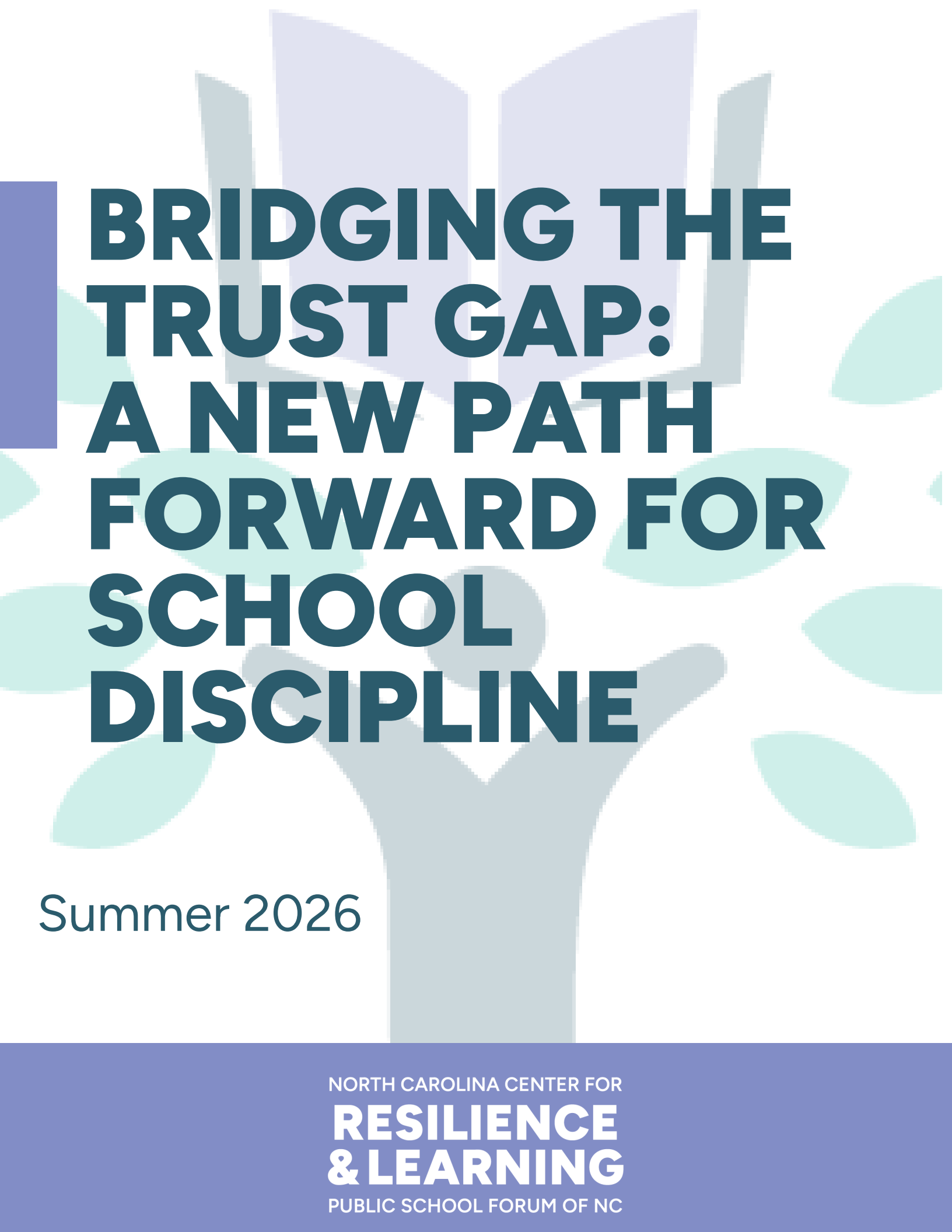




# **BRIDGING THE TRUST GAP: A NEW PATH FORWARD FOR SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

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NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR  
**RESILIENCE  
& LEARNING**  
PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF NC

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

Ever since most schools began re-opening their doors following the worst months of the pandemic, there has been a swell of cries from teachers and administrators that student behaviors have become more concerning, disruptive, and harder to address. In response, a number of districts and states have considered or moved to reinstate “[zero tolerance](#)” policies in schools as a means to reassert control and improve safety. However, when we understand the root causes underlying recent behavioral trends, it is evident that effective discipline in schools will require much more than policies with strict rules and punishments, and that zero-tolerance policies are likely to [worsen the problems](#) rather than offer meaningful solutions.

In this brief, we will consider:

1. How behaviors in schools have been changing
2. That the root may be a deepening crisis of trust
3. Recommendations for what advocates for effective school discipline can do to improve school safety and help all students learn and succeed

## Understanding the Growing “Behavior Problem” in Schools

From the perspective of teachers, administrators and other school staff, **schools re-opened their doors after the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic largely to find their students more disengaged and oppositional than before their doors had to abruptly close.** And it appears that since the pandemic, students aren’t the only ones showing behavioral changes toward school personnel - their parents are as well.

It’s important to note, however, that while the number of [school crimes](#) in North Carolina is still 20% higher in 2024-2025 than it was in 2018-19, violent crimes account for just 2.6% of crimes. Additionally, seventy-eight percent of NC schools reported five or fewer crimes in 2024-25, and [only 1%](#) of NC’s public school students were involved in any reportable offense. Inaccurate assumptions that equate behavior concerns with a school safety crisis can sometimes drive counterproductive policy measures.

### The Reality of "Behavior Problems" in Schools

**58% of teachers** address behavioral issues daily.

**48% of educators** report student behavior is "a lot worse" than pre-2023 levels.

**77% of public schools** in the South report that COVID-19's lingering effects continue to negatively impact behavioral development.

**74% of superintendents** note a significant rise in disrespectful communication from parents since 2019.

Sources: Pew Research Center (2023), EdWeek Research Center (2024), NCES (2025).

# Social-Emotional Development

Educators are noting the connection between student behavior and their social and emotional skill development. Eighty-four percent of respondents [reported](#) that they saw students' interpersonal and self-management skills as developmentally lagging compared to same-age peers before the pandemic. As recently as May 2025, [according to the NCES](#), 79% of public schools in the South agree that the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering effects continue to negatively impact the socioemotional development of students. While in the younger years, this may show up as oppositional, disruptive or aggressive behavior, for older students this might be showing up more frequently as disengagement.

Concerns over behavior and motivation may also be related to problems with focus and attention. [The NCES found](#) that 26% of public schools reported that students' lack of focus and attention is having a "severe negative impact on learning" as of the 2023-24 school year. And it's not only student learning that's impacted. An equal percentage reported that this is also having a severe [negative impact on teacher and staff morale](#). This is potentially creating a problematic feedback loop, as low teacher morale can have a negative impact on student learning and engagement.

## Youth Reports and Communication of Need

While reports from educators can offer an important perspective on what students are expressing through their behavior, they offer only a limited window into what's going on for students under the surface. **Listening to youth reports may offer greater insight into what struggles and needs their behaviors are communicating.**

The North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) suggests that certain groups of youth are impacted more than others.

Increased problems with attention and other executive functioning skills may be impacted by [children's increased exposure to screen time](#) in and outside of school, which [rose further](#) during the pandemic. Even just during school hours, cell phone use [has been identified](#) as a major problem for 33% of all teachers and 72% of high school teachers. Many states, including [North Carolina](#), have passed laws seeking to restrict students' cell phone access in schools. It remains to be seen what impact this might have on student engagement, although research so far suggests it could see some [positive results](#). It is highly likely, however, that changes in student behavior are telling us about struggles beyond what can be resolved by disconnecting their cell phones during school hours.

**47% of teachers** nationally report that students show "little to no interest in learning" (Fall 2023).

**87% of educators** believe the pandemic made students less motivated to do their best.

**72% of educators** report that student morale is lower than it was pre-pandemic.

Source: EdWeek Research Center (2023).

**In particular, the data highlights concerning and long-term trends in youth mental health and sense of connection starting before the pandemic.**

# Snapshot: The Youth Mental Health Crisis in North Carolina

| Category             | Key Findings & Statistics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National Trend       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>57% Increase in suicide rates</b> for ages 10–24 (2007–2018).</li><li>• For some groups, suicidal ideation rates have continued to rise post-pandemic.</li></ul>                                                                                              |
| Middle School        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Black males:</b> Showing concerning upward trends</li><li>• <b>Females:</b> Ideation rates are nearly double their male peers</li><li>• <b>Highest Risk:</b> 46% of Multiracial and 37% of Black girls seriously considered suicide in 2023</li></ul>         |
| High Schools         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender Gap: <b>Female ideation remains nearly double that of males</b></li><li>• Multiracial Youth: Males at 19.2% vs. Females at 27.7% for ideation</li><li>• Suicide Attempts: <b>18% of Multiracial females attempted suicide in the past year.</b></li></ul> |
| Emotional Well-being | <p><b>Prolonged feelings of sadness or hopelessness:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>27%</b> of HS Males</li><li>• <b>51%</b> of HS Females</li><li>• <b>61%</b> of <a href="#">Multiracial HS Females</a></li></ul>                                                                  |

## Behavior is a Form of Communication, so What Are Students Telling Us?

### Screen Time and Social Media

**One impact of the pandemic that is potentially still impacting youth is increased screen time and use of social media.** While the impact of social media for some youth may be mixed, as social media can [help some youth](#) who feel isolated within their local networks to feel more connected to others they identify with, [research](#) suggests that **3+ hours of social media use per day can double the risk of mental health problems for children and teens.**

And [according to Gallup polling](#) in 2023, **the average US teen is on social media close to 5 hours per day.** Girls report spending almost an hour more per day on social media than boys, which [research indicates](#) could be at least partly to blame for girls’ poorer mental health. The overall impacts of social media on youth mental health and sense of social connectedness are likely complex.

One complicated trend is that, while social media might have helped de-stigmatized talking about and seeking help for mental health struggles, it might also be stigmatizing difficult but natural emotions as problems. [According to some](#) in the mental health field, **teens in recent years have been expressing a lower tolerance for unpleasant feelings, otherwise known as distress tolerance.** Teens may need more support in learning how to feel, accept and move through their emotions in healthy ways - which may best be learned within the context of familiar, trusted relationships.

**Note:** The number of schools and students in NC responding to the YRBS has decreased since 2019, after state laws regarding what questions could be asked of students became more restrictive and a number of districts declined to participate. An overall decline in response rate has led to sample sizes of American Indian and Asian youth that were often too small to report, limiting our information about the experiences, behaviors and needs of these groups of students.

Regardless, social media is not likely the whole story, considering, for example, that the suicide rate among young people ages 15-24 was the same in [1993](#) as it was in [2023](#). The context in which youth are growing up may have as much or more impact on them than their use of social media. For instance, youth and teens [growing up in poverty](#) or otherwise socioeconomically disadvantaged develop mental health problems at rates two to three times greater than their peers growing up in less financially-stressed households. The pandemic and surrounding socioeconomic trends have impacted the lives of youth in many ways. [As of May 2022](#), **it was estimated that more than over 216,000 children in the US lost a caregiver who lived with them to COVID-19**. These losses didn't impact all groups of children equally. Children of color were twice as likely as white children to lose a caregiver to COVID, leaving some communities of adults left to raise children with less help, while themselves disproportionately suffering long-lasting physical, mental, and financial impacts.

## Adverse Childhood Experiences

[Decades of research](#) have shown us that some experiences in childhood can disrupt a child's emotional and psychological development and lead to increased behavioral and learning problems. These experiences are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, and cover a broad range of experiences which have the potential to undermine a child's sense of safety, security, and connection. It seems the wide-ranging impacts of the COVID pandemic impacted [some populations more than others](#), often compounding ACEs for some youth.

### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) & The Pandemic

**Compounding Impact: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the burden of ACEs for many youth.**

**The 2.5x Risk Factor: Youth with four or more ACEs were over 2.5 times as likely to experience a new ACE within a single year** ([Fall 2020 to Spring 2021](#)).

**Widespread Prevalence:** [3 out of 4 high school students](#) surveyed by the CDC in 2021 reported experiencing at least one ACE during the pandemic.

**Mental Health Correlation:** Students reporting a new ACE within 12 months were significantly more likely to experience:

- Persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness.
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

**The Gradient Effect:** There is a direct correlation: **the more ACEs a youth experiences, the higher the likelihood of poor mental health outcomes.**

## Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Populations

[Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey](#) (ABES), administered nationally January to June 2021 shows the following:

**Emotional Abuse: 55% of students** reported experiencing emotional abuse by an adult in their home during the pandemic.

- This rose to **66%** for non-Hispanic Multiracial students
- This rose to **76%** for students identifying as LGBTQ+

**Sexual Violence: 21.8%** of female high school students in NC reported experiencing sexual violence in 2021—a **sharp increase from the <17% reported in previous years**

**Food Insecurity: 25%** of all students experienced hunger during the pandemic, with significantly higher rates among marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

\*These are all ACEs which have the potential to increase mental health problems and disrupt social and emotional development.

Longstanding issues of inequity are also potentially impacting greater and greater numbers of youth, as the demographics of the nation's schools change. Approximately half of all student respondents in a [nationally representative study](#) of the 2020-2021 school population were members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Approximately one in four identified their sexual identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or other. This is significant in an age where many states, [including North Carolina](#), have been [passing new laws](#) restricting the discussion of issues relating to race, gender and sexuality in schools, leaving students and staff with far fewer opportunities and less guidance for fostering a sense of belonging, understanding, and trust across lines of social difference. **The [CDC has found](#) that approximately a third of youth perceive themselves as having experienced racism at school, and that these youth report higher rates of poor mental health.**



### What does it all mean?

**Underneath the behaviors, youth and their families are struggling. This doesn't excuse problematic behaviors, but it offers clues as to what youth need from the adults and systems around them.**



## Key Factors Undermining Student Engagement:

### The Trust Gap



A significant [negative impact on trust](#) between students, families, teachers, and administrators.

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### Compounding Stressors ([Lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic](#))



Increased social media influence over nuanced human dialogue.



Rising rates of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences).



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

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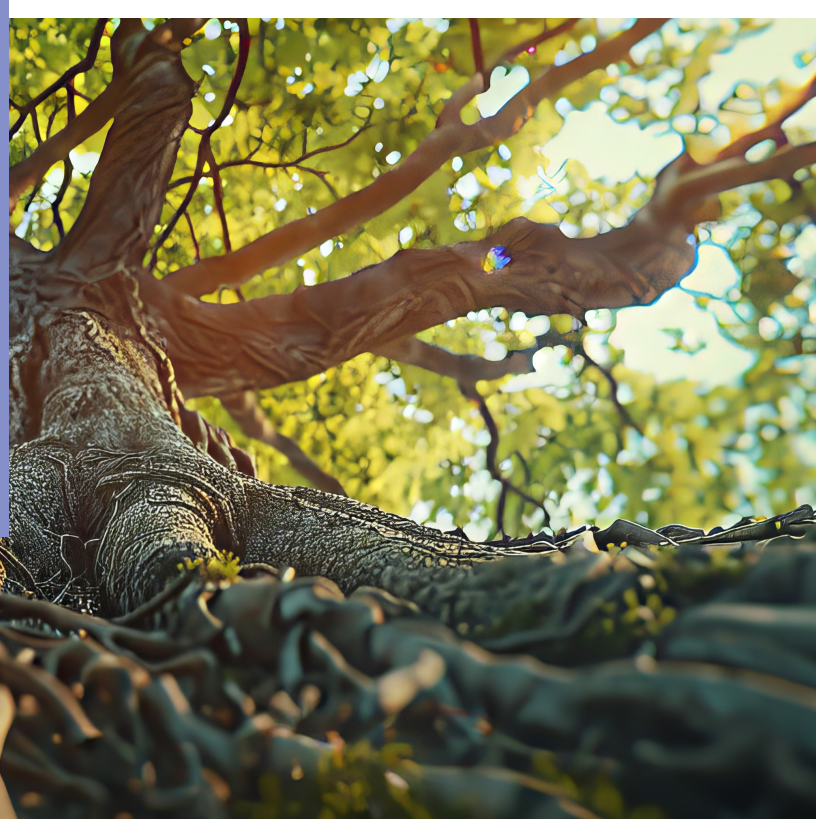
### *The Bottom Line*



**Restoring trust may be the single most overlooked factor for increasing student safety and positive engagement.**



# Trust as the Foundation for Discipline



A large body of research has looked at the role that trust plays in student outcomes. Specifically, relational trust is considered to have a significant influence on a whole host of factors influencing behavior and academic outcomes in schools.

**Trust can be defined as**

**“the willingness to be vulnerable to another person, group, or organization based on the perception that the trusted party is benevolent, competent, and behaves with integrity.”**

For [relational trust](#) to exist in a school system, four key components must be present:

| Pillar          | What it looks like in practice                                              |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respect         | Genuinely valuing the opinions and perspectives of others.                  |
| Personal Regard | Showing care for others that extends beyond basic role requirements.        |
| Competence      | The ability to rely on others to fulfill their specific responsibilities.   |
| Integrity       | A visible, consistent alignment between a person's words and their actions. |

# Trust, Behavior, and Relationships

This sense of trust, not surprisingly, is [critical](#) for building high-performing relationships that leverage strong academic achievement and positive student outcomes. And [many studies](#) support the conclusion that **“high levels of learning are unlikely to occur without a nurturing environment that includes trust.”**

**This is because students who feel safe being vulnerable with their teachers and peers are more likely to take the emotional risks involved with asking clarifying questions and asking for help.**

**Students who trust their teachers are also more likely to invest in and feel motivated toward the goals teachers set for them.** In research, [student trust in their teachers](#) is strongly related to engagement, such as a greater focus on academics and a greater value placed on school.

Key to the topic of this brief, research on trust and behavior shows that students who see their teachers and schools as [trustworthy authority figures](#) are more likely to cooperate with requests and directions, and are less likely to defy rules or exhibit problem behaviors.

This connection between trust and cooperation is, again, not surprising, as the recognized legitimacy of any authority figure is dependent on a perception of trustworthiness - that following an authority's directions will be to one's benefit.

**Even more critically, research suggests this trust in authority is not built through power, but through relationships.**

Specifically, when teachers invest in relationship-building, such as getting to know students personally and building emotional connections with them, their students are more likely to report [trust in their use of authority](#). Moreover, trust in teachers and in peers is strongly connected with [students' sense of safety](#), belonging, and engagement with school. Overall, when students have higher levels of trust for their teachers and their schools, they are less likely to engage in problem behavior and more likely to engage in cooperative behavior. This improvement in student behavior and reduced energy spent on defense and compliance also has positive impacts on academic outcomes, such as [GPA and graduation rates](#). 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 opposite is true, as well, in that lower levels of trust can increase behavioral problems and resources spent enforcing compliance, and reduce student engagement and achievement. [Students who don't feel trust for their teacher](#) may feel the need to invest energy in self-protection rather than in the type of academic risk-taking that drives learning and achievement. And even for students who don't actively resist and defy authority, they may instead passively disengage and become inattentive. This reaction can further [a negative cycle](#) in which students disengage, and teachers lower their expectations, and/or in which students further perceive their teachers' disciplinary responses as having hostile intent, and thus react with greater aggression or defiance.

## Trust, Behavior, and Relationships (Continued)

The influence of trust vs mistrust between students and their teachers and school administrators is often greater for students who already fear and expect mistreatment, often due to a history of trauma, or of [discrimination](#) and misunderstanding related to [race](#), ethnicity, culture, economic status, disability, gender, sexuality, etc. It might be less likely for these students to assume trustworthiness on the part of their authority figures, and without intentional trust-building, student-teacher relationships may already be fraught with mistrust, misunderstanding and conflict.

Trust between students and their teachers is not the only area where trust or a lack of it has the potential to either accelerate or undermine student discipline and achievement. Decades of [research](#) have found that **school leadership and climate characterized by authenticity, openness, collegiality, and high but achievable goals support trust among colleagues and in school leadership, which is positively related to school effectiveness and student achievement.**

Teachers' level of trust in students and in parents, which has been found to be very strongly related to each other, has also been found to be an important factor impacting school effectiveness.

**Multiple [studies](#) have found that [teachers' trust](#) in students and parents are stronger predictors of student achievement than students' socio-economic status.**

Studies have highlighted some [factors impacting teachers' trust in students](#), suggesting that when school leaders engage in conversations with teachers that help them humanize their students by making sense of their behavior in the context of the social environment, and engage teachers in creating a social environment that supports the psychological needs of students (such as their sense of agency, connectedness and self-efficacy), teachers' trust in their students increase. It's also been found that when teachers' trust in students and families increases, so does their own sense of [self-efficacy](#), which itself has been found to have a **strong influence on student achievement and teacher well-being and retention.**

Since trust is inherently about relationships, it's not surprising that it's a two-way street. **Just as teachers' trust in students and their families impacts school performance, so does the trust that parents have in teachers, as this is strongly related to how much students trust teachers, and impacts the levels of trust and self-efficacy that teachers have as well.** The extent to which parents trust their teachers, principal, and school as a whole directly influences how strongly students identify with school, as well as the collective efficacy of teachers. Through these and surely many other ways, parents' trust in schools can significantly contribute to or detract from a positive school climate and sense of staff and student morale.

## The Challenges with "Harsh" Approaches to Discipline

Since effective discipline relies on trusting relationships to legitimize authority, teach youth skills of internal control, and uphold a sense of accountability, the reports of increasing and persistent problems with behavior in schools very likely speak to the uphill battles schools are facing to build trust with their colleagues, with families, and with students. And **understanding trust as the crux of discipline should give us pause before jumping to adopt policies that seek simply to control behavior by punishing or removing students who aren't "behaving."**

Clearly, problematic behavior has added to the strain and stress felt by educators, students, and the whole education system since the pandemic.

**Teachers are often left with what seems an *impossible task* - to address the problematic behavior of some students while also continuing to teach whole classes.**

For some, the solution seems to be to give "[power back](#)" to teachers to remove students from the classroom as they see fit. However, we already know from experience the [impact](#) these types of approaches have. Rather than effectively changing behavior or helping students succeed and achieve in school, such policies further [erode trust](#) within school communities, while funneling struggling students into a [school-to-prison pipeline](#). 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.

**While children and adolescents need the structure and safety that clear expectations, rules, choices, and consequences provide, they also need schools where they feel known, understood, welcome, and trusted.**

In order to meet their mental health needs and develop skills for resilience, they need regular, supported opportunities to make genuine connections with adults and peers. And since all forms of learning, including academic learning, require social and emotional skills, schools are valuable places where youth can learn, practice and apply skills for managing emotions and responding to life's challenges and relational conflicts in healthy and helpful ways. Meeting such a wide variety of students' needs and helping them and their families engage in practices that promote health, learning and academic success, is a lot on schools and their staff, however, and they can't do it without robust resources and support.



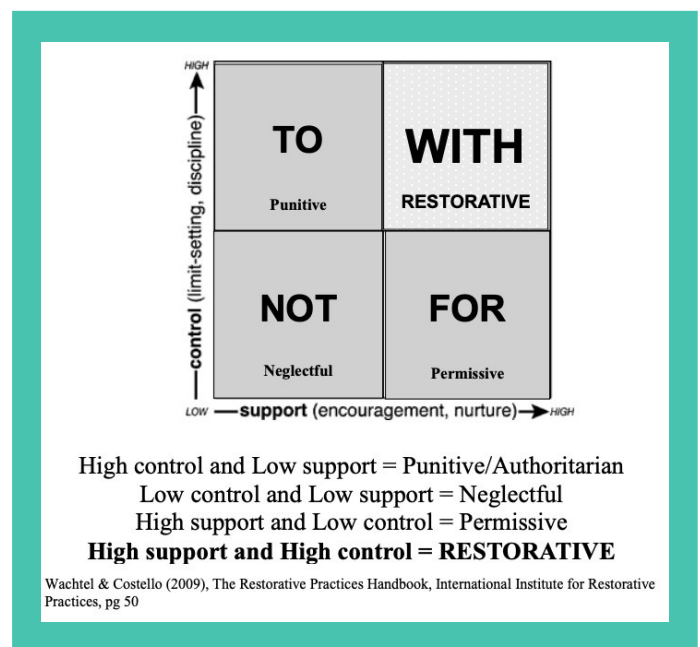
## Discipline Approaches that Build Trust

In this quickly changing social landscape, where school staffing and budgets have been under growing strain, it's been hard for schools and their teachers to adapt in ways that allow for the building and sustaining of trust. Yet, while many major shifts and trends have been broadly and concerningly eroding trust in public schools, and between schools and homes, **there is hope**. There is a lot of evidence that intentional practices on the part of schools, and the types of local and state policies that can support these practices, can help foster the type of strong, trusting, collaborative relationships between schools and families that are key for students to thrive in school and beyond. And there are relational ways that schools can approach discipline that promote both trust and safety.

Much of the peer-reviewed research on the topic of effective school discipline has consistently illuminated several [key aspects](#) which are critical to supporting student success in terms of safety, behavior, engagement and achievement.

### Effective discipline approaches:

1. are **proactive** about building trusting relationships and clarity around expectations for behavior
2. take an **“authoritative”** approach pairing high expectations with high levels of support
3. **value students’ voices and agency** in determining agreements for behavior and in problem-solving and repairing when behavior becomes problematic.



Source: [Restorative Resources](#)



**When these approaches are coordinated consistently and globally in a school environment, [research shows](#) that students spend more time in class, are more cooperative in their behavior, and are disciplined more proportionately across socio-economic differences.**

## Discipline Approaches that Build Trust (Continued)

There are a number of discipline frameworks which take this proactive, [student-centered approach](#). Among those that have been researched most rigorously include [Restorative Practices](#) (RP) and School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports ([SWPBIS](#)). Restorative Practices focuses on using intentional language and structured communication strategies to proactively foster high levels of trust and understanding, and to increase reflection, problem-solving, and accountability for change and repair when behavior causes harm. SWPBIS focuses on proactively naming, teaching and reinforcing behaviors which build a supportive culture and skills for success, grounded in explicit, shared values. Students who demonstrate a need are engaged in reflection and problem-solving, and/or receive additional supports for building trust, understanding, and social and emotional skills. While there are a number of similar discipline approaches which have demonstrated similar benefits, we will use RP and SWPBIS as illustrative examples for the purpose of this brief.



Combined, Restorative Practices and SWPBIS detail the kinds of actions schools can take to both build the relationships and conditions that support prosocial behaviors and academic achievement, and respond to problematic behaviors in ways that build safety, trust, and accountability. While both of these frameworks have important things in common, including a persistent focus on clear and explicit communication around values and culture, tiered support according to need, and high levels of feedback and reflection to shape patterns of behavior, each framework separately includes components which are especially powerful when combined and aligned.

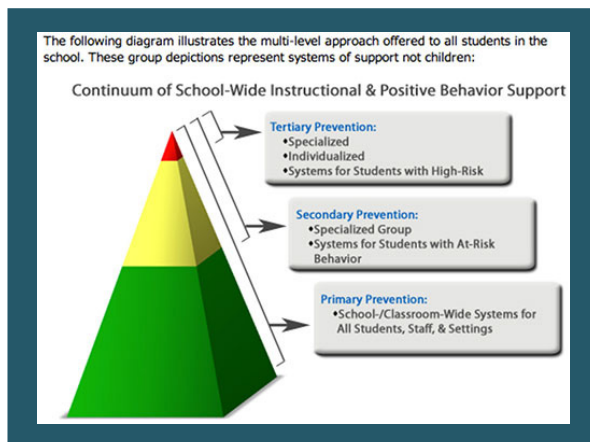


Source: [Fair Oaks Elementary](#).

## Discipline Approaches that Build Trust (Continued)

The components of trust-building and effective discipline that [SWPBIS](#) coordinates and exemplifies as an evidence-based framework:

|                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Proactive and explicit teaching of values-based expectations</b>                                                                                                       | This ensures that students and staff are very clear not only about what behaviors are approved and successful within the school culture, but also why. Expected behaviors are taught, practiced, and reinforced - positively, consistently, and in context. When done well, this proactive approach supports a sense of clarity, fairness, safety, predictability, connectedness, and congruence - increasing trust.                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Teaching and practicing social and emotional skills that are important both to students' healthy development and their success within the school environment</b>       | By proactively and explicitly teaching values-based expectations and the behaviors that meet them, students have many opportunities throughout each school day to learn and practice the social and emotional skills that help build trust.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Offering tiered interventions and supports to address the needs of individual students via an approach that is sustainable for a school to coordinate and maintain</b> | By making sure all students are proactively and explicitly taught how to create a positive school culture and succeed in the school environment, SWPBIS maximizes the number of students whose needs are met at the school's base level of operation. By offering additional interventions that can meet students' needs for more or individualized supports, schools can keep building trust with all their students <a href="#">and families</a> , and reduce misunderstandings and power-struggles that can feed discipline concerns. |
| <b>Collaborative, data-based assessment, problem-solving, and decision-making</b>                                                                                         | By regularly gathering and analyzing data about students' behaviors, skills, progress, and the interventions offered to them, schools can identify students' needs more quickly and accurately, engage in more productive and collaborative discussions, better align their interventions with students' needs, and make adjustments as needed to support progress and success.                                                                                                                                                          |



Source: [City of Burlington Schools](#)

This tiered, positive, systematic, proactive approach to building up students' self-discipline and shaping their adaptive behavioral strategies fosters a culture with the type of [communication](#), [understanding](#), responsiveness, and collaboration that strengthens both trust and safety.

## Discipline Approaches that Build Trust (Continued)

The components of trust-building and effective discipline that [Restorative Practices](#) coordinates and exemplifies as an evidence-based framework:

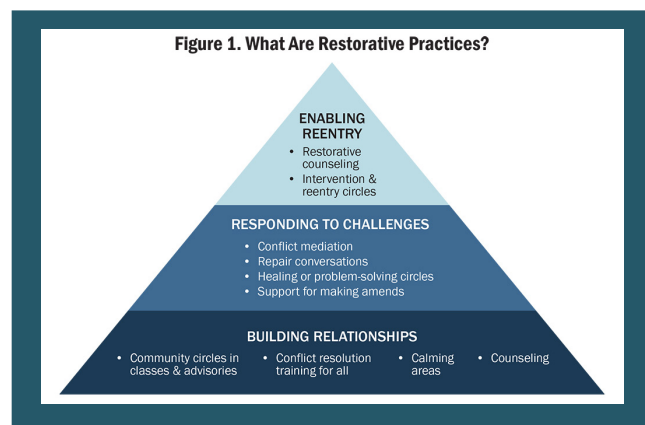
# Restorative Practices

|                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Intentional use of language</b>                                                                                              | When implementing Restorative Practices, staff use “affective” language that conveys values and respect, fosters a positive and scholarly identity for students that can guide behaviors rather than vice versa, and clearly communicates the impacts of students’ behaviors - positive and negative. This builds trust by centering relationships and students’ options for what impacts they want to have.                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Regular, structured opportunities for classroom communication through community-building circles</b>                         | Community-building circles, as a part of Restorative Practices, create consistent opportunities for students and educators to get to know each other and reflect together in ways that build <a href="#">trust and connection</a> , as well as build social communication skills, all of which forms a critical foundation for effective discipline and problem-solving.                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Structured, reflective conversations about conflict, harm caused by problematic behaviors, and accountability for repair</b> | Restorative Practices offers several strategies that, when used routinely by staff and students, help everyone build valuable skills around navigating difficult conversations, developing shared understandings, and taking ownership over the consequences of their actions. A foundation of trust is important for such strategies to be successful. At the same time, practicing such skills can solve problems, resolve conflicts, repair relationships, and lead to changed behavior that strengthens <a href="#">trust</a> and reduces future conflict. |
| <b>“<a href="#">Fair process</a>” decision-making</b>                                                                           | What defines a “fair process” of decision-making is 1) those affected by a future decision are meaningfully involved in discussing options and providing input, 2) the process and reasoning behind decisions are explained to all stakeholders in ways that address their input, and 3) expectations and consequences flowing from decisions are made clear to all involved. Fair process is an authoritative leadership approach that builds <a href="#">trust</a> through open communication, understanding, and respect.                                   |

### What are Restorative Practices?



Source: [Learning Policy Institute](#)



## Discipline Approaches that Build Trust (Continued)

Restorative Practices and SWPBIS each share core elements of effective discipline, such as listening, building trust, authoritative leadership pairing warm caring with firm structure, shared problem-solving, teaching accountability through reflection, and pairing choice with outcomes, and leveraging adult behaviors to teach students internal control vs seeking to exert external control over student behavior. Combined, the two frameworks offer a set of evidence-based strategies that staff can train in and coordinate into a systematic approach around which schools can build their team structures and policies to sustainably build positive school cultures that effectively increase safety and achievement for all.

**Research** has demonstrated that Restorative Practices and SWPBIS each play a role in reducing problematic behaviors and discipline issues, as well as improving safety, mental health, and academic achievement.

*Restorative Practices*, in particular, has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the racial disparity in discipline rates and the achievement gap, likely due in part to decreasing [the racial trust gap](#) in schools.



It is important to note that schools cannot expect to implement just a few of the practices above, or to use them sometimes or for a temporary period of time, and still achieve the hoped-for results. **Many studies have shown that fidelity to these approaches significantly affects their impact.** Yet it is so common for schools and districts to claim the use of each of these discipline approaches, while not implementing them to fidelity. There are many valid reasons for this, as each of these approaches requires significant people, time, energy, and expertise to be done effectively. Therefore, it is critical to discuss not only what schools need to do to create disciplined environments, but the conditions districts and states need to create for schools to be successful in their efforts.

A number of research studies have evaluated the resources, structures, and practices that individual schools need from their districts and states to successfully implement student-centered discipline frameworks such as SWPBIS and Restorative Practices. **These studies have found that when schools have the following supports, they are better able to implement effective practices and achieve positive outcomes, including increased safety and academic performance.**



# Implementing Student-Centered Discipline with Fidelity

Recommendations for Schools and Districts



**To maximize the benefits of these frameworks, we recommend the following steps when selecting and implementing a student-centered discipline framework.**

|                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Build readiness to engage in what really works</b>                         | Stakeholders across the school system and community must understand why the chosen approach works, be ready to adopt a student-centered lens toward discipline, and engage in the open reflection, patience, and emotional regulation that teaching self-discipline requires. Most of all, schools, districts, and beyond need to shift out of a <a href="#">culture of control</a> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Use a collaborative, data-based, fair-process decision-making approach</b> | Unsurprisingly, <a href="#">research</a> has shown that when staff are trained and told to do something they do not believe is relevant or effective, the practices are unlikely to be well implemented. Investing the time and resources required to build agreement among stakeholders from the beginning about the need for change and what approach to adopt is far more likely to result in effective implementation and successful outcomes. <b>This can look like having an interdisciplinary team in charge of looking at data and evidence-based approaches, and sharing their findings with leadership, staff, teachers, families, even students, and other community stakeholders for their input before decisions are made.</b> |

**To maximize the benefits of these frameworks, we recommend the following steps when selecting and implementing a student-centered discipline framework.**

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| <b>Assess the resources and structures needed</b>                    | <b>Effective implementation of student-centered discipline practices requires teams of staff who are resourced and trained to analyze data, engage in collaborative decision-making, and communicate with stakeholders in a two-way fashion.</b> All staff at all levels of implementing and maintaining a systemic framework of practices (district and school teams, coordinators, coaches, administrators, support services staff, and teachers) need not only high-quality training in selected frameworks and how they align, but <b>ongoing training, coaching, reflection opportunities, peer-learning opportunities, and technical assistance.</b> The time, staffing, structures, and other resources required for these supports need to be in place prior to training and the start of full-scale implementation. |
| <b>Invest fully in holistic, human-centered, systemic approaches</b> | Student-centered discipline approaches are not only effective at increasing trust, safety, and performance in schools, but they also <a href="#">take more time and resources</a> to effectively implement than the typical exclusionary methods. <b>The good news is that effective implementation of these approaches <a href="#">reduces costs</a> and <a href="#">reaps a return</a> in the long run.</b> Effective discipline requires skilled staff, who require <a href="#">competitive compensation</a> and reasonable work requirements to be recruited and retained.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Build, invest in, and maintain strong relationships</b>           | Educators have long known that relationships are important to learning and thriving, and <a href="#">research</a> emphatically supports this. <b>Student-centered discipline is effective, in part, because it helps build trusting relationships and then leverages those relationships to help kids learn the skills they need for success, including academic achievement.</b> For educators to engage in effective relationship-building practices consistently with students, they need to experience and see those practices modeled from the top down as part of their own workplace culture.                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

To maximize the benefits of these frameworks, we recommend the following steps when selecting and implementing a student-centered discipline framework.

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| <p><b>Collect and share high-quality data that illuminates a whole picture</b></p> | <p><a href="#">Research</a> shows that, in order <b>to effectively implement a new, systemic set of practices, schools and districts need data that illuminates:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. stakeholder beliefs,</li> <li>2. educators’ proficiency,</li> <li>3. practice implementation,</li> <li>4. students’ experiences,</li> <li>5. policy and structural alignment, and</li> <li>6. outcomes.</li> </ol> <p>With access to this range of data, teams can better understand needs and obstacles and make decisions that improve implementation and impact. <b>It’s therefore important to have a data management system that is easy to use and gathers the data needed in a way that makes it easy to understand.</b></p> |
| <p><b>Communicate clearly and regularly with all stakeholders</b></p>              | <p>Schools and districts have so many jobs to do that even very effective practices can fall to the bottom of the priority pile. <b>To sustain quality implementation, teams need to communicate with one another and with stakeholders</b> (leaders, administrators, support staff, teachers, families, students, and other community members) in order to gather input and share information about what’s being done, why, and how it’s going, as well as how practices and policies align together toward strategic goals.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

## Steps:

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| <p><b>Build readiness to engage in what really works.</b></p> <p><b>Use a collaborative, data-based, fair-process decision-making approach.</b></p> <p><b>Assess the resources and structures needed.</b></p> <p><b>Invest fully in holistic, human-centered, systemic approaches.</b></p> | <p><b>Build, invest in, and maintain strong relationships.</b></p> <p><b>Collect and share high-quality data that illuminates a whole picture.</b></p> <p><b>Communicate clearly and regularly with all stakeholders.</b></p> |
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# Investing in Student-Centered Discipline:

## Recommendations for Policymakers



**Policymakers face the critical task of implementing policies and allocating funds to support educators and students in this area.**

We recommend the following:

- ▶ Consider the large field of research that points to student-centered discipline as the far more effective approach, and the reasons for this.
- ▶ Reflect individually and with colleagues on the ways student-centered discipline approaches help students learn and practice self-discipline, and the alignment of these with North Carolina’s [“Portrait of a Graduate.”](#)
- ▶ When changing or creating policies to address concerns, use a fair process approach that uses stakeholder input and other data to consider the human needs underlying behaviors, and explains policy decisions to stakeholders.
- ▶ Fully and equitably fund the true cost of high-quality, evidence-based, student-centered discipline frameworks, including the staffing resources, professional development, and data collection that districts and schools need in order to implement them with fidelity at all levels of the public school system. This includes adequate staffing in roles supporting [student mental health](#).

**We envision a North Carolina where our policymakers, district leaders, and school communities practice and experience the above on a daily basis, and in doing so can then watch all our state’s children grow and thrive in safe school environments, into the happy, successful adults and community members they can be.**