

BRIDGING THE TRUST GAP: A PATH FORWARD FOR SCHOOL DISCIPLINE



The Bottom Line: Restoring trust may be the single most overlooked factor for increasing student safety and positive engagement in schools.

Since schools reopened post-pandemic, educators have warned that student behavior has grown increasingly concerning, disruptive, and complex to address

It is important for North Carolina policymakers to understand that:

- **Zero-tolerance policies** are only likely to [worsen](#) discipline problems.
- **Effective discipline** in schools will require policies and practices that strengthen trust between all stakeholders within a school community.

This brief outlines why this is the case, and shares recommendations for policymakers to support effective discipline practices in NC public schools.

[Full Policy Report](#)

Behavior Trends and Student Experience

Understanding the Growing "Behavior Problem" in Schools

- 77%** Southern Public Schools report ongoing COVID-19 behavior impacts
- 48%** Educators report student behavior is "a lot worse" than pre-2023 levels
- 74%** Superintendents note significant rise in disrespectful parent communication

What are students' behaviors telling us?

Trends and reports clearly show that youth have suffered many negative impacts on their mental health since before the pandemic. Some types of experiences in childhood known as **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** can disrupt a child's emotional and psychological development and lead to increased behavioral and learning problems through an erosion of a child's sense of safety, security, and connection. [Surveys](#) show that youth experienced an increase in ACEs during the pandemic.

Youth are experiencing compounding stressors impacting their development:

Rising Rates of ACEs

Increased [social media](#) influence over human dialogue

Community-wide [discrimination](#) and [financial strain](#)

Without targeted support to build trust and resilience across school communities, these compounding stressors erode trust between students, families, and staff—undermining wellbeing, attendance, and achievement.



The Importance of Trust

Trust is critical for building high-performing relationships that leverage strong academic achievement and positive student outcomes.

Some studies have found that **collective trust among students toward their teachers is the strongest school-level predictor of positive student attitudes, behaviors, and levels of achievement.**

The Pitfalls of Zero-Tolerance

Harsh discipline approaches and **zero tolerance policies that rely on punishment and removal from the classroom don't effectively change behaviors** or help students succeed.

These policies **further erode trust** within school communities.

Punitive and exclusionary approaches also tend to fall disproportionately on students of color, and can result in **additional harm** through further discrimination, isolation, and learning loss, funneling struggling students into a **school-to-prison pipeline.**

Student-Centered Alternatives:

Student-centered discipline approaches (e.g., Restorative Practices and PBIS) use evidence-based, effective practices that:

1. Build Trust Proactively:

Establish strong, trusting relationships and clear behavioral expectations.

2. Combine High Expectations with Support:

Take an "authoritative" approach that pairs clear standards with high levels of support.

3. Elevate Student Agency:

Value student voices in setting agreements, problem-solving, and repairing harm when issues arrive.

Recommendations for NC Policymakers:

- 1. Invest in Student-Centered Frameworks:** Fully invest in high-quality, evidence-based, student-centered discipline frameworks at the district level.
- 2. Fully invest in proper implementation** using [high-quality data](#).
- 3. Use a Fair Process Approach:** Engage, inform, and include all stakeholders from the beginning and throughout any selection and implementation process using a [fair process approach](#).
- 4. Align with NC's Portrait of a Graduate:** Connect discipline practices to teaching durable skills.
- 5. Fund Specialized Support Personnel:** Allocate funding for support staff at nationally recommended ratios.