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Health Policy Brief

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School Discipline Practices Associated with Adolescent School Connectedness and Engagement

Susan H. Babey, Joelle Wolstein, Tara L. Becker, and AJ Scheitler

"School connectedness is associated with academic achievement as well as with healthy behaviors."

SUMMARY: A positive school climate is associated with both adolescent well-being and higher academic achievement. Feelings of school connectedness, civic engagement, and school discipline practices can all contribute to a positive school climate. This policy brief examines the association of school discipline practices with feelings of school connectedness and civic engagement. Adolescents attending schools with high suspension rates reported lower levels of school connectedness and of volunteering. In addition, greater feelings of school connectedness were associated with greater perceived safety at school, more volunteering, and fewer sick days. Latino teens and teens from low-income families reported lower levels of school connectedness, had lower rates of volunteering, and were more likely to attend a school with high suspension rates. Healthy youth development could be promoted through supporting strategies that improve school climates by increasing school connectedness, encouraging participation in civic activities (such as volunteering), and reducing suspension rates.

A positive school climate fosters youth development and has been associated with higher academic achievement and healthy behavioral outcomes for students.[1] School climate is a broad term that covers several aspects of the school environment, including safety, academic supports, social relationships, engagement, school connectedness, the physical environment, and the disciplinary environment. This policy brief will focus on three factors that impact school climate: student feelings of school connectedness, student civic engagement, and school discipline practices. Each of these aspects of the school environment can contribute to a positive school climate as well as to adolescent health and well-being. In addition, these factors can impact each other.

"School connectedness" refers to students' belief that adults and peers in the school care about them and their education.[2] School connectedness is associated with academic achievement as well as with healthy behaviors such as physical activity and reduced likelihood of risky behaviors such as smoking and the use of alcohol or drugs.[3,4] "Civic engagement" refers to individual or group actions intended to address issues of concern to the public and includes a range of activities, such as volunteering and participating in community or school activities. Previous research suggests that greater youth civic engagement is associated with positive adult outcomes that include better health and development indicators, higher levels of education, and higher income.[5] For example, volunteering is associated with better academic performance, reduced likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, and greater likelihood of attending college.[6,7]

The California Endowment

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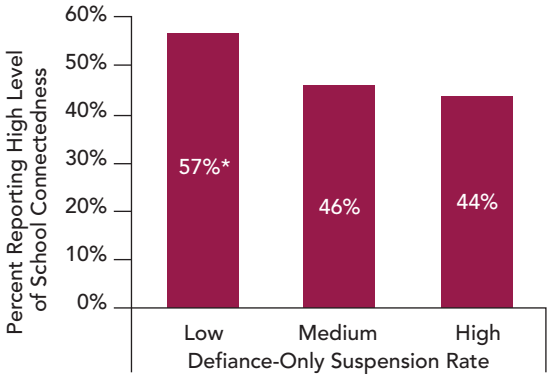
Exhibit 1

Percent of Adolescents Reporting High Level of Connectedness to School by Defiance-Only Suspension Rates, Ages 12-17, California, 2015-17



Source: 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey and 2015-16 California Department of Education Suspension Data

Statistically different from "High Defiance-Only Suspension Rate," *p<0.10

"Teens attending schools with low suspension rates were more likely to report high levels of school connectedness."

"School discipline" refers to the rules, policies, and practices used to manage student behavior. Discipline practices such as suspension or expulsion are considered exclusionary, since they remove students from their regular educational setting. These exclusionary discipline practices can negatively impact school climate. Specifically, a punitive disciplinary environment—including more frequent use of exclusionary discipline practices such as out-of-school suspensions—is associated with lower ratings of school climate as well as lower levels of school connectedness. [8, 9] In addition, racial gaps in out-of-school suspensions are linked to lower feelings of connectedness among students.[10] Furthermore, lower suspension rates have been associated with higher academic achievement.[11]

Using data from adolescents ages 12-17 who responded to the 2015, 2016, or 2017 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) along with school-level data on suspension rates from the California Department of Education, this policy brief examines the association between school discipline practices and both feelings of school connectedness and civic engagement among adolescents. School-level suspension rates are used as indicators of school discipline practices.

The brief then examines the link between school connectedness and feelings of safety and engagement at school. The brief also describes race and income differences in school connectedness, as well as demographic differences in the likelihood of attending a school with higher suspension rates. Measures are described in more detail under "Data Source and Methods" at the end of this policy brief.

School Connectedness Associated with School Discipline Practices

School connectedness was associated with school discipline practices as measured by school-level suspension rates (Exhibit 1). Two types of suspension rates were examined: total suspension rate (which includes all suspensions, for any reason, at that school), and defiance-only suspension rate. Defiance-only suspensions are suspensions for nonviolent disruptive behaviors such as violating the dress code, failing to follow directions, or talking back. Though disruptive, these behaviors generally do not pose a safety risk to teachers or other students, and this type of suspension is therefore administered in a more discretionary manner. As a result, these kinds of behaviors disproportionately result in defiance suspensions and expulsions for students of color and students with disabilities for the same behavior. Teens attending schools with low total suspension rates were more likely to report high levels of school connectedness than teens attending schools with high suspension rates (53% vs. 44%), although this difference was not statistically significant. The difference was even more pronounced when examining the association between school connectedness and defiance-only suspension rates, with 57% of those at schools with low defiance-only suspension rates reporting high levels of school connectedness, compared to 44% of those at schools with high defiance-only suspension rates.

Volunteering in Past Year Associated with School Discipline Practices

Volunteering, a common type of civic engagement, was also associated with school

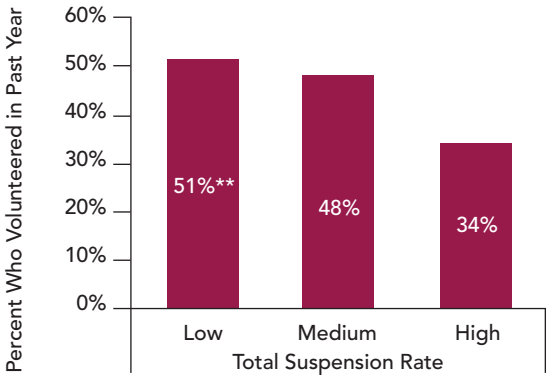
discipline practices. Higher suspension rates were associated with less volunteering (Exhibit 2): More than half (51%) of teens attending schools with low suspension rates had volunteered in the past year, compared to just 34% of teens at schools with high suspension rates. Volunteering during the past year did not differ significantly by defiance-only suspension rates, although observed differences were in the same direction (48% and 43% for schools with low and high suspension rates, respectively).

Latino, Low-Income, and Rural Teens More Likely to Attend Schools with High Suspension Rates

School-level suspension rates differed by income, race/ethnicity, and urban/rural area of residence (Exhibit 3). Latino teens were

Exhibit 2

Percent of Adolescents Who Volunteered in Past Year by Total Suspension Rate, Ages 12-17, California 2015-17

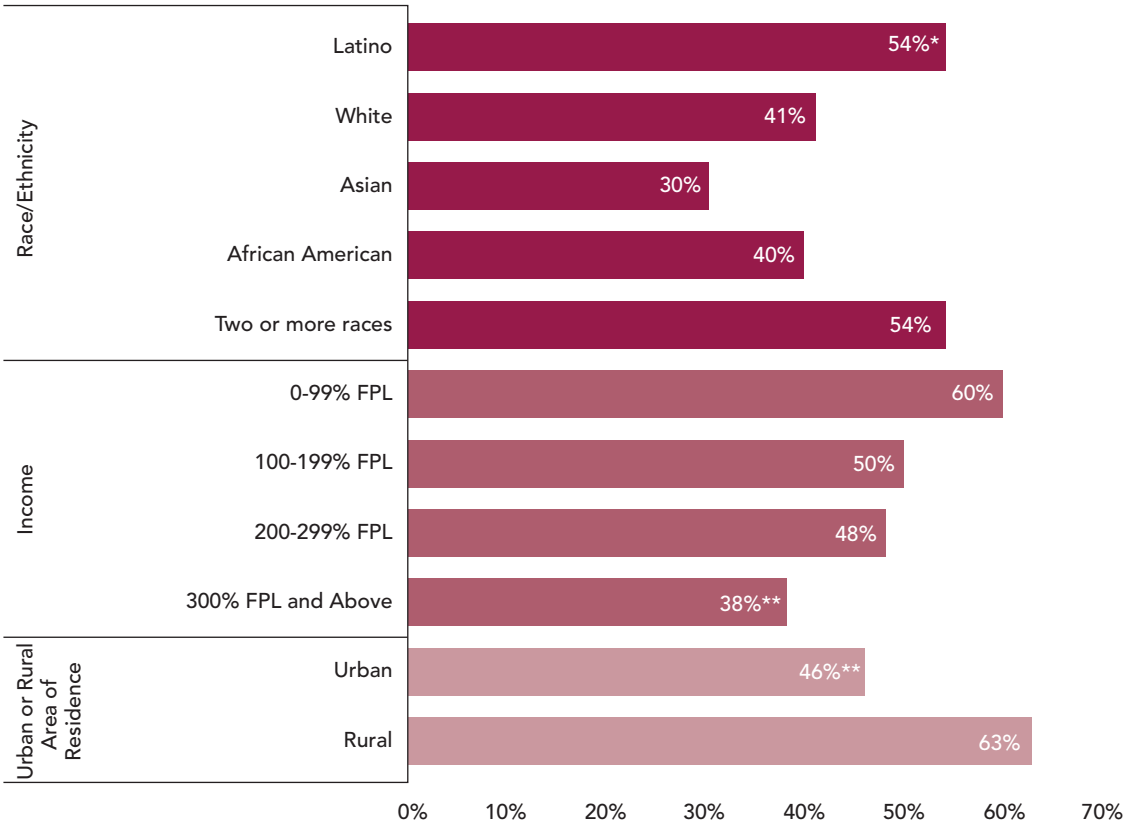


Source: 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey and 2015-16 California Department of Education Suspension Data

Statistically different from "High Total Suspension Rate," **p<0.05

Exhibit 3

Percent of Adolescents Attending Schools with High Total Suspension Rates by Demographic Characteristics, Ages 12-17, California 2015-17



Source: 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey and 2015-16 California Department of Education Suspension Data

Statistically different from "White" for Race/Ethnicity, from "0-99% FPL" for Income, and from "Rural" for Area of Residence, *p<0.10, **p<0.05

Note: Income was measured as a percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). The FPL is an economic guideline that accounts for household size and is used to determine income eligibility for public programs, such as food stamps. In 2016, the FPL (100% FPL) was $11,880 for a single-person household, $16,020 for a two-person household, and $24,300 for a four-person household.

Exhibit 4

Percent of Adolescents Reporting High Levels of School Connectedness and Volunteering in Past Year, Ages 12-17, California 2015-17

	High Level of School Connectedness	Volunteered in Past Year
Race/Ethnicity		
Latino	46%**	34%**
White	64%	66%
Asian	50%	53%
African American	66%	47%
Two or More Races	56%	59%
Income		
0-99% FPL	48%**	34%**
100-199% FPL	49%*	37%**
200-399	51%	52%
400% and Above	62%	58%
Total	**53%**	**47%**

Source: 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey

Statistically different from "White" for Race/Ethnicity and from "400% FPL and Above" for Income, *p<0.10, **p<0.05

Note: Income was measured as percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). The FPL is an economic guideline that accounts for household size and is used to determine income eligibility for public programs, such as food stamps. In 2016, the FPL (100% FPL) was $11,880 for a single-person household, $16,020 for a two-person household, and $24,300 for a four-person household.

"Adolescents from low-income families were more likely to go to schools with higher suspension rates."

more likely than white teens to be in schools with high suspension rates (54% and 41%, respectively). Adolescents from low-income families were more likely to go to schools with higher suspension rates: 60% of teens from families with incomes below the poverty line attended schools with high suspension rates, compared to 38% of those from families with incomes of 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and above. Nearly two-thirds of adolescents living in rural areas (63%) attended schools with high suspension rates, compared to 46% of those living in urban areas.

Latino and Low-Income Teens Less Likely to Report High Levels of School Connectedness and Volunteering in Past Year

Overall, 53% of California adolescents reported high levels of school connectedness, and 47% reported having volunteered in the past year. Levels of school connectedness and volunteering in the past year among California adolescents varied with income and race/ethnicity (Exhibit 4). Less than half (46%) of Latino adolescents reported high levels of school connectedness, compared to 64% of white adolescents. Latino teens were also less likely than white teens to have volunteered in the past year (34% and 66%, respectively). Adolescents from low-income families were less likely to report high levels of connectedness and having volunteered in the past year. About half (48%) of teens from families with incomes below the poverty line reported high levels of connectedness, compared to 62% of those from families with incomes of 400% FPL and above. The percent of teens who volunteered in the past year was lower among those with family incomes below the poverty line than among those with family incomes of 400% FPL and above (34% and 58%, respectively). Levels of connectedness and volunteering did not vary significantly by gender or urban/rural area.

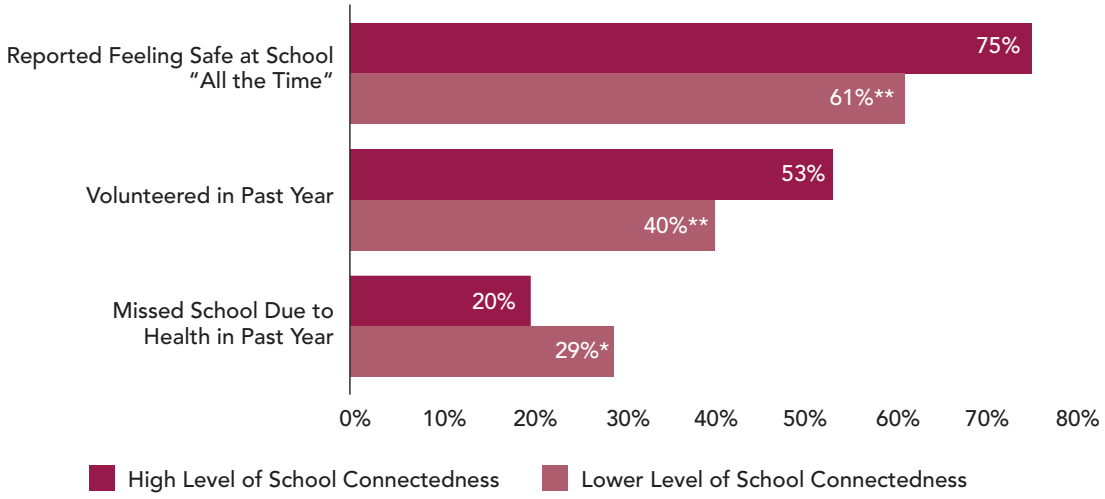
Higher Levels of School Connectedness Linked with Feeling Safe at School, Volunteering, and Attendance

A feeling of school connectedness is a protective social factor that can help promote adolescent health and well-being. This is evidenced in the current analysis, which found that feelings of school connectedness were associated with perceived safety at school, volunteering, and fewer sick days (Exhibit 5). Teens who reported high levels of school connectedness were more likely than those with low levels to report feeling safe at school all the time (75% vs. 61%). Teens reporting higher levels of school connectedness were more likely than those reporting lower levels to have volunteered in the past year (53% vs. 40%) and less likely to have missed school due to health in past year (20% vs. 29%).

Discussion and Recommendations

Adolescents attending schools with high suspension rates reported lower levels of school connectedness and lower rates of

Adolescent Indicators of Safety and Engagement by School Connectedness, Ages 12-17, California 2015-17 **Exhibit 5**



Source: 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey
Statistically different from "High School Connectedness," *p<0.10, **p<0.05

volunteering. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that a school's discipline practices are associated with other aspects of school climate, including connectedness and engagement. The proportion of adolescents who reported high levels of school connectedness was nearly 30% higher among those attending schools with low suspension rates than among those attending schools with high suspension rates (57% and 44%, respectively). The percent of adolescents who volunteered was 50% higher among those attending schools with low suspension rates than among those at schools with high suspension rates (51% and 34%, respectively).

Previous research suggests that school connectedness and participating in activities like volunteering can serve as protective social factors that provide a number of benefits to youth, as well as helping them avoid behaviors that put them at risk for adverse health outcomes, such as smoking or drug use. This relationship was observed in our findings as well – greater feelings of school connectedness were associated with greater perceived safety at school, more volunteering, and fewer sick days. It's important to note that these findings provide evidence of relationships between aspects of school climate (connectedness, engagement, and discipline practices), but that these associations likely work in both directions. For example, lower suspension rates can contribute to increased feelings of school connectedness, but increased feelings of school connectedness can also contribute to lower suspension rates.

School connectedness, volunteering, and attending a school with high suspension rates all varied with race/ethnicity and income. Latino teens and teens from low-income families were more likely than white teens and teens from high-income families to attend a school with high suspension rates, and less likely to report volunteering and feeling high levels of school connectedness. Despite recent declines in suspension rates among all race groups in California, racial differences in the likelihood of being suspended persist.[11] Research suggests that larger racial differences in suspensions are associated with lower feelings of connectedness among students.[10] In addition, adolescents living in rural areas were more likely to attend schools with high suspension rates. This pattern of results indicates that Latino teens and teens from

"Greater feelings of school connectedness were associated with greater perceived safety at school, more volunteering, and fewer sick days."

"Strategies to increase school connectedness and increase participation in civic activities among youth could help promote healthy development."

low-income families are at particular risk of experiencing the negative consequences of a lack of school connectedness and civic engagement and of attending schools more likely to engage in exclusionary discipline practices. Increasing the level of school connectedness among these groups and providing them with more opportunities and support for volunteering could also help reduce disparities in youth well-being.

Strategies to increase school connectedness and increase participation in civic activities, such as volunteering, among youth could help to promote healthy development. These strategies could include:

- ***Strengthening feelings of school connectedness, especially among low-income youth and youth of color.*** Increasing feelings of school connectedness may help promote volunteering, improve feelings of safety at school, and contribute to fewer sick days. Policies encouraging schools to incorporate strategies for increasing the extent to which students feel connected to school may promote the development and implementation of such strategies and lead to increases in this protective social factor. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer strategies for increasing feelings of school connectedness.[4] Schools can help increase feelings of connectedness by (1) developing decision-making processes that facilitate engagement by students, families, staff, and the community; (2) providing opportunities for family involvement in school life; and (3) providing support and professional development for teachers and staff. For example, school administrators can solicit feedback from teachers and staff to inform their efforts to improve school climate. They can also engage staff, parents, students, and community members in the development of school policies and the planning of school activities.

- ***Encouraging schools to move away from exclusionary discipline practices in favor of practices that are consistent and fair and that contribute to a positive school climate.*** Often referred to as "restorative justice practices," these approaches create a positive school climate and address student behavior by prioritizing belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and accountability over punishment. For example, the Oakland Unified School District implemented a restorative justice program that resulted in a reduced racial gap in suspension rates as well as improved school climate.[12] These kinds of practices are often used as alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and therefore help to reduce suspension rates. The number of suspensions in California schools declined considerably between 2011 and 2017.[13] However, racial gaps in suspension rates remain, due in large part to the much greater likelihood of suspension among students of color than among white students for the same behavior.[14] In addition, suspension rates are higher at rural schools.[15] Our analysis also indicated that adolescents living in rural areas were more likely to attend schools with high suspension rates. These kinds of differences in suspension rates can contribute to a poor school climate and lower levels of school connectedness. Reducing suspension rates and closing racial and income gaps in these rates may contribute to increased feelings of connectedness to school.

- ***Offering volunteer opportunities and/or connections to community service opportunities.*** Schools and communities can offer volunteer opportunities targeted at students and can facilitate connections between students and community service opportunities. For example, studies have shown stronger feelings of connectedness and other positive academic outcomes among students who volunteer as mentors as well as among those engaged in student-designed healthy school environment initiatives.[16, 17]

- ***Encouraging schools to emphasize the importance of creating positive relationships among students, as well as***

between teachers and students. Fostering positive relationships can lead to increased connectedness to school. This, in turn, can improve academic performance and reduce sick days. In addition, the literature suggests that finding a positive role model can assist with learning and motivation and also promotes positive engagement in and out of school.[5] Fostering positive relationships between teachers and students provides additional opportunities for teachers to serve as this type of positive role model. Schools should ensure that teachers have adequate time, resources, and training to develop positive relationships with their students.

Data Source and Methods

This policy brief presents data from the 2015-17 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS). We used data collected in interviews with 2,042 adolescents, drawn from every county in the state. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog, although 76% of adolescents responded to the survey in English. School connectedness was measured by responses to a series of five questions. Adolescents were asked, "How true is it that there is a teacher or other adult at school who really cares about you, notices if you're not there, listens to you, tells you when you are doing a good job, and expects you to do your best?" Responses to these questions ranged from 1, for not at all true, to 4, for very much true. These responses were averaged to create a composite variable with values ranging from 1 to 4, where higher values indicate higher levels of connectedness to school.

For analyses presented in this brief, school connectedness was divided into two categories, with values above 3.5 considered high and those below 3.5 considered low. Volunteering was measured by asking: "In the past 12 months, have you done any volunteer work or community service that you haven't been paid for?" Adolescents self-reported whether they felt safe at school all the time, most of the time, some of the time, or none of the time; how many school days they missed because of health; and what race/ethnicity they were. In addition, CHIS asked adolescents what school they attend. This information was used to link CHIS data with school-level data on suspension rates available from the California Department of Education (CDE) from the 2015-16 school year. The CDE data was linked with CHIS data for 1,519 adolescents; thus, analyses including suspension rates were conducted on a slightly smaller sample.

Two types of suspension rates were examined: total suspension rates (defined as the total number of unduplicated suspensions for any reason at that school divided by total enrollment at that school during the 2015-16 school year), and defiance-only suspension rates (defined as the number of suspensions for willful defiance divided by total enrollment at that school during the 2015-16 school year). Defiance-only suspensions are suspensions for "disruption or willful defiance," which is defined as disrupting school activities or otherwise willfully defying the authority of school staff. These activities include a range of nonviolent misconduct behaviors such as dancing, not paying attention in class, talking back, failing to follow directions, and violating dress codes. These kinds of behaviors disproportionately result in defiance suspensions and expulsions for students of color and students with disabilities for the same behavior.

The total suspension rate includes suspensions for "willful defiance" as well as those for more serious infractions, including possession of drugs or weapons and violent behavior. The suspension rate variables were divided into thirds to create three categories of suspension rates: low, medium, and high. For total suspension rates, the low category included suspension rates up to 2.4%, medium ranged from 2.5% to 5.7%, and high ranged from 5.8% to 48%. For the defiance-only suspension rate variable, the low category included suspension rates up to 0.2%, medium ranged from 0.2% up to 1.9%, and high ranged from 2% to 18%. These variables reflect whether adolescent respondents attend a school that has high, medium, or low suspension rates relative to other schools in the state. For more information about CHIS, visit *www.chis.ucla.edu*.

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CHIS is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, California Department of Public Health, California Department of Health Care Services, and the Public Health Institute. Learn more at: ***www.chis.ucla.edu***

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