

**RESTORING EQUITY FOR BLACK YOUTH IN URBAN SCHOOLS:  
A SCOPING REVIEW**

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## **Abstract**

Zero tolerance policies in urban schools increased the disparities in urban school discipline for Black youth in comparison to white youth. Restorative interventions continue to be a popular response to deviant student behaviors; however, exploring the impact of restorative interventions in reducing harsh discipline on Black youth should be a continued focal point for scholars. This study used a scoping review to explore knowledge available regarding using restorative interventions in urban schools and how they impact Black youth. Five databases were used to identify relevant literature. Eight pieces of literature met the criteria for inclusion in this review. Findings revealed that restorative interventions do not have substantially positive impact on Black youth's suspension rates; yet racial inequities in school and perceived negative thoughts about Black youth are among chief reasons Black youth are more likely suspended. Implications for future research and interventions are discussed.

***Keywords:*** *urban school, Black youth, zero tolerance, restorative, inequities*

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*Psalms 62:7*

*In God is my salvation and my glory: The rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God.*

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(continue to) miss the most, Dr. Charles L. Banks, Jr. (*rest in peace*). You three gave me what I knew I never had but did not think I still craved: unconditional love and support from Black men.

To all of you mentioned here, I love you and will forever cherish what all you are to me. I can only hope I can pay forward what I have gotten from you to others.

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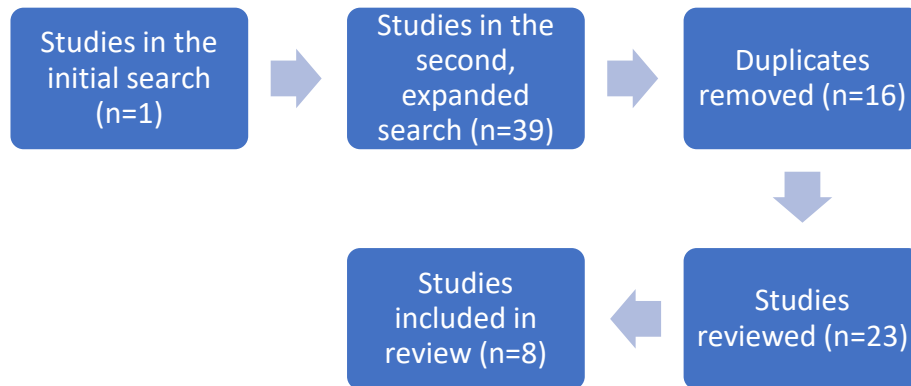
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8	Gwathney, 2021	This case study applies the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine [restorative justice as a tool to decrease inequities in zero-tolerance school suspensions] by presenting the story of a 17-year-old African-American male and his lived experience of a zero-tolerance school suspension and the social and emotional benefits of counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice.
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## Introduction

Gaining widespread implementation throughout the United States in the 1990s, zero tolerance policies mandated harsh penalties for students. Those penalties come in the form of school suspension, expulsion, alternative schooling, and juvenile justice referrals (Fabelo et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2012). While disciplinary actions and penalties are to be expected in school-based settings, there should be a particular focus on the disparate penalties experienced by children of color (used to note mostly Black and Latinx youth). Unfortunately, Black youth are also more likely to experience severe punishment (Morris & Perry, 2016), especially punitive forms of discipline such as out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Irwin et al., 2013; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Welch & Payne, 2010). Nationally, children of color in the United States are two to five times more likely than White children to be suspended or expelled from school (Koon, 2013; Huguley et al., 2020). These disparities are particularly concerning given that rather than curbing unwanted behavior, exclusionary discipline is instead associated with increases in antisocial conduct, higher dropout rates, and entrance into the school-to-prison pipeline (Carter et al., 2014). Punitive school discipline problems not only deprive youths of education opportunities; they also increase the likelihood of future disciplinary problems and, ultimately, youth contact with the criminal justice system (Gonzalez, 2012). Children of color, particularly African American, have borne the brunt of disproportionate school disciplinary measures since the implementation of zero tolerance policies (Teasley, 2014).

Positive discipline approaches are demonstrated to reduce the need for suspension in schools (Chin et al., 2012). Restorative interventions are a form of discipline, but they have a focus on addressing harm and, hopefully, restoring relationships that were broken during the harm. Restorative practices have the dual purpose of proactively cultivating caring interpersonal

and communitywide relationships, and then leveraging those relationships in response to conflict or harm (Huguley et al., 2020). For example, school-based restorative justice practices like conferencing and peacemaking circles aim to reduce misbehaviors by resolving conflicts, improves students' sense of connection to the school community and reinforces the legitimacy of K-12 school authorities (Hirschfield, 2018). Another restorative practice is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, a multi-tiered, team-based intervention framework that has proven to be effective in reducing disciplinary referrals and suspensions, particularly in elementary and middle schools (Hirschfield, 2018).

While there is literature that explains restorative interventions in schools, there is a gap in the literature to synthesize this information to help practitioners understand if restorative interventions change behaviors and ultimately improve the likelihood for Black youth to avoid suspension or expulsion. This scoping review is intended to delve deeper into understanding the impact restorative practices has on reducing suspensions for Black youth in schools.

### **Methodology**

This scoping review used the Peters et al. (2015) overview of scoping reviews as the guiding outline. This included an overview of the database searches, the guiding question, the inclusion criteria, the type of participants, the search strategy, and the chart of the resulting articles in the scoping review. Peters et al. (2015) was used as the basis for the scoping review because of its recent, common use in youth-focused, behavioral health reviews (Schønning et al., 2020; Montgomery et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021) that are like this article's content.

#### *Inclusion and Exclusion*

Studies were included in this scoping review if they focused on (1) an urban school district (as defined by location, size, and student demographic), (2) an intervention that compared

Black youth to at least one other youth population, and (3) a distinct look at changes in discipline from pre- and post-intervention. Two of the eight studies deviated from the original inclusion criteria because they offered unique perspectives on the impact of restorative interventions in schools. One of those studies included a study of a large, urban school district, and the focus was on K-12 education with a large sample size. The other was a case study that focused on a specific story of a 17-year-old African-American male, which outlined some of the most raw experiences of the impact of restorative interventions. All other studies included empirical results. Systematic reviews were excluded from this scoping review. The studies included defined restorative interventions similarly, though the studies may have used the words “restorative practices,” “restorative interventions,” and “restorative justice.”

### *Search Strategies*

In preparation for writing this literature review, a social science librarian was consulted. The initial literature searches produced a variety of literary genres, including secondary data analyses, case studies, literature reviews, as well as small and large scale qualitative and quantitative studies. The focus on the search was to find research studies to answer the following question: *Do Black youth who participate in restorative practices in school have greater reductions in suspension as compared to Black youth without a restorative practice intervention?*

Academic Search Complete was used through University of Michigan Libraries website. In addition, APA PsychINFO, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, SocIndex with full text, and ERIC were used in the article search. Only articles from the last 10 years (2011-2021) that have been peer-reviewed were used. The terms used were (black youth or African American youth) AND restorative practices in schools AND suspension. I then swapped out (restorative practices in schools) for (restorative justice in schools) to do an initial search of the literature. To

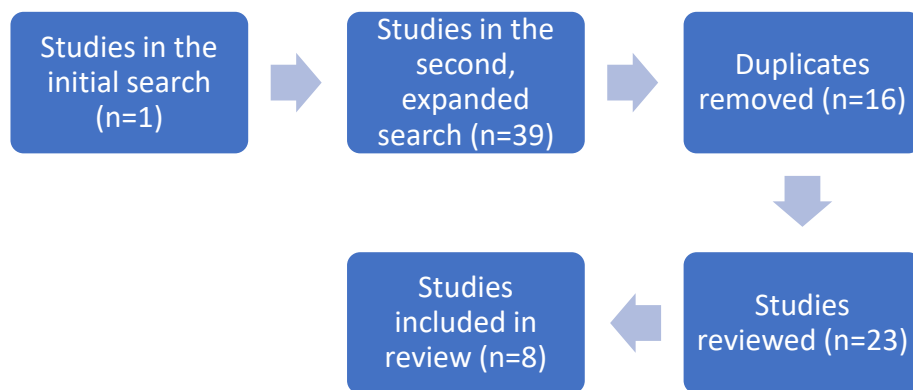
broaden the search to find additional articles, the following terms were used in a second search: (black or African American or black American) AND (restorative justice or restorative practice or restorative approach) AND (suspensions or expulsion or discipline).

### Screening

The author conducted all the research for this scoping review as well as assessed each article's fit for inclusion in the review.

### Results

Figure 1 outlines the results from the articles searching and the resulting articles included in the scoping review.



**Figure 1:** Overview of the article searching and selecting process

Table 1 provides an overview of the articles that are included in the scoping review. I reviewed eight (8) articles that provided varying information about the impact of harsh school discipline policies on students, especially students of color – and namely Black youth – while offering alternatives, such as restorative interventions, to these policies. This section provides an overview of those eight (8) articles, which provided me with the following themes: (1) racial inequities in school discipline; (2) dealing with perceived negative thoughts; (3) defining restorative justice; and (4) do restorative interventions work.

**Table 1.** Overview of Articles Included.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Overview</b>
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**Scoping Review**

This section will discuss the emerging themes and findings from the review of the literature. One main theme that arose was the focus on racial inequities in school discipline. This section will also highlight the findings from the eight articles.

**Racial Inequities in School Discipline**

Exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, punish students for poor behavior by forcing them to spend time away from the classroom or school (Hashim et al., 2018). Black youth are disciplined at substantially higher rates than their peers, leading to greater suspension and expulsion rates (Raffaele et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2014; Theriot et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2008). An investigative report conducted by the GOA (2018) reports that in 2016, Black males in high school represented 18% of America’s student population and disproportionately represented 39% of school suspensions, whereas their White peers represented 50% of the student population and accounted for 5% of school suspensions (GOA 2018).

Critical race theorists argue that given how power is distributed within school systems and society at large, the behavior of people of color will be defined in negative ways and controlled by members of the dominant non-Hispanic White group (e.g., defiance worthy of discipline in school settings) (Ladson-Billings et al., 1995). Experiences of oppression tend to be driven by the lack of social mobility and power as demonstrated by Ousey and Unnever (2012). They revealed that a tipping point does not exist; instead, greater variation in racial and ethnic



populations stigmatizes the minority class, resulting in more punitive attitudes of the majority class (Ousey & Unnever, 2012).

Despite declines in both school violence and the use of exclusionary discipline practices in general (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), scholars have demonstrated that exclusionary discipline practices are disproportionately applied to minority racial and ethnic groups (Kupchik et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2000; Wallace et al., 2008; Welch, 2018). The overuse of office disciplinary referrals for even minor offenses has led scholars to argue that these actions are, in part, a function of underlying racial bias embedded in systems that place students of color at a disadvantage (Girvan et al., 2017) and that maintain the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett, 2016).

## **Scholarly Results**

### *Defining restorative justice*

To understand how authors are looking at restorative interventions in their studies, it is important to pay attention to which definition of restorative justice they ascribe to. According to Gregory et al. (2016), restorative justice is fundamentally a philosophical approach to addressing student behavioral infraction. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) identified it as a proactive form of discipline.

In *Restorative Interventions and School Discipline Sanctions in a Large Urban School District*, the authors used the following definition of restorative justice: The restorative justice framework centers on infusing equity, well-being, and inclusion into disciplinary practices (Fronius et al. 2019). Restorative justice is an evidence- based approach that aims to direct school districts away from zero-tolerance suspensions (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al. 2019).

### *Disproportionate School Disciplinary Responses*

The results of Mitchell et al. (2020) find that minority students are indeed most negatively affected by harsh policies at all stages of school discipline (e.g., referral, punishment, suspensions, and arrest; Giroux, 2003). More specifically, Mitchell et al. (2020) shows that an increase in the percentage of minority students is associated with decreases in mild and restorative school discipline. The cumulative disadvantage for minority students in the school disciplinary process may be associated with an increased likelihood of arrest and overrepresentation of minorities in the school–juvenile justice system pipeline (Advancement Project, 2005; Giroux, 2003; Rocque et al., 2017).

While some scholars argue the benefits of this universal approach and contend that zero-tolerance suspensions are racially neutral and fair (Chen 2008; Killion 1998), several others assert that zero-tolerance school suspensions lack individualized approaches to student discipline and influence racial disparities (Augustine et al. 2018; GOA 2018). Ferguson (2000) found that Black youth account for 25% of the student population, while making up 50% of all school punishments. Black youth are more likely to be referred [to the office] for less severe sanctions such as disrespect, excessive noise, and threats, than White student counterparts (Gregory et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2002), which adds to [Black youth being] more frequently suspended and expelled from schools [than their White peers] (Brooks et al., 2000; Costenbader et al., 1994; Fabelo et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 1986; Wallace et al., 2008). The criminalization of Black boys in schools, for example, serves as a form of racial oppression, and as such, we can expect the boys to engage in resistance as a normal and healthy response to this oppression (Freeman, 2015; Nolan, 2011; Tuck et al., 2011).

Hashim et al. (2018) examines how Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) suspension ban impacts suspensions over time. The results of the study show that educators in LAUSD were suspending traditionally marginalized students for willful defiance at greater rates than other students prior to the suspension ban (Hashim et al., 2018). According to Hashim et al (2018), after the suspension ban, LAUSD implemented a School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) program; as part of the SWPBIS program, LAUSD established new standards for student behavior and school-site practices surrounding student discipline. Schools, in turn, had to develop discipline plans aligned to these standards, including setting rules for student behavior, developing three tiers of intervention strategies for managing student behavior to avoid suspensions, monitoring suspensions with school data, and providing appropriate staff training (Hashim et al., 2018).

Two results came from the Hashim et al. (2018) study that further shows the racial inequities in school districts. One is that there is an upward shift (a modest 0.7 percentage increase) in suspensions in year 3, since LAUSD only banned suspensions for willful defiance and not for other kinds of misbehaviors (e.g., violent behavior), which makes it possible that schools reached a point at which they could not possibly lower suspensions any further, leaving nowhere else to move but up (Hashim et al., 2018). Finally, the fact that persistent gaps in discipline rates still exist between black and nonblack students suggests an ongoing need to focus on both the causes and consequences of disproportionalities in disciplinary infractions (Hashim et al., 2018). These persistent racist punitive practices exist as part of a school-to-prison pipeline – a collective of policies and procedures which work to funnel boys of color (and increasingly other marginalized intersectional identity groups of students) away from positive educational outcomes and toward incarcerated futures (Annamma, 2015; Porter, 2015).

### *Dealing with perceived negative thoughts*

Several empirical studies suggest that characteristics at the student level (e.g., number and type of discipline incidents) and school level (e.g., the principal's discipline philosophy) contribute to the relationships between student race, school racial composition, and exclusionary practices (e.g., Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). Teacher attitudes and their implicit biases are one area of concern in the discussion of academic disparities (Liang et al., 2017). Implicit bias may influence how educators and school psychologists interact and treat students of color (Girvan et al., 2017). Black boys, because of stereotypes and implicit biases held by teachers, are more likely to receive discipline referrals for their behaviors, including acts of defiance, regardless of severity (Gregory et al., 2008; Lewis et al., 2010; Van Dyke, 2016). Scholars have postulated that poor relationships between Black youth and educators can lead to differential processing (Gregory et al., 2016). In fact, studies have shown that racial discipline gaps are greater in schools where students report less support (Gregory et al., 2011) and less connection to school adults (Anyon et al., 2016).

In *Offsetting Racial Divides*, the author explains how inequities in disciplinary practices and how Black youth are perceived negatively place African American males at higher risk of dropping out of high school (Gwathney, 2021). An example of how dealing with perceived negative thoughts can be detrimental:

“Using open-ended questions, [the author] asked Elijah – the subject of the case study – to share more about his presenting temperament. He irritably replied that his Algebra II teacher made several comments that left him feeling “disrespected and insulted.” When prompted to share an example of the comments, Elijah explained that his math instructor frequently called him and other African American male students’ “homie” and separated them in class. To gain a deeper understanding of his experience, I asked Elijah, “How do these experiences make you feel?” Sarcastically, Elijah tilted his head to the side and replied, “How do you THINK it makes me feel!?” According to Howard (2008), the negative undertones of the term “homie” is used to depict African American males as dangerous, uneducated, and violent.” (Gwathney, 2021)

This experience showcases how direct and indirect biases of Black youth can have an impact on their feelings, safety, and ability to learn.

Importantly, these biases contribute to the disproportionate overrepresentation of students of color placed in low-track and special education classes (Blanchett, 2006), which limits educational mobility, decreases college readiness (Burriss et al., 2005). For instance, implicit biases may result in judgments of Black students' behaviors as indicative of emotional or behavioral disorders and learning disabilities as opposed to other problems. In *Perspectives of Respect, Teacher-Student Relationships, and School Climate Among Boys of Color*, the authors wrote that middle school- and high school-aged Black boys shared how they experienced their school and their relationships with teachers and peers (Liang et al., 2020). Namely, student attention to differential treatment, disrespect, and power struggles in their relationships with teachers suggests that strengthening educators' abilities to form strong bonds with students is one critical piece in improving student experiences and outcomes (Liang et al., 2020).

### ***Do restorative interventions work?***

Recently, schools have been increasingly employing a set of practices referred to as [restorative interventions - RIs] to disrupt racially disparate punishment (Gregory et al., 2016). RIs assume that subjective experiences of harmful acts need to be acknowledged and that it is worthwhile to harness the power of the collective for resolution and repair (Drewery, 2013; Zehr et al., 2004). RIs to school discipline include a variety of practices on the prevention-intervention continuum (Anyon et al., 2016). Namely, some practices aim to prevent infractions and other practices intervene after infractions have occurred (e.g., Blood et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2008; Wachtel et al., 2009).

*In An Examination of Restorative Interventions and Racial Equity in Out-of-School Suspensions*, the student-level RI variable was statistically significant (OR = 0.31,  $p < .001$ ) and indicated that the receipt of one or more RIs was associated with a 69% decrease in the odds of receiving an OSS while controlling for all other variables in the model (Gregory et al., 2018). Using Denver Public School (DPS) data from 2014–2015, statistical models showed that student participation in RIs substantially reduced the odds that individual students received OSS; however, the benefits of such participation were relatively similar across racial groups and therefore only marginally associated with more comparable assignment of OSS to Black and White students (Gregory et al., 2018).

Anyon et al. (2014) found that, accounting for student and school covariates (including participation in in school suspension (ISS) and behavioral contracts), discipline-referred students who received one or more restorative interventions (RIs) (odds ratio OR = 0.73,  $p < .01$ ) were less likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (OSS) during that same school year than discipline-referred students who did not receive an RI. However, despite accounting for students' RI and other school and student characteristics, Black students continued to have significantly higher odds of receiving an OSS relative to White students (OR = 1.55,  $p < .001$ ; Anyon et al., 2014).

This suggests that the alternatives to suspensions, such as RI, may have benefits for all student groups but not substantially greater benefits for referred Black students (Gregory et al., 2018). The findings suggest that student participation in RIs were related to only marginal narrowing of the suspension gap between Black and White students. This leads to conjecture that equity efforts may make greater inroads if they focus on prevention, rather than intervention (i.e., responses after students have already received a discipline referral; Gregory et al., 2018).

Black youth were more likely to participate in RIs than White students, and despite a higher likelihood of participation in RIs relative to White youth, Black youth remained at heightened risk of being suspended in the second semester (Anyon et al., 2016). According to *Restorative Interventions and School Discipline Sanctions in a Large Urban School District*, the associations between receipt of RIs in the first semester and fewer office discipline referrals (ODRs)/OSSs in the second semester did not account for a range of student and school characteristics that could influence RI participation and/or subsequent discipline incidents. For example, there is emerging evidence that students' likelihood of participating in a restorative conference is influenced by their trust or relationship with the person who will be implementing the intervention (Anyon, 2016). Other influences could include students' propensity to take responsibility for their actions, a disciplinarian's willingness to offer students the opportunity to participate in a RI, or a school leader's commitment to proactive or preventative approaches to addressing misbehavior (e.g., Payne et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014).

There is potential for RIs to reduce racial disparities in school discipline, but empirical research in this area is lacking (Gregory et al., 2018). While its form and function are an increasingly important part of reimagining equitable classroom management practices (Milner et al., 2018), restorative practices remain situated within a system that supports teacher beliefs and teaching practices that criminalize boys of color (Basile, 2021). At the heart of this issue is the persistent ethos of fixing the students, instead of fixing the system (Basile, 2021). On the other hand, it is also plausible that school capacity to implement RIs meaningfully operates as a crucial driver of disciplinary outcomes (Anyon et al., 2016). It therefore seems likely that additional forms of prevention and intervention, in addition to individual RIs, are needed to fully address equity concerns (Anyon, 2016; Anyon et al., 2016).

## Conclusion

In summary, zero tolerance policies in urban schools continue to have negative impacts on Black youth. While RIs are an alternative to out-of-school suspensions (OSSs), and students who participate in RIs see significant decreases in OSSs, Black youth who participate in RIs still experience OSSs at a higher-rate than their White peers. Racial inequities in school discipline and dealing with perceived negative thoughts are among the chief reasons Black youth continue to receive significantly higher OSSs. Unfortunately, the two aforementioned factors are a part of a larger systemic issue that exists within and outside of school systems. The two factors give a great foundation for school and education practitioners to begin to think about ways to further address inequities in OSSs for Black youth.

There are some strengths in the literature on school discipline and [the need for] alternative, equitable responses to deviant behavior. One is that the literature begins to explore some of the additional perspectives that contribute to inequitable school discipline policies. In *Perspectives of Respect, Teacher–Student Relationships, and School Climate Among Boys of Color*, the authors begin to discuss power dynamics from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, which is an important framework to grounding how societal inequities impact K-12 school systems. Another strength is that several of the articles hone in on teacher-student relationships. According to Liang et al. (2021), teacher-student relationships appear to be central to outcomes [for students]. The dynamic between school staff members and students – especially for Black youth – is an important indicator of academic achievement. Finally, the literature does not shy away from critiquing – and, even, criticizing –RIs as an alternative to OSSs.

There are also some limitations in the literature. The most apparent limitation is the availability of data to analyze and the time it takes to analyze multiple-variable data. Even when



data are available, they are correlational and, as such, cannot fully predict that RIs prevent OSSs (Gregory et al., 2018). With the scope of information necessary to *prove* that RIs prevent OSSs for Black youth, there is only so much the authors can glean from secondary data analysis. Additionally, there are data on students overall, but there lacks sufficient data on the impact of RIs on Black youth. Finally, a major limitation found in the literature is the staff structure, resources, and capacity in schools to implement RIs and effectively gather data to show that RIs reduce OSSs for Black youth. In one study, the authors note that only 12.52% of all those referred for discipline in the first semester in the [Denver Public Schools district] (n = 652) received a RI, which means it is also plausible that school capacity to implement RIs operates as a crucial driver of disciplinary outcomes (Anyon et al., 2016).

One of the important gaps in the literature is the lack of acknowledging the lived challenges for urban, Black youth. The literature does not fully address the need for student, school staff, and community buy-in on RIs for RIs to have the greatest impact and not appear like another top-down mandate for students in school.

Based on the literature in this review, I would recommend that Black youth participate in RIs because of the even marginal benefit of reducing their OSSs. As noted in Morrison and Vaandering (2012), I would also recommend that RIs be used as a proactive form of discipline – potentially having schools with both a proactive RI for all students’ participation as well as a reactive RI for students who have conflict. In addition, I would recommend that RIs in school integrate additional perspectives, such as CRT and trauma-informed care, as well as adverse childhood experiences, to determine if RIs have an impact on reductions in suspension or if there are other needs that students have that can be addressed. Finally, researchers and practitioners alike must recognize – and prioritize in their work – racial biases impact how Black youths’

behaviors are seen as deviant in comparison to their peers; this awareness should be used as its own framework for school cultural competence and review of school disciplinary actions.

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