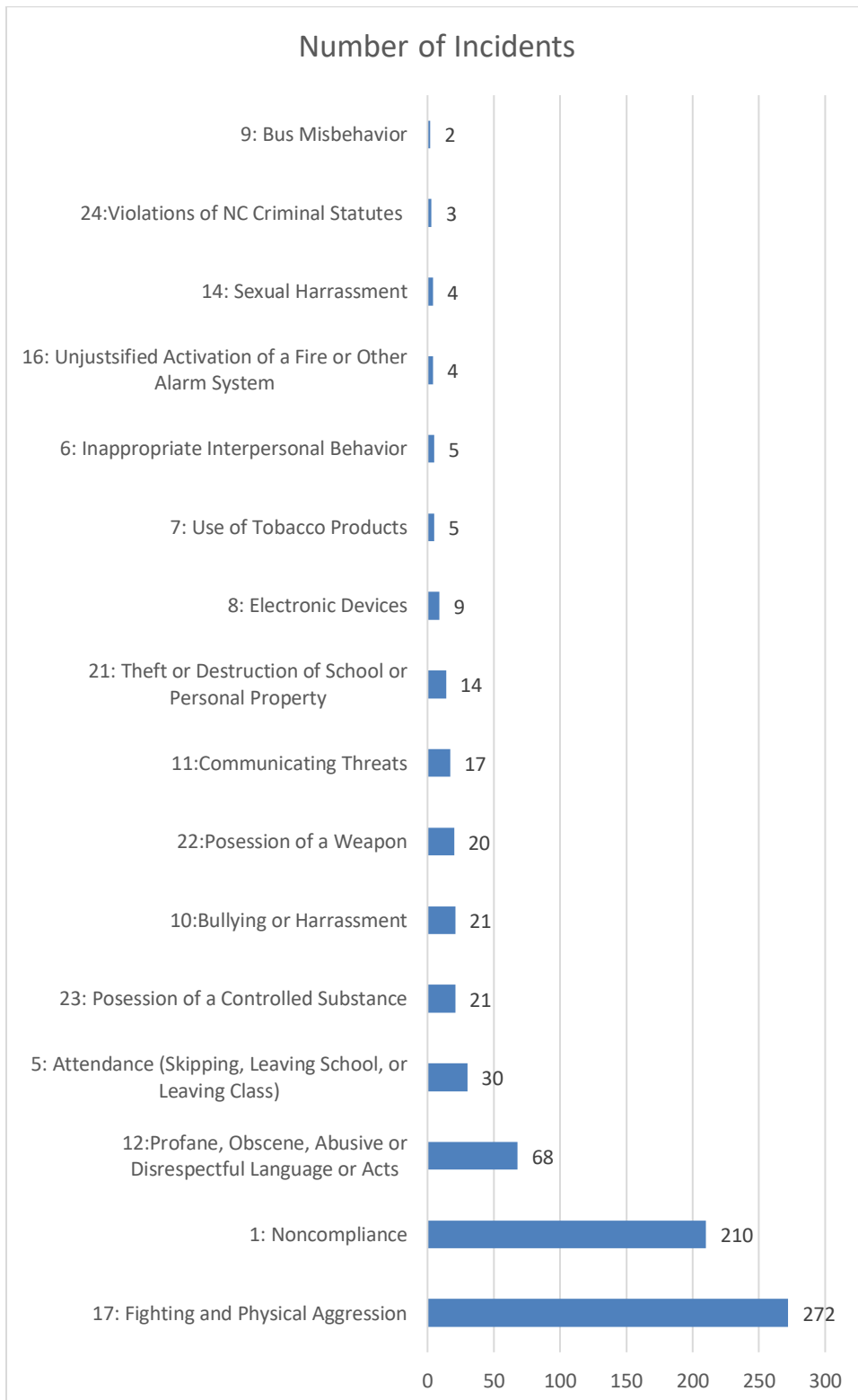
would allow them to decrease the use of out-of-school suspension.

**Theme #10.** The final theme that emerged was the impact of socio-economic status (SES) on increased out-of-school suspension. Most of the discussion of this theme emerged in response to the question about why Title I schools suspend at a higher level. The administrators noted SES as a contributing factor due to the cultural implications and challenges that these students might be facing. The frequency of low SES was surprisingly low because the schools were included in the study based on their status as Title I schools, which, means that they have a high occurrence of students from lower socio-economic households. The administrators discussed low socio-economic status in terms of the cultural or other implications that impact students and the greater need for communication, relationships, and understanding the whole student.

### **Sub-question 2**

Sub-question two for this study was, “How would archival data inform the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?” The archival data showed that there were definite trends in the reason codes that were attached to the out-of-school suspensions.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the frequency of the suspension codes that were attached to the out-of-school suspension.

**Figure 1***Frequency of Discipline Codes*

**Theme #1.** The frequency of offense codes was the first theme that emerged in the archival data. There were clear distinctions in what types of activities lead to the assignment of out-of-school suspension. The first theme that emerged was the impact of fighting and physical aggression. This was the most common offense code that was attached to any out-of-school suspension by a considerable margin. It was also an element that was referenced by several of the administrators as a reason that they must suspend.

The second and third highest offense codes are similar in that they deal broadly with disrespect. Noncompliance had a wide variety of applications, but it often was tagged specifically for disrespect of teachers, disruptive behavior, and insubordination. While this was not a violent code in terms of physical aggression, it is the code that is primarily used to note disruption to the learning environment and effects interaction with teachers and classmates.

**Theme #2.** There were trends within the archival data that reflected the demographic breakdown of students by gender, race, and whether they have an IEP. In each of the cases, there are inconsistencies with the representation of students in the school and the representation of the students receiving out-of-school consequences. The strength of the relationship cannot be determined with the data collected, but the raw numbers point to the need for further study and examination of the incidents that make up the out-of-school suspension.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of suspension incidents by gender.



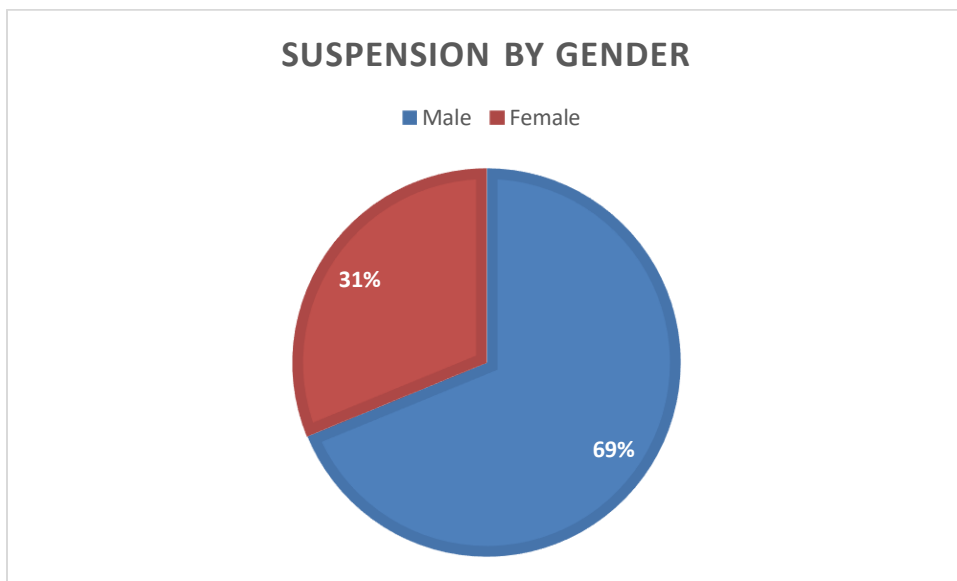
**Figure 2***Suspension by Gender*

Figure 3 shows the distribution of suspension incidents by race.

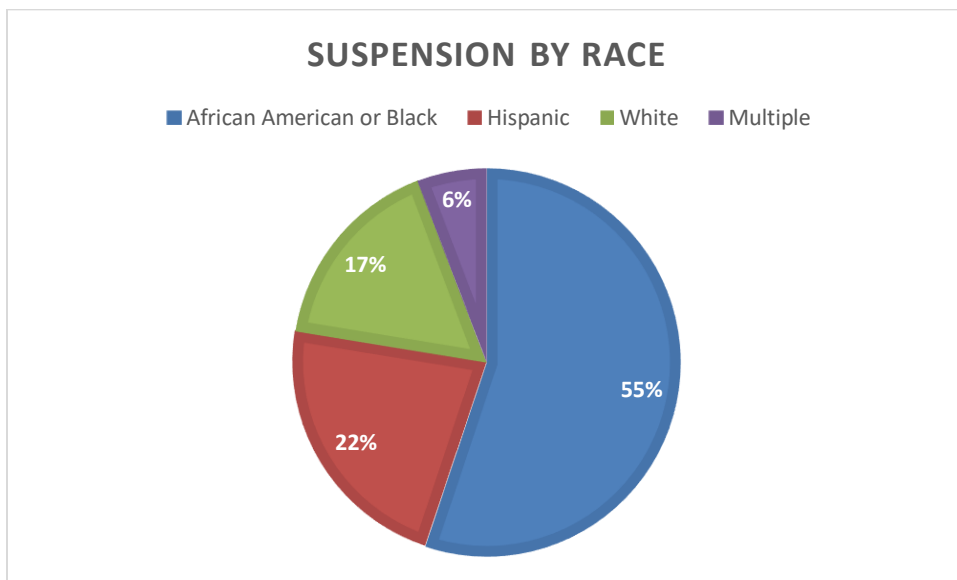
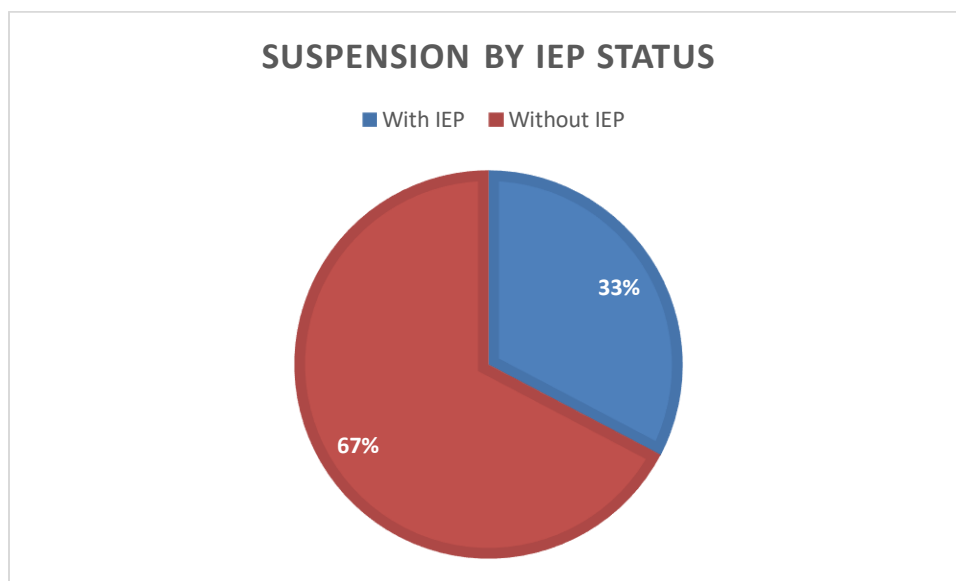
**Figure 3***Suspension by Race*

Figure 4 shows the distribution of suspension incidents by IEP status.

**Figure 4***Suspension by IEP Status*

Strong assumptions cannot be made from the graphs because the total demographic information of the school was not available to the researcher in order to determine the degree to which the representation that groups of students were inconsistent with the general of the school. However, in combination with the administrator interviews and the national statistics, it appears that there are disparities in the number of suspensions that are assigned to subgroups of students based on gender, race, and IEP status.

**Theme #3.** The third theme that emerged was the frequency in which students were suspended. Two of the three schools provided data on the frequency concerning the frequency of student offenders. Between the two schools, there were a total of 599 incidents that resulted in out-of-school suspension. Those 599 incidents involved 330 unique students. Of the 330 students who were suspended, 197 of them only had one suspension incident. Conversely, 133 of those students had more than one out-of-school suspension incident. Of the

total 599 incidents, 197 were attributed to one-time-offenders, and 402 were attributed to repeat offenders. The top 20 offenders who make up 6% of the total number of students who were suspended at least one time accounted for 122 of the total incidents, which is 20 percent of the total number of suspension incidents.

### **Sub-question 3**

Sub-question three for this study was, “How would quantitative survey data from teachers inform the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at the three Title I middle schools in a school district in central North Carolina?” There were 16 complete responses to the survey in which teachers were asked to state their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement concerning out-of-school suspension.

For the statement, “Students in my school typically receive appropriate out-of-school consequences for violations of the student code of conduct.” Teacher responses were primarily agreed or strongly agree. Out of the total 16 responses, 11 stated either agree or strongly agree. The most common answer was agreed. This suggests that teachers generally agree with the level at which students are suspended out-of-school.

For the statement, “School administrators in my school adhere to the policy provided in the student code of conduct when issuing out-of-school suspensions.” Teacher responses were primarily agreed or strongly agree. Out of the 16 responses, 12 stated either agree or strongly agree. The most common answer was agreed. This suggests that teachers generally agree that their administrators generally operate within the policy or code of conduct.

For the statement, “Out-of-school suspension is necessary to maintain order within the school building.” Teacher responses were primarily somewhat agreed or agree. Out of the 16 responses, 10 stated either somewhat agree or agree. There was a wide range of responses to this

question. The results could suggest that there is not a consensus among the staff about the need for out-of-school suspension to maintain order. The answers ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

For the statement, “Less restrictive alternatives to out-of-school suspension are utilized in my school.” Teacher responses were primarily somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. Out of the 16 responses, 13 stated either somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. The most common answer was strongly agree. This suggests that teachers generally agree that out-of-school suspension is necessary to maintain order but that there is some division to the effect level. The high number of strongly agree responses suggests that teachers feel passionate about this element of school discipline and out-of-school suspension.

For the statement, “Student behaviors have typically improved when a student returns from an out-of-school suspension.” Teacher responses were primarily somewhat disagree, neutral, or somewhat agree. Out of the 16 responses, 11 stated either somewhat disagree, neutral, or somewhat agree. Teachers do not have strong feelings about this statement compared to other responses. Only one response either agreed or strongly agreed. The trend for this statement trended toward the disagreement side but was generally neutral.

For the statement, “Out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on the suspended student’s academic achievement.” Teacher responses were primarily somewhat agree or agree. Out of the 16 responses, 12 stated either somewhat agree or agree. The most common answer was agree. Teachers generally agree that out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on the suspended student’s academic achievement.

For the statement, “Out-of-school suspension of students with frequent behavioral incidents has a positive impact on the classroom environment.” Teacher responses were

primarily somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. The most common answer was agree with seven participants selecting this option. Teachers generally agree that out-of-school suspension of students with frequent behavioral incidents has a positive impact on the classroom environment.

For the statement, “Out-of-school suspension should be issued more frequently at my school.” Teachers did not answer this question with a strong consensus. The most common answer was disagree, but there were two or three selections for somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, and agree. Teachers are opinionated but fall along a wide spectrum of responses.

For the statement, “Out-of-school suspension should be used less frequently at my school.” Teachers primarily responded neutral or somewhat agree. Out of the 16 responses, 10 stated either neutral or somewhat agree. The most common answer was neutral. This question and the previous question both failed to show a strong consensus for agreement or disagreement, but the teachers agreed on the neutrality of this statement, whereas the range of opinions was stronger in the previous question.

For the statement, “The possibility of suspension decreases the likelihood that students will engage in dangerous behavior such as fighting, or drug use.” Teacher responses were relatively evenly distributed between strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, and somewhat agree. No teachers strongly agreed, and only one teacher agreed. While there was not a consensus on any one answer, the trend was toward the disagree end of the spectrum.

**Theme #1.** The first theme that emerged was that teachers agreed with their administrators’ actions and believe that they are following the school policy in the way that they are currently administering out-of-school suspension. They were in relatively strong agreement

that students receive appropriate consequences and that they are in line with the district policies. They also generally agreed that out-of-school suspension is necessary to maintain order. This matches the data from the administrative interviews and the discipline data. Students are suspended frequently, but teachers generally believe they need to be suspended frequently. This does not suggest that teachers are not aware or do not care about the impact of out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on student's academic outcomes. However, they also recognize the impact that disruptive students have on the learning environment, as demonstrated in question seven.

**Theme #2.** The second theme that emerged was that teachers do not desire to see the frequency of suspension increase. Questions 8 and 9 asked similar questions phrased both positively and negatively about the frequency of out-of-school suspension. Teachers generally did not think that out-of-school suspension should be used more frequently. Similarly, teachers were either neutral or somewhat in agreement with the statement that suspension should be used less frequently. The data does not show a clear desire to decrease out-of-school suspension, but they do not want to see suspension levels increase.

**Theme #3.** The third theme was that there is a wide range of beliefs about the effectiveness of suspension. Teacher responses showed that there was no clear consensus on question 10, which questioned their belief in the effectiveness that the possibility of out-of-school suspension can have on changing student behavior. Also, according to question 5, they are generally neutral in their beliefs that behaviors improve after a suspension. From their answers in question 7, they understood that students with frequent behavior issues were a negative influence on their classroom, but they also tended to believe that suspension negatively impacts the students who were suspended. The responses to the survey showed that teachers

were conflicted and were aware of the tension between the need to establish discipline and order and the need to help students who struggle with behavior issues.

### **Discussion**

The data gathered in this study showed that there were significant connections between the body of research concerning out-of-school suspension and the activities in practice in the CSS. The administrators and teachers demonstrated, at a minimum, awareness of and, in many cases, agreement with the sentiment conveyed in the current literature concerning out-of-school suspension. From an empirical perspective, some trends emerged in the research that was in line with the current research. The adverse effects of suspension, the disproportionate application of consequences based on cultural differences, and the impact of suspension on future student behavior were all examined. From a theoretical perspective, trends emerged concerning student behavior, attitudes toward student behavioral accountability, and the use of out-of-school suspension as a tool to modify or control behavior. There were small associations within the data that supported CT, GST, and SLT.

A major practical and application-based element that emerged was the tension that exists between the need to maintain order and discipline and the desire to reduce out-of-school suspensions. There was no evidence that teachers or administrators wanted students to be suspended because they thought it was best for the individual students who were being suspended, but they often saw it as a necessity in order to preserve the learning environment for other students. This was a point that was not presented heavily in the current research that examined the impact of suspension on the students who are being suspended. Black (2016) reported that out-of-school suspension could have negative impacts on bystanders in the school who were not directly affected or were not offenders. The data gathered in this study does not

refute this point as some of the administrators noted that out-of-school suspension could affect many students, especially if they feel that one of their peers was treated unfairly. However, the administrators and teachers noted that the removal of students with high-frequency behavioral issues could have a positive impact on the learning environment for the remaining students.

Another practical area of concern was with teacher satisfaction and the need for teachers to feel supported. Administrators were concerned about the perceptions that teachers might develop if out-of-school suspension was not utilized because of negative student behavior. This sentiment is supported by research that links teacher perceptions of student behavior and teacher satisfaction (Collie, Shapaka, and Perry, 2012).

An element that needs to be considered in the discussion of the impact of out-of-school suspension that emerged in the administrative interviews was the stark contrast between students who exhibit frequent disruptive behavior and the majority of the student body. Nearly all the administrators described a difference in the perspective of students and differences in the effectiveness of consequences for students who are frequently in trouble. The archival data also showed that there were differences in the likelihood of being suspended. Most of the students in the schools in this study were never suspended, and out of all the students who were suspended, most were only suspended one time. Administrators also noted that the fear of the negative stigma associated with out-of-school suspension is effective for most students but that for the small percentage of students who are suspended multiple times, they generally respond to out-of-school suspension with indifference.

### **Empirical Discussion**

The empirical evidence in the current literature pointed to the lack of effectiveness of out-of-school suspension and the potentially damaging implications to students (Ahn & Trogon,



2017 Black, 2016; Skiba & Losen, 2015). The administrators, teachers, and archival data all supported this sentiment. The administrators frequently noted that out-of-school suspension left students with academic deficits, potentially strained relationships, and for students with frequent behavioral issues, it generally did not create a desire for changed behavior within the students.

However, it is important to note the distinction that administrators made between the use of suspension on students with high-frequency behavioral issues and the general student body. Administrators and the archival data supported the position that a high percentage of student suspensions are assigned to a small percentage of students. For students who do not display high-frequency behavioral issues, administrators generally believed that the possibility of suspension is an effective deterrent, and some administrators stated that they believed negative behaviors would increase if the possibility of suspension were removed entirely.

Ahn and Trogden (2017) noted that disruptions could impact test scores and student learning. The teachers and administrators agreed that out-of-school suspension does not generally lead to changed student behavior after a suspension. They also agreed, however, that when students with high-frequency behavioral issues are removed from the classroom, it has a positive effect on the classroom and enables learning. The tension in the principal's mind seemed clear as they had a desire to reduce the frequency of out-of-school suspension but weighed its necessity when considering the impact that a small number of students can have on the general learning environment.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

The two primary theoretical constructs in the current literature that guided this study were behavior modification and the impact of social pressure on behavior. These themes emerged

through a discussion of (CT), GST, and SLT. These theoretical constructs appeared to be compatible with the data that was gathered concerning the use of out-of-school suspension.

The use of out-of-school suspension as a means of behavior modification was clearly on the minds of teachers and administrators. Administrators generally believed that out-of-school suspension or the possibility of out-of-school suspension had an impact on most students and influenced behavior but noted that it does not work for all students. Every school approached the issue of out-of-school suspension differently but generally reported that they were able to help students to adjust their behavior with various tools. One school had increased its emphasis on behavior support and had designated individuals who were responsible for working with students to ensure that they felt understood. They wanted students to be able to talk through their issues that could have potentially influenced their behavior so that they can be avoided in the future. Increasing relationships with students was not a reward in the traditional sense, but it appeared to be helping reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions. Similarly, most of the administrators referenced some form of restorative practices in which they increased the opportunity for students to be heard and build community in the school.

The beliefs and practices that have been put in place by the administrators at the participating schools are in-line with some other current research on the use of an alternative to suspension programs that emphasize structure and relationship (Hernandez-Melis et al., 2016; Stovall, 2017). The purpose of this study was not to determine a statistical correlation between a consequence and the impact on student behavior. However, it did show that teachers in the participating schools believe that administrators view maintaining safety and discipline is a necessity in their schools and that it should be done with a variety of tools. They generally agreed that communication and building relationships are essential in changing student behavior

and that it can be done with a comprehensive approach that utilizes a reward and punishment system along with relationships, coaching, and a genuine sense of caring on behalf of the administrators.

A theme that emerged in the theoretical literature was that people would generally reject manipulation and coercion. General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1985) suggested that people act in a way to avoid negative stimuli and may become frustrated with their inability to gain the desired outcome or avoid pain. The administrators generally agreed that when students are suspended as a behavioral consequence, it is important for schools to restore the strained relationships and to work to a positive conclusion. One principal noted that when students come back to school, it was important for them to know that they are still loved and cared for even if there was a consequence. Another administrator noted that when a student is removed from a classroom because of the negative impact they are having on the rest of the classroom, the teachers need to focus and think about what they will do when the suspension is over. This planned and intentional reentry to the classroom is important because it allows students to understand how the consequences were connected to the negative behavior, but that these negative behaviors do not define or shape the identity of the student as a bad kid. Similarly, the administrators noted that in some cases, the teachers might have been partially to blame for incidents that took place. They were clear that this is not usually the case but advocated for teachers and administrators to consider how the adults in the building are trained and supported so that they can work toward positive solutions.

Social learning was another element that emerged in several ways in the data that was collected. First, the administrators noted the significant difference between frequent offenders and most of the student body and the fact that most students are effectively deterred by

suspension or other consequences. This suggests that the social nature of learning and the ability to learn from the shared experiences of others does work. The teachers noted that there are positive changes in the classrooms when disruptive students are removed. The archival data also showed that most of the students in the school are never suspended and that a high percentage of the total suspensions are assigned to a small percentage of students. It appears that most students can understand and adhere to the behavioral expectations without having to experience a suspension personally.

One of the three schools had created a form of alternative suspension within the school that allowed students with high-frequency office referrals and disruptive behavior to be removed from the general classroom without being removed from the school building as a suspension. The program allowed for students with behavioral concerns to be assigned to smaller class sizes with increased structure and accountability. Another administrator noted that they had researched the school within a school concept in which students could be removed from the classroom until they completed an in-school-suspension or restorative program. These programs, along with restorative justice or restorative circles that were discussed by several administrators, are social and point to a general belief that its community is created or increased within the school, students can be encouraged to demonstrate behavior that is appropriate for an educational setting.

The findings in this study confirmed the prior research but pointed to the complexity of the issue that can be missed with the emphasis on the negative impact of out-of-school suspension on individual students who are frequent behavioral concerns. A primary construct that guided the formation of this study was the fact that out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on students, and it is not effective, yet it is still widely used in the education system in the United States. While most of the literature does not directly suggest the motivation behind

administrator decisions suspend, it can often be implied or understood to mean that educators do not care about the effects that the suspension will have on the student. This data gathered in this study showed that this is not the case in this school system. Administrators and teachers are keenly aware of the weight that a suspension can have, but generally believe that it is used as a necessity within the school system. The administrators agreed that the frequency of out-of-school suspension needs to decrease. There were two primary issues identified by administrators concerning the removal of out-of-school suspension.

First, they reported that if it were removed, student misbehaviors would increase. This was generally believed to be about the total student body. They were in general agreement that students with frequent behavioral concerns would not be affected, but that other students who are currently deterred by suspension would be likely to display increased misbehavior if their fear of the consequences were removed or if they were encouraged by seeing other students who misbehave receive insignificant consequences.

Secondly, many reported that it would decrease teacher morale. One administrator noted that this damage to teacher morale could be compensated for through explicit teacher training and communication. However, many of the administrators noted that if students were returned to class too quickly after a major disruptive or disrespectful event, teachers would not feel supported or valued.

The need for consistency among teachers echoed the need for teachers to feel supported. The need for improved communication, cultural understanding, and relationships was cited as some of the most important elements in decreasing out-of-school suspension. If students are not held accountable for their actions, especially for offenses directed towards teachers, the teachers will not feel supported, which could lead to increased teacher turnover. Increased teacher

turnover would decrease the likelihood that relationships with students can be built over time, which could then lead to increased student misbehavior. There is a need for further study concerning the perceptions and attitudes of teachers concerning student misbehavior and solutions to the problem. Neither teachers nor administrators in this study want to see out-of-school suspension increase, and they understand the heavy consequences of using out-of-school suspension. In order to solve the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension, a method for supporting teachers and holding students accountable will need to be developed.

### **Summary**

The interviews with administrators, teacher surveys, and archival data pointed to the complexity of high-frequency out-of-school suspension. The teachers and administrators appeared to be aware of the issues associated with out-of-school suspension and wanted to see change. The interviews and teacher survey showed that both teachers and administrators are concerned with the issue and agreed that out-of-school suspension can be damaging to students. There was a tension between their desire to help students with frequent behavioral issues and the larger classroom setting. The two groups were consistent in their concern for one another. Administrators were concerned about teacher well-being support, and teachers strongly believed that their administrators were following policy and acting appropriately in their handling of discipline and the assignment of out-of-school consequences. The archival data supported the trends in out-of-school suspension and supported the position reported by administrators that a small percentage of students are responsible for a large percentage of out-of-school suspension incidents. The data showed that both teachers and administrators are aware of the issues and would likely support actions to decrease the frequency of out-of-school suspension, but it must

be done in a way that students can be held accountable for their actions, and that discipline and structure in the school can be maintained.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools in the CSS and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multi-method design was used, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The problem that the CSS was facing was high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. It was an issue that had been targeted by the school system in previous years but continued to persist, especially in Title I schools. Research suggests that out-of-school suspension is an increasing problem nationwide and can have adverse effects on students (USDOE, 2014). This chapter includes a restatement of the problem, a proposed solution to solve the central research question, an assessment of the resources and funds needed to solve the problem, roles and responsibilities, a timeline, solution implications, and an evaluation method.

### **Restatement of the Problem**

The problem identified in this research study was the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension at three Title I middle schools in central North Carolina. The problem was based on the statistics available from the school system as well as national statistics concerning the issue of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. The negative and unequal effects of out-of-school suspension have been well documented in recent literature. (Black, 2016; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba & Losen, 2015). However, despite the research and general agreement in the literature and school systems, out-of-school suspensions have continued to be heavily used in the school system (USDOE, 2014). The apparent inconsistency in the research and the practice concerning out-of-school suspension revealed a need for this study. The study has the potential to influence the development of alternatives to out-of-school suspension and could provide



context and understanding concerning the inconsistencies in research and practices.

### **Proposed Solution to the Central Question**

Based on the data collected in this study, a solution to the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension lies in the creation of an alternative to suspension program within each school that will consist of education, relationship building, and a re-entry process for students with high-frequency behavioral issues. Professional development for teachers implementing the program as well as general education teachers will take place that will help staff members to understand how their actions and classroom procedures can influence student behavior. Teachers will also receive professional development concerning reentry to the classroom after an exclusionary consequence. The use of an alternative to suspension programs and in-school suspensions have shown to be a promising solution for discipline school discipline reform as they protect students from out-of-school suspension while offering structure and restorative support (Anyon et al., 2014). The study showed that administrators were aware of the negative implications that out-of-school suspension can bring and wanted to decrease the use of this form of suspension. There were no examples of administrators who wanted to increase or even maintain the level of out-of-school suspensions in their schools. Three important constraints led to the use of out-of-school suspension. It is also important to recognize that nearly all the administrators noted that there were differences in the way students respond to the possibility of suspension or an actual suspension based on the frequency in which students misbehave and are suspended.

The first constraint was that teachers and administrators believed that out-of-school suspension supports their ability to control behavior within the school. If the possibility of suspension was removed, more students might engage in serious misbehavior, and the overall

structure and discipline could decrease. Schools must be able to hold students accountable for misbehavior, and there must be visible consequences for serious misbehavior to compensate for this constraint.

The second constraint was that teachers need to feel supported when there are persistent or serious examples of student misbehavior. Teacher turnover, satisfaction, and ability to teach were all discussed by administrators. Administrators discussed the need to support teachers with consideration given to teacher turnover, teacher satisfaction, and the overall perception of the school climate. The perspectives of the administrators were supported in recent literature. One study reported that when teacher perceptions of student misbehavior are higher, they tend to feel a lowered sense of occupational well-being along with decreased perceptions of student relationships (Aldrup et al., 2018). Administrators were concerned about a potential downward spiral that can take place if teachers do not feel supported. A lack of support can lead to high turnover rates. High turnover rates can lead to a lack of relationships, communication, and cultural understanding, which can lead to student frustration and reaction or office referrals that stem from a root cause of misunderstanding or miscommunication. Teachers must feel that they are equipped to handle discipline in their classrooms. They want to know that if there are serious or recurring behavioral concerns, they will be supported by administrators. The professional development and intentional coaching included in the proposed solution will help in this area. Teachers will need to receive additional support concerning procedures and classroom activities that mitigate student disruptive behavior. Some of the schools have already implemented schoolwide plans for addressing student behavior, and the school does not need to adopt a specific behavior modification program. However, the implementation of the alternative to suspension program should be supported by teacher education and training. If the schools are not

already implementing a behavior modification program, they should consider comprehensive character development programs such as Capturing Kids' Hearts Campus by Design model (Holtzapple et al., 2011).

Finally, the learning environment must be protected. Teachers are evaluated based on test scores and student outcomes in the classroom. Misbehavior in the classroom can decrease the effectiveness of classroom instruction. Teachers and administrators noted that when students with high-frequency behavior concerns are removed from the classroom, the classroom often improves in the short term. Both groups noted that this gain comes at the expense of the high-frequency offenders. Therefore, it should not be a permanent solution to remove these students, but if the behavior of high-frequency offenders were controlled, it would lead to gains for most students who are not high-frequency offenders.

Two themes also emerged from the data that influenced the development of this proposed solution. Administrators believed that increasing relationships, communication, and cultural understanding would lead to improved outcomes for students. The need for this improvement falls on both teachers and students and will not be effective if the onus for these relationships, communication, and cultural understanding falls solely on the students. Teachers need to be intentional and educated about the students they are teaching. They also need to be taught to implement practices in the classroom that take into consideration the various backgrounds and baggage that students might bring to the classroom. The data did not suggest that teachers were unaware of this, but it did suggest that administrators believed that some but not all teachers struggle with the ability to build relationships and communicate with students. This solution addresses this need through a structured reentry process in which staff will be briefed on the needs of specific students and propose strategies that helped them to cope and adapt. The school

will need to continue professional development with all teachers concerning engaging students and cultural understanding.

One of the participating schools in the study had already implemented an alternative to suspension program within the school. The others have considered how they can create an alternative to suspension programs but have not fully implemented them as a formal program. The formal establishment of an alternative to suspension program would help to ensure that the purpose of the program is followed and would allow it to be checked for the fidelity of implementation. The formal program could be named to fit school and district themes and mission statements, but it should be positively phrased in order to avoid continued negative stigma. One study found that students in a school system felt that alternative school programs leave students with a negative stigma and contribute to their identity (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). For this proposed solution, the alternative to suspension program is referred to as Solutions as the intention of the program is to find a solution to the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension and secondly that the goal of the program will be to help students find a solution that works for them and will set them up for success.

Solutions will consist of a classroom for each grade level, which will be housed in a separate setting for each subject. Four general education teachers will be selected to implement the program—one for each of the core content areas. If dual-certified teachers are available, it would be ideal to have two teachers rather than four in order to increase the relationship-building process and decrease the inconsistencies in expectations between teachers. Teachers participating in solutions would be assigned classes in the general education environment when not teaching in the solutions program. Ideally, they should be provided with an additional non-class time that can be used to schedule conferences with students and parents and to increase their ability to plan

for complex student needs.

Students will be selected to participate in the Solutions program after their second suspension. Students can also be referred to the Solutions program to start the next school year based on their total number of suspensions in the previous year. The Solutions classroom should not have more than 15 students in order to maintain a low student to teacher ratio. However, if the numbers can be kept lower, it would be beneficial to the students in the program. Once assigned to the Solutions program, students will develop goals with an administrator and behavior support staff member that will focus on general school expectations and student-specific goals based on previous behavior patterns. As part of the program, students will track their behavior daily and must accomplish their goals for 15 school days in order to return to the general education classroom.

The Solutions classroom will be highly structured with an increased emphasis on procedures and expectations, processing student emotions, and reactions to negative stimuli. In an examination of differences in alternative schools housed off-campus and those housed on campus, Smith (2019) found that the school environment had a strong effect on the effectiveness of an alternative education program. Smith suggested that the on-campus alternative school programs could have a higher graduation rate than schools located off-campus but was unable to show a statistically significant difference. The Solutions classroom should be in a separate location in the building from the other classrooms in order to decrease the negative stigma from other students and to avoid attention-seeking behaviors and distractions. The students will also have weekly scheduled time with a behavior support staff member that will address the student-specific goals and talk about a plan for reentry to the general classroom. The smaller class sizes and emphasis on student expectations, procedures, and behavior will allow teachers to be

proactive in identifying potential problems. They will also allow teachers to prepare for and expect emotional or other venting that can be addressed as a symptom of trauma rather than a disrespectful outburst. Safety will need to be maintained in the classroom, and unsafe patterns of behavior may still lead to out-of-school suspension.

Students will participate in a minimum of two conferences each week that they are in the program—one conference with the behavior support staff member and a second with one of their Solutions teachers. The conferences should not be punitive or an opportunity to talk about what the student has been doing wrong, but rather, should be utilized to build a relationship with the student and seek to understand their needs. If problem behavior is discussed, the teacher should be intentional in their framing of the discussion of how the behavior can be improved and with empathy concerning the root cause of the issue.

The reentry plan for Solutions will be essential in the success of the program. Shelmire (2011) examined a school within a school system that created a separate learning environment for at-risk students. Shelmire found that in this case, students who were in the program achieved success measured by a variety of metrics, but that when the students returned to the general classroom the following year, they did not maintain their success. For this reason, it will be important that Solutions is focused on the reentry process throughout the process and that students will be given the structure they need. The focused reentry process should enable students to have success when they return to the general education classroom. Solutions teachers will all teach regular classes in addition to their Solutions classes. When a student returns to the regular classroom by meeting their goals for 15 days, they will be reassigned to at least one of the Solutions teacher's classroom for their general setting. This will allow the students to build a bridge and serve as a reminder of the expectations and procedures they learned while in the

Solutions program. The emphasis on relationship building during the solutions program will also help the student to feel that they have a relationship with at least one of their teachers when they return to the general classroom. The behavioral support staff member will continue weekly check-ins with the students returning from the Solutions classroom as needed.

As the data from this study showed that there is a need for building relationships, communication, and cultural understanding between teachers and students, an important part of this program will include education and training for teachers. The teachers participating in the program will need to participate in an educational program focused on trauma-informed schools, restorative practices, cultural awareness, and responsiveness. Teachers for this program should be selected by the administrations and willing participants in the program. Teacher buy-in will be important in order to establish the types of relationships that will be essential for the success of the program. The second form of education will come in the form of debriefing with teacher teams. When a student transitions out of Solutions, one of the Solutions teachers will create a confidential student profile that will be presented to the student's core teachers. This profile will include triggers, relevant background information, and successful behavioral intervention practices. Solutions teachers should be respectful of the student's confidence and be clear with students about what they have permission to share with other teachers, and if there are elements the student would not want to be shared. If a student builds a relationship with the Solutions teacher, teachers should avoid damaging that relationship by sharing details that the student thought would be kept confidential. The teacher will need to be clear with the student about mandatory reporting requirements that supersede the desire for confidentiality.

It will be important for schools to maintain all requirements for a free and appropriate public education and adhere to all Exceptional Children laws with the implementation of the

program. Student IEPs will need to be followed, and teachers will need to be licensed and qualified so that students have access to the curriculum.

The Solutions program will be similar to a school within a school (SWS) program that has been implemented in response to various needs in different circumstances. Schools have used SWS programs to serve academically gifted students and to establish magnet schools within a school system seeking to increase diversity in the student body (Shipley, 2011). SWS models have also been used to address the needs of at-risk students. In one study, a SWS program was implemented in order to address the needs of rising first-year high school students who were identified as at-risk during middle school. The study found that students who participated in the SWS program had increased academic outcomes and that their needs were met Shelmire (2011).

### **Resources Needed**

The resources required for this proposed solution are primarily staffing related. Each school would need to be able to identify a location for each of the Solutions classrooms that are away from the primary student hallways. No specialized equipment is needed beyond the typical classroom materials. The program will require the equivalent of one teacher for each grade level, but it should ideally be split between multiple teachers on each grade level. It may be necessary for schools to add one teacher for each grade level in order to maintain current class sizes. It may also be possible to pay for the positions out of the current allotment. The class sizes would increase if the equivalent of one full-time teacher for each grade level were dedicated to the Solutions program. Teachers strongly agreed that their classrooms operated more smoothly when the students with frequent behavioral concerns were removed, and it is possible that the reduction in out-of-school suspension would offset the increased class sizes.

Further research is required to determine the influence that increased class sizes would



have if the presence of an alternative to suspension program were added to a school. All the schools either had a behavioral support staff member or were planning to add one for the upcoming school year. The implementation of this program would require that a portion of the behavioral support staff member's day would be allocated to this program, or it may be necessary to hire an additional behavioral support staff member.

### **Funds Needed**

The funding for this program could be offset within the current school budgets, but if all staff members were hired for the program and did not pull from existing staff members, the program would require three teachers and one behavioral support position for each school. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2019), the median annual wage for middle school teachers is \$58,600. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2020) also noted that in the southern region of the United States, salary typically accounts for roughly 72% of the total cost of employment. This would bring the total cost of hiring each teacher to \$81,389. The total cost without implementing this program at each school without offsetting any of the labor from current employees would be \$325,556 per year.

However, it is highly likely that the schools would be able to compensate for this program within their current employment without the need to hire all the positions. Each school already employed or had plans to hire a behavioral support specialist. If the duties of the behavioral support staff position described in the Solutions program was assigned between the current behavioral focused employees, counselors, or administrators, the cost to each school could be reduced by 25%. Similarly, if one of the core teaching positions was accounted for within the current teaching allotment, the cost of the program could be decreased by an additional 25% for a total cost of \$162,778 per year. The funding for teacher positions could

come from several sources. The local board of education could authorize the funding of the positions within the already existing school budget. The program can also be funded through state and federal grants.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Four key roles will need to be addressed in each school in order to implement this plan effectively. The administrators will need to hire staff, allocate space, and share the plan with the faculty and stakeholders. It will be their responsibility to explain how the program supports the overall school goals and how the change in disciplinary policy is designed to support students and find solutions to high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. Administrators will also be responsible for ensuring that the Solutions program is implemented with fidelity and that teachers and students in the program are held accountable and supported as the program is implemented. Administrators will need to coach teachers on how their behavior modification system is linked to the Solutions program and help them to understand how their actions, communication, relationship building, and cultural awareness impact students and the likelihood of student misbehavior. The programs do not need to be created new as most of the schools are already implementing programs, but they need to be reviewed with staff and presented with an understanding of how every level of student discipline is connected.

The Solutions teachers will have a key role in ensuring that education is continued while students are assigned to the program. They will be responsible for creating lesson plans and establishing a classroom with high expectations while enforcing the rules and procedures. They will also be responsible for communicating and counseling students and sharing appropriately with other staff members in order to help smooth the student reentry process.

The behavioral support staff members will also have a key role in the implementation of

the program. They will be responsible for helping students to process their behavior and whether they are meeting their goals. They will also serve as a bridge and support when students are transitioning back to the general classroom. Their goal will be to provide support so that teachers and students can understand how their actions influenced the negative behavior and how they can achieve success in the general classroom.

Teachers in the general classroom will also have responsibilities in the implementation of the Solutions program. Teachers must understand that when a student is assigned to Solutions, they are not doing so in order to get a break from the student or to pass off the students. There will be a need for intentional and planned reentry when the student earns their way out of the program. Teachers will participate in the generalized professional development that emphasizes character development or structural processes for reducing student conflicts such as the Capturing Kids' Hearts Classroom by Design model or other models that are already in place. General classroom teachers will need to ensure that they are looking for proactive solutions for students and engaging with them based on the information passed on from the Solutions teachers and behavioral support staff. The teacher cannot assume that they can take the same actions that they took before the discipline incidents and expect different results. They must be willing to process and reflect on the student's needs and work proactively and intentionally to solve the problem. This will be accomplished through the staff briefing from the Solutions teachers and the behavioral support staff member. Teachers will be provided with a specific reentry plan for each student that will emphasize their goals and triggers as well as other relevant background information so that teachers can adjust and adapt to meet individual student needs.

### **Timeline**

When considering the timeline of implementing this program, it will be necessary to consider the time it will take to recruit teachers for the program, train the Solutions teachers, and train the whole staff on the focus of the program and the need for the teaching staff to be united. As stated by the principals in the interviews, an emphasis on any program that will replace out-of-school suspension will require teaching and front-loading for teachers. Teachers need to increase their ability to build relationships, communicate, and gain cultural awareness. This will be accomplished by emphasizing the needs of individual students through presentations by the Solutions teachers and behavioral support staff members before the reentry process and the extensive conferencing that will take place during the Solutions program. For the general education teachers not participating in the Solutions program, this will be accomplished through school-wide professional development and coaching from administrators. This professional development and coaching are already happening at all the schools in the CSS. However, through this proposed solution, administrators will help teachers to make connections between reducing out-of-school suspension and the behavioral and relationship training that is already taking place. This will be an ongoing process and should take place throughout the summer preparation and the entire school year. Teachers will need to understand suspension as not just a student problem. The program will also need to be explained to students, parents, and other stakeholders and written into the school discipline policy and procedures. For this research study, the targeted start date will be August 2021.

Teachers will need to be hired the summer before the implementation of the Solutions program. School administrators and the leadership team will need to begin discussing the

implementation of this program at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year and reflect on discipline issues in their schools in order to plan for the constraints and key dates or recurring issues. The Solutions teachers for the next year should be selected from the current teaching staff by December 2020. Teachers should be selected based on a proven ability to build relationships with students, communicate effectively with students and parents, and display cultural awareness. The teachers should display a high level of self-efficacy and believe that they can make a difference in the lives of students, even those with a tendency to display challenging classroom behaviors.

The selected teachers for the program should receive professional development opportunities throughout the spring semester. Professional development should emphasize trauma-informed schools, restorative practices, cultural awareness, and responsiveness. Trauma-informed practices have been studied and implemented in a variety of ways. It can begin with teachers, leadership, or community involvement, but essential elements of success include staff awareness, support, and resources (Kataoka et al., 2018). The Solutions program will allow schools to begin this process and address one subset of students whose response to trauma is manifested through misbehavior, but there will also be a need to increase trauma-informed practices throughout the school to operate in connection with the Solutions program. The new hires to the school will replace the teachers who will be moving to the Solutions program. These teachers will need to be hired by the summer of 2021.

All teachers should complete professional development concerning behavior modification and character development through their chosen platform. Solutions teachers who have attended professional development that will assist them in the implementation of the Solutions program can present their findings to staff and administrators can lead staff in a review of their behavior

modification program. All staff should examine how they can proactively communicate more effectively with students and reduce the likelihood of student misbehavior through communication, relationship building, and cultural awareness.

The following activities will need to be completed during the summer of 2021. The school policy and student code of conduct will need to be updated in order to reflect the change in disciplinary policy. Teacher training will need to be conducted during the teacher workdays prior to the start of the school year. A presentation to parents will need to be delivered explaining the updated disciplinary practices and the emphasis on relationship building, communication, and cultural awareness. The parent training could be conducted in connection with general information about the start of the school year. However, it will be important that stakeholders are aware of the change and the thought process behind the changes.

By the start of the 2021-2022 school year, the Solutions classrooms will need to be identified and prepared. They will not require specialized equipment beyond the normal classroom setting. The classroom environment does not need to feel like a lockdown facility, but it should provide visual cues concerning classroom expectations and procedures.

In the first year of implementation, there will not be any students initially assigned to the program as students will not be referred until they receive their second suspension. Until students are assigned to the program, the Solutions teachers should utilize their time by assisting classroom teachers, participating in professional development, and building relationships with students who have been identified as tending to display high-frequency behavioral concerns.

The timeline for the assignment of students to the Solutions program will vary from school to school based on the assignment of disciplinary measures. Once students are assigned to the program, the teachers will begin following the data tracking, conferencing, and teaching in

the Solutions classroom.

The following table shows the timelines that will be used for the implementation of the Solutions program:

**Table 2**

*Implementation Timeline*

Activity	Timeline
Administration and Leadership Team Training and Reflection	2020-2021 school year
Selection of Solutions Teachers	Winter 2020
Professional Development for Solutions teachers	Spring 2021
Hire new teachers to replace Solutions teachers	Summer 2021
Train faculty and explain the program	Summer 2021
Complete professional development for staff	Summer 2021
Provide parent and stakeholder training	Summer 2021
Revise student code of conduct and school discipline policy	Summer 2021
Prepare Solutions classrooms	Fall 2021
Implement Solutions program for suspended students	Fall 2021

### **Solution Implications**

There are both positive and negative implications for the implementation of the proposed solution. The positive implications include a reduction in the total number of out-of-school suspensions, maintained or increased perceptions of teacher support, increased relationship building and communication with students with high-frequency behavioral issues, and increased academic focus for students who are suspended. The challenging or negative implications for this program include the high cost of the program due to the need for additional staffing, the risks of implementing the program without ensuring fidelity, and the possibility that the program will not solve the issues of disproportionate consequences based on race, gender, or disabilities.

The use of the Solutions program will allow the school to decrease the total number of

school suspensions. As the students will be assigned to the program after their second suspension, subsequent suspensions will not result in the student missing time in school. This will mitigate the safety concerns that administrators raised concerning students who are not supervised at home when suspended and ensure that students are still instructed by highly qualified teachers while serving their consequences. It will also support teachers who noted that their classrooms are improved when students with high-frequency behavioral issues are removed from the classroom. It will also increase or maintain teacher morale, which was a concern of some of the administrators when discussing the possible negative implications of intentionally decreasing the use of out-of-school suspension. The negative implications for students who are suspended have been well documented, and some of these negative characteristics will likely decrease as the total number of days suspended decreases.

One of the primary goals, while students are assigned to the Solutions classroom, is to increase communication, relationships, and awareness. The conferences with one of the Solutions teachers and the behavioral support staff member will help students to be able to communicate and understand how their actions affect the larger educational environment and determine other solutions to meet their needs. The teachers and behavioral support staff will also help teachers understand the student's background, triggers, and cultural issues that could lead to misunderstandings in the classroom. The relationships that will be intentionally built during this time will help address the top three issues that administrators discussed in the interviews and will help to ensure that the need for communication, relationship building, and cultural awareness are viewed as part of the teacher's responsibilities and not solely the responsibility of the students.

A recurring theme in the current literature and in the perception of the administrators who were interviewed was that students do not learn when they are not in the school building. They



end up creating larger deficits and forming negative perceptions about school when they are suspended. This program would ensure that highly qualified teachers are teaching students and that their academic needs are being met even when they are receiving consequences for their behaviors.

One of the negative implications of this solution is that it has a high yearly cost due to the need for increased staffing for the program. The program may alleviate some of the stress that is placed on teachers and make it easier to teach. The archival data showed that high-frequency offenders are responsible for a large number of the total discipline incidents and that if their needs are addressed through the Solutions program, teachers may be able to make up for larger classroom sizes if the schools opted to fund the program through currently allotted positions. Funding for teaching positions has implications at the local, state, and federal levels. The positions could be funded at any level of government or through grants focused on student growth and discipline reform.

Another risk of the program is that if it is not implemented with fidelity and proper staff training, it could be used as a holding program to get rid of students who are viewed as problems. A key to this program is the focus on relationship building, restorative practices, and a planned reentry into the classroom. If the Solutions program is implemented simply as a place to hold students and send busy work, the negative stigma may remain for students who are assigned to the program, and the negative behaviors will likely persist. The data from administrators, archival data, and teachers showed that the high-frequency offenders typically do not change their behavior in response to out-of-school suspension, and if this program is not implemented with fidelity, it is likely that they will not change their behavior as a result.

Current literature shows that students are suspended disproportionately based on race,

gender, and disability status. The implementation of the Solutions program is designed to decrease the total number of suspensions by increasing communication, relationship building, and cultural awareness. The schools will need to continue to train staff on cultural understanding and ensure that equitable practices are being put into place. If students from one subgroup are still suspended at a higher rate than their peers, the Solutions program could be utilized more frequently for that subgroup. This could lead to a rejection of the program, negative stigma, and the real or apparent segregating of students based on race, gender, or disability status. The Solutions program must be implemented in unison with continued schoolwide efforts to ensure equity. This Solutions program alone will not be sufficient to solve the issue of systematic inequality, but it can support a total reduction in out-of-school suspension, which could contribute to solving the problem.

### **Evaluation Plan**

The evaluation of this program will be essential in solving the problem of high-frequency, out-of-school suspension. Fairris (2012) noted that when evaluating a program, it is important to look at the goals or objectives of the program and then look at the factors that influence the outcome. Following this example, the first evaluative measure for the success of the program will be the frequency of out-of-school suspension and the rate at which it changed after the implementation of the program. The evaluation of a dynamic program such as the proposed Solutions program will also require ongoing assessment and should not be considered a one-time event (Mertens & Wilson, 2019).

The stated goal of the Solutions program is to decrease the frequency of out-of-school suspension by 15%. This can be charted first by looking at the yearly suspension numbers adjusted for changes in total enrollment. The program will be considered successful if the rate of

out-of-school suspension drops from year to year and at the end of three years. At the end of three years, it will also be relevant to compare the suspensions for 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students after three years of the implementation of the Solutions program and for 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students the year prior to the implementation of the program. This will demonstrate if there are significant differences in the behavior of students after three years of exposure to the program and for students who were never exposed to the program. The change in behavior over time will be relevant to the success of the program as well as a one-year snapshot. Behavior will be measured through the number of suspensions for the school as a whole and will also be monitored for levels of change for individual students who have participated in the program. The data will need to be analyzed to determine if participating students are less likely to display disruptive behavior in the future, and if there are trends in graduation status and academic success or failure.

The secondary consideration for the success of the program will be the degree to which administrators believe their staff has changed in the practices of relationship building, communication, and cultural awareness. These were areas that the administrators identified as needing improvement, and it will be important to understand their perceptions throughout the implementation of the program. It will also be important to talk with students who have participated in the program. The behavioral support staff can complete this as part of the reentry conferencing.

The delimitations that were placed on the study were that the study was designed to examine specifically Title I middle schools in central North Carolina. Students at Title I schools have a higher likelihood to be assigned out-of-school suspension and have unique characteristics that may require different solutions than non-Title I schools. The proposed solution to the program is focused on reaching the students with high-frequency behavioral issues and on

increasing relationships, communication, and cultural understanding. The study also specifically focused on the perceptions of administrators, archival data, and teachers. Feedback from students and parents was not solicited for this study in order to focus on school-level issues. Further study on the perception of students within the CSS would also be beneficial in determining if there are misconceptions between teachers and students and how the general student body regards the possibility of out-of-school suspension.

The study was limited in its scope and would require further research and study in order to be generalizable to a larger population. The study revealed themes within the data but was unable to identify a specific correlation between actions, behaviors, and attitudes. The themes can be used to understand the shared perception of out-of-school suspension as a problem, according to teachers and administrators.

Further study is also needed concerning the impact of an alternative to suspension programs on students who were not engaged in disruptive behavior. Further research is also needed in the effectiveness of cultural awareness training for teachers and how teachers can proactively address student behavior through intentionally building relationships. There was a strong consensus among the participating administrators that relationships, communication, and cultural awareness are important elements in decreasing student misbehavior incidents, and it will be important to understand how these elements can be improved in practice. It will also be relevant to examine teacher attitudes and beliefs towards these areas.

### **Summary**

High-frequency, out-of-school suspension is a problem that must be addressed for the sake of all students. Both the students who are suspended and the other students in the school are affected when students are suspended. Out-of-school suspensions have been proven to affect

students disproportionately by race, gender, and disability status nationally. This study did not point to a conclusive statistical disproportionate application of discipline. However, the trends in suspension data reflect possible similarities to the national issues of inequality in discipline data.

The data gathered for this study showed that teachers and administrators were aware of the implications of suspension. Administrators were fully in support of the need to decrease out-of-school suspension. Teachers were aware of the negative implications of out-of-school suspension, and while they did not conclusively state that the number of student suspensions should be decreased, they did not generally want to see suspension increase. Both teachers and administrators displayed evidence of tension between not wanting students to be suspended and the need for order in the school and classrooms. The administrative interviews and archival data pointed to the fact that there are a small number of students who are frequently suspended that heavily impact each school's total suspension numbers.

An alternative to suspension program was proposed to address this issue. This program will serve students in the general school building to serve students who are suspended more than once. Students will attend the Solutions program until they meet their goals for 15 days. They will engage in conferences with the Solutions teachers as well as from a behavioral support staff member. The program will include teachers who are highly qualified and who teach general education classes as well as in the alternative to suspension program. The program will focus on building relationships, communication, and cultural awareness and will emphasize the need for teacher understanding as well. A structured reentry process will help students to adapt in order to ensure that their needs are met in a way that is not disruptive to the general school environment. Each student will be assigned to at least one of their Solutions teachers when they return to the general education classroom and will maintain their weekly conferences with the behavioral

support staff member to provide support and encouragement during the reentry process.

The goal of the Solutions program is to reduce high-frequency, out-of-school suspension in a manner that does not jeopardize the total school climate. Structure and discipline must be maintained in the school building, and administrators believe that the current process is effective for most of the students in their schools. The Solutions program will allow the schools to provide for students who tend to have frequent behavioral concerns as well as the students who do not frequently demonstrate this behavior. Participation in the Solutions program will not excuse the school from other general education requirements such as a free and appropriate public education or required Exceptional Children services. Through the Solutions program, schools will ensure that the needs of each student are addressed and set them up for success. It is not a punishment system, but a proactive approach to address a complex issue that is currently impacting many students.

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**APPENDIX A****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 29, 2020

William Hatten  
Katie Thompson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-293 Reducing Out of School Suspensions in Title I Middle Schools: An Applied Study

Dear William Hatten, Katie Thompson:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
Research Ethics Office

## **APPENDIX B**

### Effectiveness of out-of-school suspension

- 1.4 What is the goal or objective when students are assigned out-of-school suspension?
- 1.5 How do students respond to out-of-school suspension in regard to academic outcomes, reentry to the classroom, future behavior?
- 1.6 How does out-of-school suspension influence your school climate?

### Barriers to reducing out-of-school suspension

- 2.4 How do school policies affect your use of out-of-school suspension?
- 2.5 What factors influence your decision to assign out-of-school suspension?
- 2.6 What problems could arise in your school if out-of-school suspensions were intentionally limited?

### Equitable practices

- 3.3 Why do you believe that out-of-school suspension at Title I middle schools is used with higher frequency than at non-Title I schools?
- 3.4 How does out-of-school suspension impact school safety?

### Solution focus

- 4.1 What alternatives to suspension have been successful at your school?
- 4.3 What resources would you need in order to reduce the frequency of out-of-school suspension?

### APPENDIX C

Teachers were asked to select their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree for the following 10 statements:

1. Students in my school typically receive appropriate out-of-school consequences for violations of the student code of conduct.
2. School administrators in my school adhere to the policy provided in the student code of conduct when issuing out-of-school suspensions.
3. Out-of-school suspension is necessary to maintain order within the school building.
4. Less restrictive alternatives to out-of-school suspension are utilized in my school.
5. Student behaviors are typically improved when a student returns from an out-of-school suspension.
6. Out-of-school suspension has a negative impact on the suspended student's academic achievement.
7. Out-of-school suspension of students with frequent behavioral incidents has a positive impact on the classroom environment.
8. Out-of-school suspension should be issued more frequently at my school.
9. Out-of-school suspension should be used less frequently at my school.
10. The possibility of suspension decreases the likelihood that students will engage in dangerous behavior such as fighting, or drug use.

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Consent

**Title of the Project:** Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions in Title I Middle Schools: An Applied Study

**Principal Investigator:** William Hatten, Liberty University Doctoral Student

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an administrator at a Title I middle school in North Carolina. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to formulate a solution to the problem of high frequency out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools. This study will seek to understand why students are suspended and examine solutions to decrease the frequency of suspension.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured interview with the purpose of understanding administrator perspectives towards the use and effectiveness of out-of-school suspension, barriers to reducing out-of-school suspension, and perceptions of equitable practices concerning discipline. The interview will last approximately one hour. It will consist of a series of questions with the possibility of follow-up questions to clarify or understand the responses. Audio of the interview will be recorded if an in-person interview is conducted. The audio and video of the interview will be recorded if the interview is conducted through video-conferencing.
2. Participate in member checking and follow-up questions to clarify if the researcher's assessment of the interview responses is accurate. Follow-up and member checking will take approximately 15 minutes and may be repeated if the initial member checking requires significant revision of the researcher's initial assessment.



**How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect any direct benefits from the study.

Benefits to society include the possibility of decreased out-of-school suspension and improved student outcomes, decreased student dropout rates, and a potential decrease in student delinquency.

Liberty University  
IRB-FY19-20-293  
Approved on 5-29-2020

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The researcher is a mandatory reporter and is required by law to report child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher serves as an administrator in the same school system. The researcher will not select any subordinates for interviews and will not use or reference the interview data within any school system channels or communication. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is William Hatten. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Katie Thompson, at [REDACTED].

Liberty University  
IRB-FY19-20-293  
Approved on 5-29-2020

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

## APPENDIX E

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions in Title I Middle Schools: An Applied Study

**Principal Investigator:** William Hatten, Liberty University Doctoral Student

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a teacher at a Title I middle school in North Carolina. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to formulate a solution to the problem of high frequency out-of-school suspension for three Title I middle schools. This study will seek to understand why students are suspended and examine solutions to decrease the frequency of suspension.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Complete an anonymous survey stating your level of agreement or disagreement with 10 statements concerning school discipline and/or out-of-school suspension. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect a direct benefit from the study.

Benefits to society include the possibility of decreased out-of-school suspension and improved student outcomes, decreased student dropout rates, and a potential decrease in student delinquency.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Liberty University  
IRB-FY19-20-293  
Approved on 5-29-2020

**Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher serves as an administrator at Turrentine Middle School. To limit potential or perceived conflicts the study will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, simply do not submit your survey and close out of your browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is William Hatten. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Katie Thompson, at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

Liberty University  
IRB-FY19-20-293  
Approved on 5-29-2020

**APPENDIX F**

Dear Middle School Administrator:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Education doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to formulate a solution to high frequency out of school suspension at Title I middle schools and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be school administrators at a Title I middle school. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher either in person or through video conferencing. Once all data has been gathered the researcher will contact the participants with the purpose of member checking in order to ensure that the gathered data is portrayed accurately. It should take approximately 1 hour to complete the interview and 15 minutes for member checking. Your name and other identifying information will be collected as part of your participation, but all identifying information will be kept confidential.

In order to participate, please contact me at (Phone Number Redacted) or email me at [wthatten@liberty.edu](mailto:wthatten@liberty.edu).

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview and is also attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview if the interview is conducted in person or via email if the interview is conducted via electronic means.

Sincerely,

William Hatten  
Assistant Principal  
[wthatten@liberty.edu](mailto:wthatten@liberty.edu)

**APPENDIX G**

Dear Middle School Administrator:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Education doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to formulate a solution to high frequency out of school suspension at Title I middle schools and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

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Sincerely,

William Hatten  
Assistant Principal  
[wthatten@liberty.edu](mailto:wthatten@liberty.edu)