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DISRUPTING THE CASCADE: USING IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE TO MITIGATE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Education Systems Improvement Science

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by
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August 2024

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ABSTRACT

The use of exclusionary discipline practices in schools has continued to increase since the advent of Zero Tolerance discipline policies in the 1990s. Research indicates that these practices are largely ineffective in addressing behavior, and result in detrimental outcomes for students and communities. This study focused on the use of Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs) as a form of exclusionary discipline. Using an improvement science design, the purpose of this study was to identify how DAEPs can be leveraged to mitigate negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline. Specifically, this study sought to understand how implementing explicit skill instruction and adult support at a DAEP in a small, rural school district impacts outcomes for a group of 9th grade students (N=8). A comparison of the intervention groups' Grade Point Average (p=.853) and total class period absences (p=.115) with students that did not receive intervention was achieved through a independent samples t-test, which yielded nonsignificant results. A paired-samples t-test was performed to compare disciplinary interactions experienced by students before and after intervention. Results did not indicate a statistically significant reduction (p=.20), however, a comparison of means did suggest over a 50% reduction of overall referrals. An analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with a variety of stakeholders (educators, parents, students) yielded positive results. Stakeholders reported perceived reductions in recidivism and increased skill development. Findings of this study will be of particular interest to practitioners seeking to implement similar interventions, as well as local and state policymakers. Overall, results not only contribute to the growing body

of literature regarding DAEPs, but also emphasize the potential for meaningful change when utilizing an improvement science framework.

Keywords: exclusionary discipline, disciplinary alternative education programs, alternative programs, equity, behavioral skill instruction, improvement science, education

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. To my late grandmother, who's influence during my formative years continues into my adulthood. You lived in a time where you had to give up your right to an education so that you could raise a family. Because of your sacrifice, I have the opportunity to do both.

To my mom and dad, who worked tirelessly to provide me with every opportunity that they didn't have themselves. Who I am today is largely because of your constant encouragement and dedication to my education.

To my husband, Hunter, who provided constant support and motivation through this experience. Conducting research through a pregnancy and writing a dissertation with a newborn has not been easy—and without you, it simply would not have been possible. I'm forever grateful for your partnership.

Finally, to my daughter, Maebry. You're only a tiny baby now, but my hope is that through this work, and others like it, you might grow up in a world that is more equitable and just for all children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I wish to thank my committee for their expertise and guidance. My deepest gratitude to my chair, Dr. Edwin Bonney, for your support, patience, and encouragement. Your unwavering belief in my success was paramount to completing this work. Thank you, Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford and Dr. Jacquelynn Malloy for your inspirational teachings on equity and social justice, which serve as a critical foundation for this work. Finally, a special thank you to Dr. Giancarlo Anselmo. Your ongoing mentorship has shaped the practitioner that I am today.

Second, I would like to thank the educators that served on this study's improvement team. Improvement doesn't happen without the dedication, flexibility, and eagerness of individuals such as yourselves.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support. American novelist, Chuck Palahniuk, is quoted as saying, "Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I've known." Without your combined efforts in informing my personhood, this work would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

EDUCATION: THE GREAT EQUALIZER?

Problem of Practice

Horace Mann, former Secretary of Education, is credited with the following quote that has inspired educators since the early 1800s: "Education, then, beyond all other divides of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of social machinery." The notion that the United States educational system serves as a "great equalizer" has become widely accepted as the purpose and power of our schools. Unfortunately, this oft-referenced adage is not a wholly accurate representation of the actual outcomes of American schooling. While I agree that Mann's sentiment is a worthwhile goal, I would also argue that in its current state, the United States educational system not only does little to equalize opportunities, it exacerbates and perpetuates systemic inequities experienced by marginalized groups.

School systems often use a variety of metrics, including achievement scores, attendance, discipline, and graduation rate, to assess educational efficacy. One notable metric, and the interest of this study, is exclusionary discipline practices in schools. Exclusionary discipline refers to consequences metered to students that result in their exclusion from the general education environment (Bal, 2016). Specifically, exclusionary discipline practices include out-of-school suspension (OSS), in-school suspensions (ISS), disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs), home-based placements, and expulsion (Cruz et al., 2021).

Scholars have found that inequitable discipline practices in U.S. schools have a direct, negative effect on achievement, attendance, and graduation rates (Bal, 2016; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Gerlinger, 2022). For example, nearly 1/5 of disparities found in opportunity gaps throughout educational research can be explained by inequalities in

discipline practices (Gerlinger, 2022). The term “opportunity gap” refers to the fact that certain groups (typically representing dominant culture) consistently outperform other groups (typically non-dominant groups) academically (Flores, 2018). Some may refer to this as the "achievement gap." The term opportunity gap will be used within the context of this study, as it highlights the historical and structural influences that created and perpetuate outcome disparities. Not only does exclusionary discipline contribute to gaps in outcomes for individual minority students, but it has also been found to be associated with overall poor school climate (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019), low achievement (Fenning & Jenkins, 2018), high student disengagement (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021), high dropout rates (Bal, 2016), and increases in anti-social behavior and violence (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022).

In an effort to decrease expulsions, many districts have moved toward using DAEPs as a more "inclusionary" option (Selman, 2017). Researchers estimate that over 10,000 DAEPs nationwide receive nearly half a million students annually (Tajalli & Garba, 2014; Selman, 2017), which is a significant increase from 1998 when there were only 3,850 DAEPs nationwide (Selman, 2017). A primary factor in the increasing use of DAEPs in school districts can be attributed, in part, to the passage of the Safe Schools and Gun Free Schools Acts in 1994. Legislators in favor of both acts claimed that they would effectively reduce drug usage and violence in schools (Selman, 2017). However, an unintended consequence of these laws was the advent of what has come to be known as "zero-tolerance" discipline, which subsequently resulted in a dramatic increase in "push-out" forms of disciplinary action, such as suspensions and expulsions (Selman, 2017; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). DAEPs were born out of pressure from educator unions on districts to mitigate this surge in suspensions and expulsions (Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Rather than completely removing students from the educational curriculum, the

initial purpose of DAEPs was to "provide a temporary place to deal with the educational and behavioral needs" of students (Tajalli & Garba, 2014, p. 623).

While DAEPs should, in theory, provide space for students to receive individualized interventions in a supportive, restorative environment, the literature suggests that is often not the case. In their 2014 study, Tajalli and Garba (2014) found a significant overrepresentation of black and Hispanic students in DAEPs across the state of Texas. Tajalli and Garba's study corroborates the existing body of literature regarding the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities attending DAEPs. In addition to overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities (SWDs), students living in poverty, and males are more likely to be placed in DAEPs due to discipline than their counterparts (Selman, 2017).

While it seems that the use of DAEPs as an alternative method of discipline has well-intended roots, the present-day execution of DAEPs in most American school districts perpetuates inequitable educational opportunities for students placed in them—especially students of color, ethnic minorities, students in poverty, and SWDs. This is especially egregious given the unique opportunities that DAEPs *could* afford educators to intervene individually with students.

The driving Problem of Practice that guides this research study is the increasing rates of exclusionary discipline in a rural, South Carolina school district. More specifically, this study will utilize an improvement science design to address a district's use of a DAEP as a form of exclusionary discipline, which results in inequitable educational outcomes for students placed there. In the following sections, I will describe historical and current discipline trends and outcomes within the local context of this school district, as well as address my positionality as a researcher-practitioner working within the district. Then, through a review of the literature, I will

describe the historical, societal, and systemic influences that underpin current disciplinary practices in U.S. schools. Next, I will synthesize existing research on exclusionary discipline practices. Specifically, this literature review will detail inequities perpetuated through standard disciplinary practice and the use of DAEPs through the theoretical lens of a developmental-cascades framework, as well as evidence-based practices and interventions aimed at decreasing inequitable outcomes.

Finally, I will conclude this chapter by introducing the improvement team, detailing research questions aimed at understanding how to improve inequitable outcomes for students and a description of root cause analysis specific to this Problem of Practice within the context of the research site.

Local Context

Central Sandhills School District (CSSD) is a small, rural district with limited funding and several minority populations. According to the SCDE (2022a), 3,533 students were enrolled in CSSD on the 180th day of school during the 2022-2023 school year. Of those students, 79% are living in poverty. Regarding ethnicity, 19.2% of students are Black or African-American, 21.7% are Hispanic or Latino, 52.9% are white, and the remaining 6.2% are Native American, Asian, Two or More Races, or Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (see Table 1.1). In comparison with 2016-2017 data (SCDE, 2017), overall district enrollment has remained consistent, except for a notable increase in Hispanic students (from 14.2% to 21.7%) and a decrease in white students (from nearly 61% to 52.9%). Poverty rates have remained relatively unchanged.

Table 1.1

Central Sandhills School District Racial & Ethnic Demographics

Year	Total Population	White		Black		Hispanic		Other	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
22-23	3533	1871	52.9	680	19.2	768	21.7	214	6.2
21-22	3406	1808	53.0	631	18.5	759	22.3	208	6.2
20-21	3300	1783	54.0	627	19	703	21.3	187	5.7
19-20	3424	1898	55.4	637	18.6	679	19.8	210	6.2
18-19	3451	1979	57.6	655	18.9	600	17.4	217	6.1
17-18	3483	2045	58.7	655	18.8	546	15.7	237	6.8
16-17	3526	2149	60.9	819	23.2	500	14.2	58	1.7

According to current district reports (Central Sandhills School District, 2022), approximately 22% of students in CSSD are identified as disabled and receive specialized instruction through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This percentage is much higher than the state average of 13.9% (SCDE, 2021) and the national average of 14.5% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

In regards to achievement, CSSD's end-of-year test scores in ELA and math for the 2021-2022 school year were significantly lower than the state average across all grade levels (S.C. School Report Card, 2022). Only 15% of students identified as multi-lingual learners (MLs) made progress toward English proficiency targets, in comparison with the state average of 31.7% (S.C. School Report Card, 2022). Graduation rates also lag behind the state average, with 77.6% of students in CSSD graduating on time, compared with the state average of 83.3% (S.C. School Report Card, 2022).

In summary, CSSD's student population is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and language status. Poverty rates are high and remain relatively

unchanged since 2016. Academically, students are performing below the state average, as evidenced by state test scores and high school graduation rates.

Disciplinary Practices and Trends in Central Sandhills School District

Central Sandhills School District utilizes a district-level code of conduct that is ultimately dictated by the local school board and state law. This code of conduct categorizes disciplinary infractions into three categories (Levels 1, 2, and 3) by degree of impact (see Appendix B). Students are required to be referred for a district-level hearing upon an accumulation of Level 1 and/or 2 offenses, or a Level 3 offense. The hearing involves a review of grades, attendance, discipline history, interventions, relevant programs (IEP/504), student input, precedent, and case law. Hearing placements include returning to school on probation, homebased instruction, the DAEP, and expulsion.

The CSSD DAEP currently serves 6th-12th graders and employs three certified teachers, a part-time special education teacher, two classified instructional assistants, and an administrator. The program may serve between 5 and 20 students at any given time. Students undergo regular "performance reviews" every 4.5 weeks, which entail a review of attendance, academics, and behavioral progress (see Appendix C). Students who meet expectations are then transferred back to their home school, oftentimes "on probation."

Table 1.2

Central Sandhills School District Discipline Hearings

Year	Total	White		Black		Hispanic		SWD	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
22-23	153	72	47.05	54	35.29	25	16.33	33	21.57
21-22	164	72	43.90	51	31.09	41	25	31	18.90
20-21	36	20	55.55	9	25	7	19.44	7	19.44
19-20	147	88	59.86	44	29.93	13	8.84	33	22.44
18-19	175	103	58.85	57	32.57	23	13.14	32	18.28
17-18	136	82	60.29	34	25	13	9.55	32	23.52
16-17	118	65	55.08	40	33.89	6	5.08	18	15.25

Note: Data compiled from notes and spreadsheets kept by District Hearing Officers.

A review of CSSD's historical and current disciplinary data indicates similar issues of inequity as cited in the literature. During the 2022-2023 school year, 153 district-level hearings were held for 133 students (see Table 1.2). In terms of race and ethnicity, 16.3% of referred students were Hispanic, 47% were white, and 35.3% were Black. Finally, of students referred for district-level hearings, 21.6% were identified as having a disability. From these data, it can be concluded that compared with overall district demographics, Black students are over-represented in referrals for district-level discipline.

Table 1.3

Central Sandhills School District Hearing Outcomes Placements

Year	Total Hearings	Alternative Program		Homebased		District Level Probation		Expulsion		Other[a]	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
22-23	153	55	35.94	54	35.29	22	14.37	1	.6	21	13.72
21-22	164	63	38.41	17	10.36	60	36.58	1	.6	23	14.02
20-21	36	13	36.11	5	13.88	10	27.77	0	0	13	36.11
19-20	147	45	30.61	--	--	--	--	0	--	--	--
18-19	175	53	30.28	14	8.04	90	51.43	0	0	18	10.28
17-18	136	54	39.7	3	2.2	49	36.03	1	.7	32	23.53
16-17	118	35	29.66	7	5.93	72	61.01	0	0	4	3.38

Note: Data compiled from notes and spreadsheets kept by District Hearing Officers.

[a]Due to inconsistencies in data collection, there were hearing results that were not consistently coded or described. Many of these instances did ultimately result in exclusionary placement, such as homebased or DAEP placement by an IEP team.

In addition to disparities in who is receiving hearing referrals, longitudinal data suggest that the number of overall district-level hearings is increasing over time (see Table 1.3). During the 2016-2017 school year, 118 district-level hearings were held, whereas in 2022-2023 school year, 153 hearings were held—despite the overall student population remaining stable. While overall expulsion rates are low, uses of other exclusionary methods are common. There has also been an increase in exclusionary discipline, and a decrease in the use of district level probation (which involves an immediate return to the home school). In the 2016-2017 school year, only about 36% of hearings resulted in exclusion, while 61% resulted in a return to school with probation. During the 2022-2023 school year, 71% of hearings result in exclusion, whereas only 14% result in probation. Regarding recidivism, data from the 2022-2023 school year indicates

that of the 133 students referred for district-level hearings, 15 students were referred for one or more hearings (11%).

Table 1.4

Central Sandhills School District DAEP Placements

Year	Total Hearings	Alt Placements		White		Black		Hispanic		SWD	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
22-23	153	55	35.94	33	60	16	29.09	5	9.09	8	14.54
21-22	164	63	38.41	25	39.68	17	26.98	20	31.75	8	12.70
20-21	36	13	36.11	7	53.85	4	30.77	2	15.38	1	7.69
19-20	147	45	30.61	32	71.11	8	17.77	5	11.11	7	15.55
18-19	175	53	30.28	30	56.66	19	35.84	4	7.54	8	15.09
17-18	136	54	39.7	36	66.66	12	22.22	6	11.11	11	20.37
16-17	118	35	29.66	21	60	11	31.43	3	8.57	5	14.28

Note: Data compiled from notes and spreadsheets kept by District Hearing Officers.

In regards to placement at the CSSD DAEP, district data (see Table 1.4) suggests that there has been a gradual increase in initial placements. It should be noted that these numbers reflect students that were initially placed at the DAEP as a result of a hearing. Some students that are initially placed on homebased instruction will return to the DAEP as a step between homebased and returning to school. Similar to disparities in overall hearing referrals, data indicates that Black students are overrepresented in terms of DAEP placements.

In summary, district data suggests an overall increase in district-level discipline hearings, despite a relatively stable population. In turn, there has been a gradual increase in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, which disproportionately affects Black students in particular.

Central Sandhills School District and Problem of Practice

As previously established, this study aims at understanding the use of DAEPs as a form of exclusionary discipline and associated outcomes for students in public school districts. CSSD's disciplinary practices and trends are not unique. Considering exclusionary discipline practices and associated outcomes are the norm in most U.S. school districts (Selman, 2017; Tajalli & Garba, 2014), conducting this study in CSSD will yield information that could be meaningful to districts with similar populations. Given trends specific to the district, conducting this study in CSSD also allows for the opportunity to address inequities in the use of exclusionary discipline with Black students.

In addition, using CSSD as a research site will also lend some understanding of discipline in a rural district, and how these practices impact students living in poverty. Understanding the impact of exclusionary discipline on these demographics is relevant to current educational research, since nearly one fifth (18.7%) of students in the U.S. attend rural schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and in South Carolina, over one third (33.6%) of students are attending rural schools. The NCES (2019) further reports that in 2016, 19% of students in the U.S. were considered to be living in poverty. Demographically, Black (34%), Native American (34%), and Hispanic (28%) students are most impacted (NCES, 2019).

I will be conducting this study as a scholarly practitioner in Central Sandhills School District. Specifically, I am employed as a School Psychologist. Perry et al. describe this type of research role as an "insider collaborating with other insiders" (p. 112). My primary role is working with school teams to support students with disabilities and behavioral needs. Due to my role, I have witnessed how exclusionary discipline practices play out over time with individual students. Similar to findings in the research, the outcomes I have directly observed are rarely

positive (Bal, 2016; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Gerlinger, 2022). It seems that the students who should be receiving the most educational supports are, instead, being excluded entirely. However, given that I am not in an administrative position, I do not have direct influence over discipline policy or practices. For this reason, my Problem of Practice will be addressed utilizing change ideas and interventions that are feasible for my role and sphere of influence. These include behavioral interventions, pro-social skills training, and social-emotional learning.

Finally, it is important to address my positionality as a researcher (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017). I am a white, abled, middle-class female. As will be discussed in the following literature review, modern disciplinary practices in schools are heavily influenced by historical and current systems of racism and classism. In conducting this study, I, a member of primarily dominant groups, will be researching a topic that directly impacts minoritized groups. Sensoy & Diangelo (2017) state that "Dominant groups have the most narrow or limited view of society because they do not have to understand the experiences of the minoritized group in order to survive. Minoritized groups often have the widest view of society, in that they must understand both their own and the dominant group's perspective — develop a double-consciousness- to succeed" (p. 70). For this reason, it is crucial to approach this study with an awareness and understanding of my own "limited view," so that the experiences of minoritized groups impacted by exclusionary discipline can be centered.

To summarize, utilizing CSSD as a research site will provide meaningful and valuable information regarding exclusionary discipline practices in rural, diverse school districts with a large percentage of students living in poverty. The findings of this study can provide data to similar districts seeking to improve their disciplinary practices, use of DAEPs, and outcomes for

students that have been repeatedly engaged in exclusionary discipline practices. In the next section, I will provide a review of the extant literature related to the Problem of Practice. I will begin with a broad summary of exclusionary discipline practices in schools, and end with a more focused review of promising strategies used to address negative outcomes.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I will discuss the historical, social, and political context in which school discipline norms have evolved, including the rise of zero-tolerance policies as a result of federal legislation, the impact of exclusionary disciplinary practices on student and school outcomes, and DAEPs. I will conclude with promising practices and interventions found within the literature that aim at addressing inequitable discipline practices on a larger scale, which may also be utilized to address my specific Problem of Practice.

Historical, Social, and Political Underpinnings of Modern U.S. Schooling

In order to fully understand the injustices inherent in disciplinary practices in U.S. schools, it is imperative to consider the historical, social, and political context in which school discipline norms have evolved. Like most institutions and systems in America, the modern U.S. educational system has its roots in colonialism, industrialization, and white-dominant culture (Fallon et al., 2021). Pre-revolution, educational opportunities were primarily afforded to white male children and happened within the home. At this time, it was illegal for enslaved Black children to receive an education, although it sometimes occurred in secret (Fallon et al., 2021). Post-revolution, the United States saw an increase in compulsory-education policy, especially in the Northern states. Here, a significant shift occurred where most children were educated in large groups outside of the home, as opposed to small groups by their mothers, tutors, or not at all (Fallon et al., 2021). This shift in setting was what precipitated the notion of school discipline,

which was to "maintain order with a few adults overseeing many children" and was "particularly imperative for the "urban poor" in need of "character education" to prepare for work in the system of industrial capitalism" (Fallon et al., 2021, p.5).

As a result of segregation, Black communities formed their own schools with Black teachers with deep connections to their communities (Fallon et al., 2021). While this was a time where Black schools educated Black boys and girls without the influence of white-dominant culture, it was not a time completely free of oppression and violence toward the Black community at large. Black teachers and administrators were harassed and even murdered. Black schools were destroyed and burned. Those left faced inequities in funding and access to materials (Fallon et al., 2021).

While desegregation is often heralded in American history as a landmark for racial equality, the effect on Black education is considerably grim. Black schools, administrators, and teachers were cast aside in favor of their white counterparts. Between 1964 and 1973, the number of Black principals in the South decreased by 90% (Fallon et al., 2021). The ultimate result of desegregating schools was that Black educators found themselves ostracized from the educational sphere, and Black students found themselves educated by White women that were either overtly racist or, at the very least, did not understand or appreciate their culture and needs (Fallon et al., 2021).

This brief history of the origins of the American school system illustrates a system rooted in classism and exclusion, favoring Anglo-Saxon middle-class ideals. Even with each marker of "progress," unintended (or intended) consequences have left many groups disenfranchised and oppressed. While the topic of this section has been primarily around the racist origins of educational practices and how that has impacted the Black community, it is essential to note that

policies and practices have also oppressed other students of color, females, SWDs, multi-lingual learners, and students in poverty.

Zero Tolerance and the Rise of Exclusionary Discipline

As discussed in the introduction, a significant influence on current discipline practices in American schools was the passing of the Drug-Free Schools Act of 1986 and the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, both of which were born out of increasing public concern (primarily driven by falsities in the media) regarding school safety (Bryan, 2017; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010; Mongan & Walker, 2012). These acts further resulted in what has become known as "zero tolerance" discipline policies, which is the strict application of punitive measures for behaviors related to drugs, alcohol, violence, and weapons (Mongan & Walker, 2012). These policies, however, quickly became associated with high rates of exclusionary discipline: ISS, OSS, DAEPs, referrals to law enforcement, court involvement (i.e., Department of Juvenile Justice or DJJ), and expulsion (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019).

Increasing usage of exclusionary discipline did not affect all student groups equally. Shortly after these policies were enacted, expulsion rates of black students increased nine times as much as those of white students (Gerlinger, 2022). Presently, exclusionary discipline practices in the United States disproportionately affect students of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Office for Civil Rights, 2022). According to their most recent findings, the Office of Civil Rights (2022) reported that during the 2015-2016 school year, over 100,000 students were expelled from public schools, and over 11 million instructional days were lost due to OSS. Exclusionary discipline metered to Black males was found to be most disproportionate compared to their white counterparts (OCR, 2022). Specifically, while Black males only comprised 7.7% of the enrolled student population, they comprised 20% of ISS, 24.9% of OSS, and 25.9% of

expulsions. In comparison, White students represent 24.4% of total student enrollment and make up 28.7% of ISS, 24.9% of OSS, and 36.5% of expulsions (OCR, 2022). Girls, in general, receive fewer suspensions and expulsions than boys (only 30% of girls as compared with 70% of boys), with the exception of Black girls, who receive nearly twice the amount of OSS as their white counterparts (OCR, 2022).

Not only are racial and ethnic minority students more likely to receive punitive, exclusionary discipline than their white counterparts (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021), but they are also more likely to receive exclusionary discipline for what is called "subjective offenses" (Bal, 2016). Subjective offenses are behaviors that are evaluated subjectively by teachers and administrators, such as "disrespect" and "appearing threatening" (Baroni et al., 2020, p. 155). In contrast, white students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline for what are referenced as objective offenses, such as possession of a weapon (Bottiani et al., 2017; Cruz et al., 2021).

In light of these findings, some may ask: are black students just engaging in disrespectful, threatening behaviors more often than their white peers? The literature suggests the contrary. Several studies have ruled out that disproportionate discipline is due to Black students engaging in "elevated" behaviors and that actual levels of misbehavior are similar to their white peers (Bottiani et al., 2017). Regardless of the behavior demonstrated, Black students are more likely to receive a harsher consequence than their white peers (Cruz et al., 2021). The literature suggests that the most likely root causes of discipline disparities are teacher bias (Bottiani et al., 2017; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021), teacher referral practices (Barnes & Motz, 2018), inexperience with disability/mental health (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021), and administrator attitudes toward discipline (Damone et al., 2019).

It could stand to reason that disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices are justified as long as the end result is safe schools. Unfortunately, zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices not only do not fix the problem but, rather, appear to exacerbate existing problems. To date, there is little evidence that exclusionary discipline practices are effective in decreasing negative behaviors or increasing safety (Bal, 2016; Baroni et al., 2020; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Gerlinger, 2022). Exclusionary discipline essentially results in decreased access to resources, instruction, and support for disciplined students (Bal, 2016). This translates into low achievement, higher dropout rates, and a increased likelihood of special education referral (Bal, 2016; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018).

In summary, what is considered “good behavior” is often contextualized by norms defined by the dominant culture. Policies aimed at making schools safer have failed to deliver in achieving that goal and have subsequently led to detrimental outcomes for Black, poor, and disabled students.

Cascading into the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The adverse outcomes of exclusionary discipline practices for students surpass the walls of the school building. In schools where discipline practices closely mirror the U.S. criminal justice system, "the distinction between school discipline and criminal justice becomes increasingly blurred" (Mowen & Brent, 2016, p. 629). Both systems use terms like offense, hearing officer, statement, and probation. The school-to-prison pipeline hypothesis posits that youth and adult involvement in the prison system starts in schools through exclusionary discipline practices (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Bryan, 2017). Students metered just one suspension or expulsion while in school are significantly more likely to be incarcerated later in

life (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Bryan, 2017; Mowen & Brent, 2016). Most students get sucked into the pipeline as early as preschool (Henry et al., 2021). Consistent with overall discipline trends in schools, Black students (especially males) and SWDs are disproportionately impacted by the pipeline (Barnes & Motz, 2018).

Not only does one suspension increase the chances of incarceration later in adulthood, but there is also a cumulative effect—meaning that each instance of exclusionary discipline further increases risk for later engagement with the criminal justice system. In their 2016 study, Mowen and Brent found that even when controlling for race and delinquency behaviors, individuals that received three suspensions reported a 252 percent increase in odds of arrest compared with individuals with no suspensions.

While multiple theories aim to explain why the correlation between exclusionary discipline and later incarceration is so robust, the theory that will serve as a framework for this research is the developmental cascades theory. Developmental cascades is a developmental theory that there are "cumulative consequences for development…that result in spread affects across level, among domains…and across different systems" (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010, p. 491). That is, singular influences can compound with other influences and effectively dictate an individual's life trajectory within a system. In the context of the school-to-prison pipeline, developmental cascades theory would suggest that children and youth experiencing repeated instances of exclusionary discipline internalize a "deviant self-concept" (Mowen & Brent, 2016, p. 632) through labeling. These students essentially accept their role as the "trouble-maker" (Barnes & Motz, 2018, p. 2329) throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and then act as such. Exclusionary discipline practices during adolescence further contribute to the cascade into delinquency because the student is removed from a structured, routine-oriented environment

into an environment with less supervision and the opportunity to drift toward anti-social activities with other at-risk youth (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Through repeated exclusionary discipline, students are taught to “disengage and deidentify” (Barnes & Motz, 2018, p. 2329) with education and then later blamed for their lack of motivation or value for education.

While developmental cascades may hasten the current within the pipeline, researchers have also found that the cascades can be disrupted (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Masten et al., 2005; Moilanen et al., 2010; Okano et al., 2020). If a pattern of exclusionary discipline sets a trajectory for adverse outcomes during and after schooling, then disrupting that pattern can reset the trajectory. Reframing challenging student behaviors as an opportunity to identify needs and provide support could disrupt the cascade and produce more positive outcomes for individuals, families, and society.

Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs: A Wasted Opportunity

As previously discussed in the introduction, when exclusionary discipline practices increased as a result of zero-tolerance policies, so did the demand for alternative means of discipline (Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Due to this demand for more inclusionary discipline, DAEPs began to gain popularity among districts. DAEPs have been known to serve a variety of students, including those that are significantly behind on high school credits, a danger to themselves, pregnant, on a court order, or truant (Dameron et al., 2019). However, behavior is the most commonly cited reason for a student to be placed at a DAEP (Ballard & Bender, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2019). It is surprising, then, that across all educational settings. DAEPs are actually the least likely to implement social-emotional-behavioral (SEB) practices into everyday operations (Ballard & Bender, 2021). Some reasons for this include need for more funding, resources, and

staffing (Dameron et al., 2019), creating significant barriers to delivering quality interventions and services.

Given that DAEPs are considered by some to be a category of exclusionary discipline, it is not surprising that there are disparities in which students are placed there. Black students, males, SWDs, and students in poverty are most likely to be placed at a DAEP (Ballard & Bender, 2021). In regards to SWDs, students that are identified as Intellectually Disabled and/or Emotionally Disabled are more likely to be placed at a DAEP in comparison with other disability categories (Selman, 2017).

Overall, the literature regarding the efficacy of DAEPs on student outcomes is limited (Ballard & Bender, 2021). While DAEPs have been found to have some short-term positive effects on behavior and achievement, those effects are not present after one year (Griffiths et al., 2019). Given that the most vulnerable and at-risk populations tend to be disproportionately placed in DAEPs, it would stand to reason that, as a setting, DAEPs should receive the most strategic and effective resources.

Promising Practices

While the current reality of discipline practices in American schools seems bleak, the literature points to some promising practices that may effectively mitigate the outcomes of students placed at DAEPs. The interventions reviewed in this section include broad intervention models, including tiered intervention systems and discipline training, as well as more specific interventions, such as the Monarch Room (Baroni et al., 2020) and the Motivational Interview with At-Risk Students (MARS) mentoring model (Henry et al., 2021).

Some studies reference schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS) and behavioral multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS-B) as effective intervention

models for supporting students with SEB needs. SWPBIS is a tiered delivery model that aims to improve student behavior through teaching and reinforcing pro-social behaviors. Currently, over 20,000 schools in the U.S. implement SWPBIS (Griffiths et al., 2019). Multiple studies have found that, when implemented with fidelity, SWPBIS reduces overall disciplinary referrals, increases school safety (Bal, 2016), increases teacher well-being, and positively impacts achievement scores (Griffiths et al., 2019). In addition, SWPBIS has been found to decrease rates of exclusionary discipline (Grasley-Boy et al.). MTSS-B is similar to SWPBIS but is broader in approach and application. As opposed to focusing solely on student behavior, MTSS-B takes a more holistic approach and incorporates individual students' emotional and mental health needs.

While both SWPBIS and MTSS-B provide frameworks for delivering SEB interventions and supports to students, it is important to note that both systems have primarily been researched with "suburban dominant culture schools" (Bal, 2016, p. 411). In addition, both systems rely on defining and teaching appropriate behavior, which begs the question: Who is setting the standard for appropriate behavior? Some studies have found that when behavioral data is analyzed by group, SWPBIS seems to benefit white students more than other racial and ethnic groups (Cruz et al., 2021), which suggests that perhaps the standard is the white, middle-class, dominant culture. In their review of MTSS-B, Fallon and colleagues (2021) assert that although educators should be aware and cautious when using systems that are rooted in whiteness, such as MTSS-B, such systems can also "be strengthened to disrupt anti-Blackness by infusing antiracism" and culturally-responsive practices (p. 3). They assert that this may be done through consideration of systemic and institutional factors of racism, root cause analysis of student behaviors (and avoiding deficit perspectives), challenging racist policies, incorporating protective and

supportive factors for oppressed students, affirming cultures, and "interrogating" injustices (Fallon et al., 2021, p. 7).

As discussed in previous sections, teacher bias, educator discipline practices, and administrator attitudes toward discipline are significant factors in inequitable disciplinary outcomes. Accordingly, studies have found that providing discipline training to educators can positively impact student outcomes. Providing teachers with training on discipline methods that rely on empathic, authoritative, and trauma-informed discipline as opposed to punitive and reactionary discipline has reduced overall referrals (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010). Training in restorative justice practices and implicit bias has been found to reduce both overall referrals and disparities (Cruz et al., 2021).

In 2020, Baroni and her colleagues conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of an intervention they designed called the Monarch Room on exclusionary discipline for court-involved females. The Monarch Room was designed as an alternative to ISS and OSS and served as a therapeutic setting where students could engage in problem-solving, talk therapy, sensory integration activities, and somatic therapy (Baroni et al., 2020). Findings indicated that overall, use of the Monarch Room correlated with significantly reduced discipline referrals and exclusionary discipline (Baroni et al., 2020). However, it was also found that students that were referred to the Monarch Room were still disproportionately Black, indicating the need for further training with referring teachers (Baroni et al., 2020).

Another promising intervention found in the research, developed by Lauren Henry and colleagues (2021), is a combination of motivational interviewing and mentoring (referred to as MARS Mentoring). In their study, Henry et al. (2021) implemented the MARS Mentoring program, which is “rooted in self-determination and behavior modification…and delivered

through a motivational interviewing framework" (p. 62), with students at a suburban K-12 DAEP. During the MARS Mentoring Program, students enrolled at the DAEP completed a 4-module curriculum aligned with motivational interviewing practices, checked in with their school-based mentor as they progressed through the curriculum, identified an area of change, set a goal for themselves, and then monitored their progress. Results of the study indicated that after completing the MARS Mentoring program, there were significant decreases in behavior, as reported by teachers, as well as significant decreases in internalizing experiences, as reported by students. In addition, student academic performance appeared to improve, as evidenced by grades in ELA and math (Henry et al., 2021).

Overall, research regarding interventions applied specifically to DAEP settings is limited. There is evidence to support overall positive student outcomes as a result of MTSS-B and SWPBIS; however, there is some collective doubt that these outcomes are present across all student groups. There is a consensus that regardless of intervention, practitioners should ensure practices are culturally-responsive.

Research to Practice

The purpose of this literature review is to provide context for the identified Problem of Practice, as well as to inform evidence-based change ideas to address said problem. The research brings to light the fact that modern-day disciplinary practices in schools have been historically influenced by racism and classicism. Discipline codes and structures are not widely sensitive to cultural differences, and tend to favor dominant cultural norms (white, middle class). Exclusionary discipline practices appear to be the most harmful—not only in regard to individual student outcomes, but to educational systems health as well. Black students, regardless of gender, receive the highest rates of exclusionary discipline, even though there is no evidence within the literature

to support actual behavioral differences between them and their counterparts. Students receiving repeated counts of exclusionary discipline, over time, are more likely to develop internalized delinquency, leading to a cascade of psycho-social factors that ultimately result in increased risk of engagement with the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Mowen & Brent, 2016).

In order to decrease rates of expulsion, many districts have increasingly turned to the use of DAEPs. The research on DAEPs is fairly limited, especially in regard to their efficacy. What can be said, based on the research, is that students enrolled at DAEPs represent vulnerable populations requiring high levels of intervention. Whether DAEPs are implementing (or equipped to implement) that level of intervention is unclear. The most researched methods of behavioral intervention in schools (MTSS-B, mentoring, and counseling) have seen positive results. However, there is an issue of whether these results are observed across demographics. In addition, there are questions of whether these interventions further perpetuate the upholding of dominant cultural norms.

In summary, the literature paints a picture of a clear problem: current school discipline practices are disproportionately impacting minoritized groups of students because they were not devised with those students in mind. The literature also suggests that the most effective, and socially-just solution to this Problem of Practice would be to rewrite discipline codes through a culturally-responsive lens, and target issues of racial and classist implicit bias. However, as a School Psychologist with limited administrative power, these are not feasible change ideas for this study. Given the limited scope of literature on effective DAEP interventions, this study will seek to address gaps in the research by implementing culturally-responsive interventions with students placed at the CSSD DAEP. In the following sections, I will describe the improvement team

involved in the causal analysis and intervention implementation of this Problem of Practice, as well as research questions that will guide this study.

Addressing Inequitable Discipline Practices Through Improvement Science

A key component of improvement science is the inclusion and utilization of multiple perspectives in order to research, design, and carry out a change idea (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This is accomplished through a strategically assembled team (or teams) of individuals who are users impacted by the problem, as well as professionals with expertise. Multiple perspectives and a team approach allow for a deeper understanding of the problem, and therefore, more effective intervention implementation (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

In order to address my Problem of Practice, a team was formed in the summer of 2023. The purpose of this team was to research the problem through disciplined inquiry (Bryk et al., 2015), design an intervention, and then implement the intervention at the start of the 2023-2024 school year. This team was comprised of individuals that bring unique perspectives through their professional expertise, roles within the discipline process, and personal positionality (see Table 1.5).

Table 1.5

Improvement Team Members, by Role and Positionality

Team Member	Role	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Relevant Expertise
District Hearing Officer	Conduct district level hearings	Male	Black	Experience as Secondary Principal
Freshman Principal	Responsible for school-level discipline and hearings	Female	White	General Education Background
Freshman Assistant Principal	Responsible for school-level discipline and hearings	Female	Black	Experience as School Counselor; District MTSS Team
DAEP Principal	Coordinates and delivers academic and behavioral support at the DAEP	Male	White	Experience as Secondary Principal, Athletics Coach, and General Education

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions through an improvement science design:

1. How can disciplinary alternative education programs be leveraged to mitigate, rather than perpetuate, educational inequities caused by exclusionary disciplinary practices?
2. How does supporting the social/emotional/behavior needs of marginalized students placed at disciplinary alternative education programs impact their overall educational outcomes?

As previously discussed, a review of the literature reveals a limited understanding of how DAEPs function within districts, despite the increase in their usage. The first research question seeks to understand how DAEPs might be leveraged to mitigate inequitable outcomes caused by

exclusionary discipline within the local context of a rural, diverse school district. The second research question seeks to move beyond understanding and toward action. In answering this question, the aim is to develop actionable steps that similar school districts can take to enhance their DAEPs to produce more equitable outcomes for all students.

Root Cause Analysis: Defining and Understanding the Problem

A key feature of improvement science is the use of Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to define and understand the problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). RCA is accomplished through a variety of tools and methods, all with the purpose of approaching the identified problem from a systems perspective (Perry et al., 2020). A systems approach leads to a rich understanding of the problem within context, which then allows for a more clearly defined problem and "actionable improvement initiative" (Perry et al., 2020, p 59).

Primary sources of data used to analyze the Problem of Practice included observations, empathy interviews, and local data analysis. Observations were conducted during various meetings throughout the disciplinary process, including MTSS meetings, IEP-meetings, and manifestation determinations. Observations not only provided data regarding process, but also stakeholder attitudes and approaches. Stakeholders in regular attendance during these meetings included administrators, teachers, school counselors, parents, and students.

In addition to observations, empathy interviews were conducted with educators engaged in the disciplinary process. Educators engaged in empathy interviews included administrators, the Student Services Coordinator, special education teachers, school psychologists, and the DAEP administrator. Empathy interviews primarily focused on gaining stakeholder perspectives on the current disciplinary process, outcomes, and the current DAEP model.

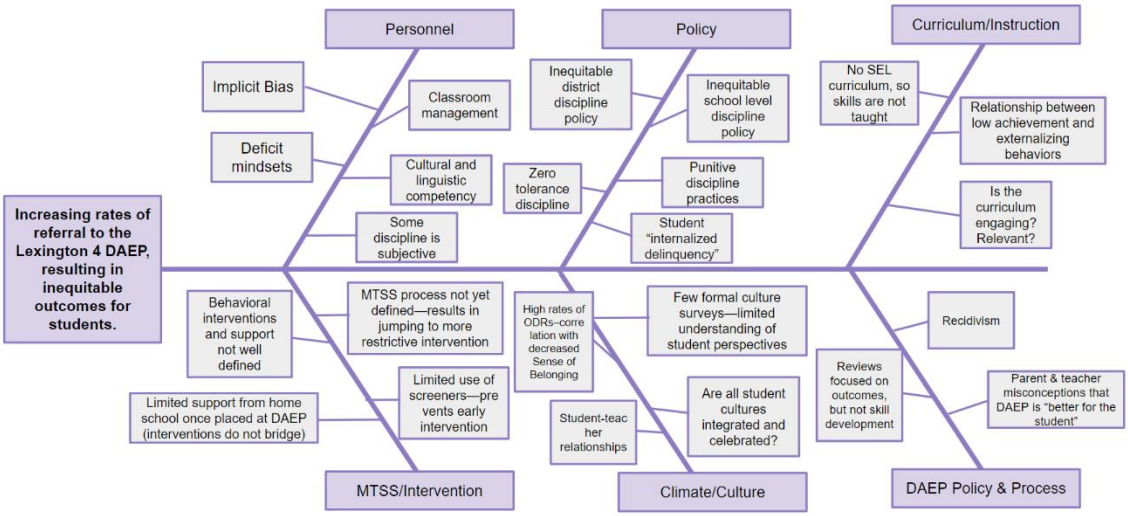
Through observations and empathy interviews, a major theme emerged: disciplinary incidents requiring district-level hearings appear more frequent, and more students are being referred to the DAEP as a result. School psychologists reported that manifestation determinations tend to be repetitive—the same handful of students for the same types of offenses. Building administrators shared that one factor that may be contributing to the increase in hearing referrals is that the discipline policy was restructured during the 2018-2019 school year. This restructuring left administration feeling like there was less "wiggle-room" for professional judgement and handling discipline in-house. The building principal reported that there are often instances where she would prefer to handle the disciplinary incident at the building-level, but that current policy requires referral for a district-level hearing based on certain triggers (Appendix B). Regarding the DAEP, many stakeholders expressed concerns that it was not an effective behavioral intervention.

In order to quantify the problem, a local data analysis was conducted. Data was gathered from a variety of sources, including demographic data reported by the State Department of Education, as well as data logs kept by DAEP Principals and the District Hearing Officer. These data were analyzed for longitudinal trends regarding referrals to district-level hearings, as well as outcomes of those hearings. In addition, an equity audit was conducted. Equity audits are a RCA tool that allow teams to identify inequitable access and outcomes through analyzing disaggregate data (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). It was through these data analysis that anecdotal reports regarding increasing rates of disciplinary hearings and exclusionary outcomes were verified. Through the equity audit, it was also found that Black students are receiving disproportionate rates of both district-level hearing referrals and DAEP placements.

In order to organize and conceptualize the findings described above, a fishbone diagram was utilized (Figure 1.1). An initial draft of the fishbone diagram was created by myself, and then shared with the improvement team. At this time, a summary of national trends as found in the literature, as well as district trends were also shared. Team members were then invited to identify additional factors contributing to the problem.

Figure 1.1

Fishbone Diagram



The fishbone diagram identifies broad systemic factors, as well as related specific factors that influence the identified Problem of Practice. Increasing rates of disciplinary referrals to the DAEP are influenced by policy (federal, state, and local), personnel, curriculum/instruction, MTSS/intervention practices, and school climate/culture. Factors that are specific to the local context were also identified. These findings will be further discussed in the following chapter, as they will inform this study's theory of improvement and proposed cycle of inquiry.

Conclusion

The driving Problem of Practice behind this research study is the increasing rate of discipline hearings and DAEP placements in CSSD. In addition, given an analysis of discipline data and existing research on the topic, this study also aims to address issues of inequitable disciplinary outcomes, as evidenced by disproportionate rates of discipline metered to Black students. Through an improvement science design, this study will seek to understand how DAEP settings can be leveraged to mitigate, rather than perpetuate, inequitable educational outcomes for students placed there as a result of exclusionary discipline. This study will yield findings that will not only improve practices within the local context of the study, but will also help to inform educational practice, research, and policy.

This study has the potential to inform disciplinary practices in similar districts. The local context for this study is a small, rural district with an increasingly diverse population. In addition, approximately 80% of the student population in CSSD is considered to be living in poverty. These characteristics are not unique to the local context, considering nearly one fifth of students in the U.S. attend rural schools (NCES, 2017). In South Carolina, those numbers increase to one third of students (NCES, 2017). Further, nearly one fifth of students in the U.S. are living in poverty. Findings from this study may be extrapolated to similar districts to improve educational programming at DAEP settings for students that experience exclusionary discipline and related outcomes.

As discussed in the literature review, the extant research regarding the effects of exclusionary discipline practices in general is rich and established. However, there is limited research regarding DAEPs specifically. Given the increasing rates of DAEP utilization (Selman, 2017), it is essential that more research be conducted on this specific setting. In addition to

understanding DAEPs as a placement, this study will contribute to the body of literature regarding effective intervention for students placed in these settings. Given the generally negative outcomes associated with all types of exclusionary discipline (Bal, 2016; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gerlinger, 2022), it is important to understand how educators can effectively support students placed at DAEPs.

This study will also provide data that can inform local and state policy. As discussed in the literature review, the use of DAEPs has increased in use as an “alternative” to expulsion. However, it is still considered a form of exclusionary discipline. Currently, the state of South Carolina only monitors suspensions and expulsions (SCDE, 2023). This means that entire populations are receiving exclusionary discipline measures that are not being monitored. Through this study, policymakers will be made aware of the increasing rates of DAEP utilization, the probable outcomes associated with this form of exclusionary placement, and how these placements can be utilized to improve outcomes for students.

Our educational system, as it exists today, does not quite equate to being the "balance wheel of social machinery," that Horace Mann asserts it to be. While our educational system certainly has the power to balance social inequalities, the current reality is that our systems often serve as another cog in the machine. The disciplinary practices that are commonplace in American schools are not only ineffective, but actively harm the children that we are meant to help. Specifically, the increased use of exclusionary discipline in schools yield negative educational *and* life outcomes for students. The goal of this study is to understand how such outcomes can be mitigated through DAEP settings in public schools. The following chapter will outline my proposed theory of improvement, improvement science design, and methodology.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

This study aimed to improve educational outcomes for students placed at the CSSD DAEP through an improvement science design. Improvement science is a "systematic approach to continuous improvement in complex organizations" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 1). It provides a research framework in which scholarly practitioners define problems within a system, identify potential change ideas, and measure the impact of those change ideas (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These steps are repeated through reiterative cycles of inquiry called Plan/Do/Study/Act (PDSA) cycles (Bryk et al., 2020). Problem identification and causal analysis were discussed in the previous chapter and illustrated through a fishbone diagram (Figure 1.1). In the following sections, the change idea will be introduced within the context of a theory of improvement, and elements of the PDSA cycle that drove this study will be defined.

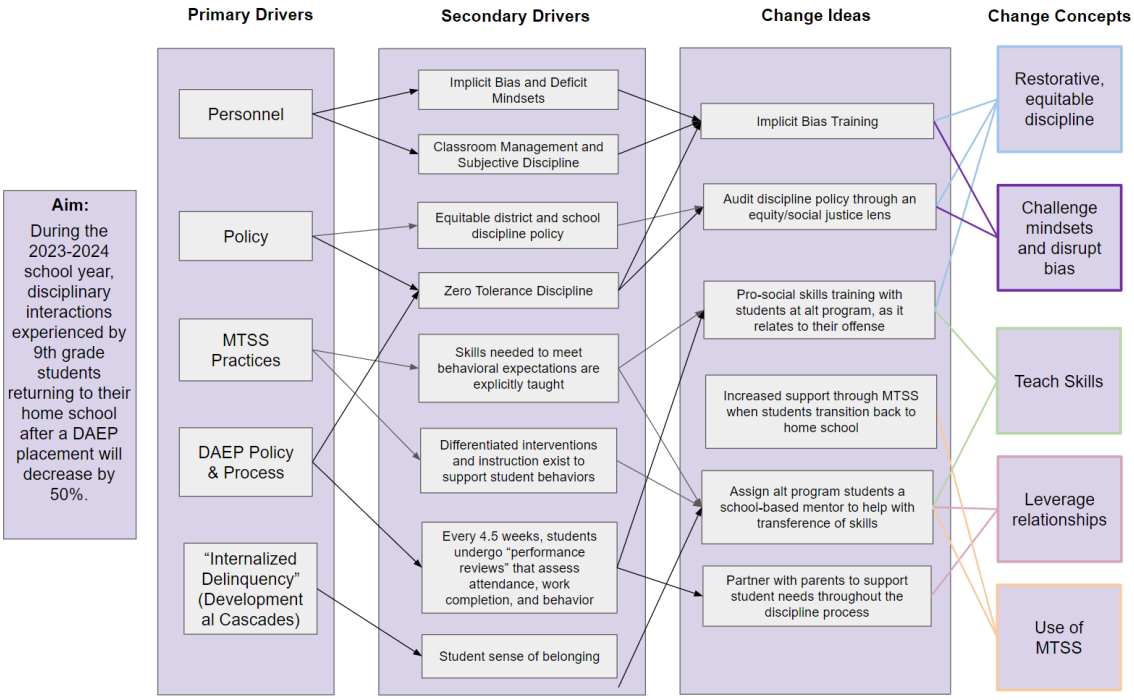
Plan: Theory of Improvement

A critical component of an improvement science design is the theory of improvement. After engaging in a thorough problem analysis, a theory of improvement must be established before acting to improve the problem (Perry et al., 2020). Theory development is a collaborative process that helps an improvement team determine what change can be introduced into the system to solve the identified problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The theory of improvement not only aids in the development of an intervention, or change idea, it also helps to prevent unintended consequences by considering all components of the system (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). An effective theory of improvement is informed by the system, research/theory, and feasibility of implementation for the users (Bryk et al., 2015). A useful tool in developing and illustrating a theory of improvement is the driver diagram. A driver diagram clearly delineates

the aim, drivers, change ideas, and change concepts that will be implemented during the Do phase of the PDSA cycle. A driver diagram (Figure 2.1) was developed in collaboration with the improvement team, utilizing system knowledge, scholarly literature, and users of the system.

Figure 2.1

Driver Diagram



The team agreed that regardless of the change idea, it would be most feasible for implementation to focus on a single cohort of students. The 9th graders were chosen for two primary reasons. First, research indicates that the 9th grade school year is a crucial year for predicting later outcomes, such as credit accrual, GPA, graduation rates, and attendance (Allensworth, 2013; Lowder et al., 2022). Second, all 9th graders in CSSD attend school at a separate 9th grade campus, which would allow for more intensive intervention implementation and increased fidelity. While the broad goal of this study is to improve overall educational outcomes for students who experience exclusionary discipline, the aim statement reflects a

narrowed focus: by the end of the 2023/2024 school year, disciplinary interactions experienced by 9th grade students returning to the freshman campus after a DAEP placement will decrease by 50%. Primary and secondary drivers, as well as related change ideas are described below.

Primary Driver 1: Personnel

Personnel refers to educators in the building that are involved in the disciplinary process. This includes teachers in the classroom metering discipline referrals, administrators processing referrals, special education staff involved in manifestation determinations, and the district level hearing officer.

The identified secondary drivers were classroom management and implicit bias. While educators responsible for metering exclusionary discipline are typically administrators and district-level personnel, discipline begins in the classroom with teachers. One major driver of disproportionate discipline metered to Black students, as identified in the literature, is implicit bias (Bottiani et al., 2017; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021). Classroom teachers are more likely to refer Black students for subjective offenses, such as “disrespect” than any other race (Bal, 2016), even though actual rates of externalizing behaviors exhibited by Black students are consistent with their counterparts (Bottiani et al., 2017, Cruz et al., 2017). Other catalysts found in the literature related to the impact that personnel have on disciplinary referrals are individual teacher referral practices (Barnes & Motz, 2018), inexperience with disability/mental health (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021), and administrator attitudes toward discipline (Damone et al., 2019).

The proposed change idea related to implicit bias and classroom management styles was to implement a training with teachers and staff at the 9th grade campus. The literature supports the notion that providing trainings to teachers on trauma-informed and positive discipline strategies can result in an overall reduction of office discipline referrals (Barnes & Motz, 2018;

Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010). In addition, training in restorative justice practices and implicit bias has been found to reduce both overall referrals and racial disparities in discipline (Cruz et al., 2021).

Primary Driver 2: Policy

Policy refers to state, district, and school level policies that impact discipline. As discussed in the literature review, zero tolerance policies are normative and inform school-level policy. The discipline policy in CSSD is not unlike most discipline policies found across the United States. It is grounded in punitive practices that are not necessarily culturally or racially responsive.

The secondary driver identified by the team was zero tolerance policy at the school and district levels. Zero tolerance discipline policies are associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline, especially for minority students (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019). The literature does not support the notion that highly punitive discipline structures make schools safer—in fact, the findings suggest that these types of policies are correlated with decreases in overall educational outcomes, including achievement, behavior, and high school graduation rates (Bal, 2016; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gerlinger, 2022).

The primary change idea related to this driver was to conduct an audit of the district and school-level discipline policy for cultural and racial biases. Next, the policy would be changed to reflect a culturally-responsive discipline code that is equitable for all students.

Primary Driver 3: MTSS

The district's MTSS is still in the beginning stages of development. Many schools have developed tiered systems to support academics, however, tiered systems for behavior are still

lacking and inconsistent across the system. This often results in reactive consequences as opposed to proactive intervention for students that demonstrate behavioral needs.

The secondary driver associated with MTSS was differentiated behavioral instruction that supports student needs. Research indicates that effectively implemented MTSS for behavior is correlated with reduced rates of exclusionary discipline, increased achievement, and increased teacher satisfaction (Bal, 2016; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2019).

The change idea that was generated in response to this driver was the use of school-based mentors. As previously discussed in the literature review, Henry and colleagues (2021) found that mentoring, in combination with motivational interviewing techniques, had a positive impact on behavior and grades. These findings are consistent with other studies. For example, a meta-analysis of 70 mentor programs found a moderate positive effect on youth outcomes (Raposa et al., 2018). It was hypothesized by the team that a school-based mentoring program at the freshman campus as a Tier 3 intervention for students identified as at-risk would serve two functions. First, it would provide a tiered support to students as a preventative intervention prior to referrals for district level hearings or DAEP placements. Second, in the event that a student is placed at the DAEP, mentors could serve as a bridge between the two settings.

Primary Driver 4: DAEP Policy & Process

The CSSD DAEP is expanding and policies are continuously evolving. There appears to be a lack of consensus across stakeholders (parents, teachers, administration, district level leadership, students, etc.) regarding the purpose of the DAEP. Students undergo regular performance reviews (Appendix C), however, reviews do not include a component to address behavioral concerns related to the disciplinary offense.

The secondary driver related to the DAEP process was performance reviews, as they are a key component of the DAEP process. Once students are placed at the DAEP, they participate in performance reviews every 4.5 weeks. The purpose of these reviews is to assess academic progress, attendance, and adherence to DAEP rules.

The change idea associated with the daily functioning of the DAEP was to introduce explicit skill instruction linked with behavioral goals. A considerable gap identified by the team during problem analysis is a lack of focus around behavior. The CSSD DAEP is a small setting with the potential to provide highly individualized behavioral interventions to students placed there. However, like many DAEPs across the country, the CSSD DAEP does not employ systematic behavioral instruction (Ballard & Bender, 2021). This change idea would involve incorporating a behavioral goal into the Performance Review. This goal would be set by students with their parents and the DAEP principal upon intake. The goal would then be linked with explicit, evidence-based skill instruction, and then reviewed during the Performance Review.

Primary Driver 5: Internalized Delinquency

As previously discussed in the literature review, recurring experiences with exclusionary discipline has a compounding impact on a student's sense of self (Mowen & Brent, 2016). Over time, students may internalize a sense of otherness, or delinquency, that can impact academic engagement and social/emotional/behavioral functioning. Further, the negative impact of exclusionary discipline continues into adulthood, significantly increasing chances of interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Bryan, 2017; Mowen & Brent, 2016). For this reason, internalized narratives regarding self—specifically delinquency—has been identified as a primary driver for student outcomes. It is important to

note that internalized delinquency is a *cumulative result of systems that inequitably meter exclusionary discipline to students* and not a deficit within the student.

A secondary driver identified by the team was sense of belonging. While delinquency narratives internalized by students can have a myriad of short and long-term effects, one measurable impact is that of belonging. Over the course of time, students receiving multiple instances of exclusionary discipline receive a message that they do not belong at school. Sense of belonging has been associated with higher levels of student motivation and engagement, improved attendance, decreased disciplinary incidents and higher levels of achievement/graduation rates (Kuttner, 2023).

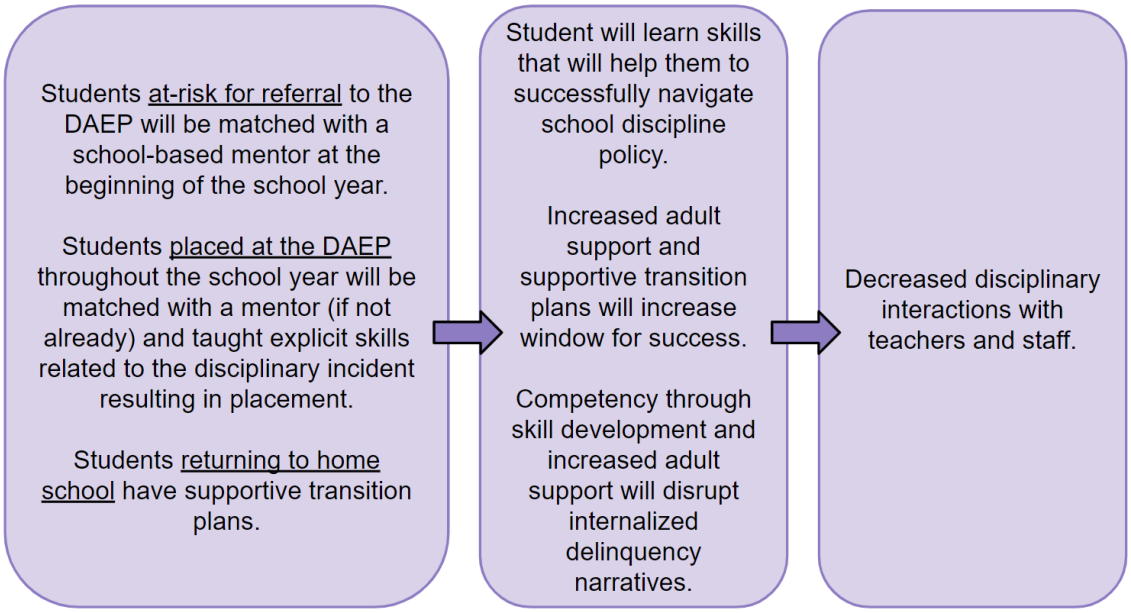
The primary change idea related to this driver is to increase sense of belonging through adult support. This would be done through a mentor program, as described above under Primary Driver 3.

Change Idea and Theory of Improvement

As illustrated by the driver diagram, there are multiple leverage points for change that would address the Problem of Practice. The team discussed each potential change idea within the context of CSSD as a system, as well as our scope of influence. Admittedly, the most effective driver for change would be to conduct an equity audit of the discipline code and propose changes to the policy to the board. However, considering our level of influence, it was determined that this would not be the most feasible change idea. The team determined that the most impactful change idea would be to bridge both settings (the freshman campus and DAEP) through increased adult support and explicit skill instruction, similar to the MARS mentoring intervention described in Chapter One.

Figure 2.2

Theory of Improvement



Based on the developed theory of improvement (Figure 2.2), a combination of school-based mentorship and explicit skill instruction during DAEP placement would increase school belonging, help students learn skills to be successful under the current discipline policy, and then transfer those skills to the school environment with ongoing adult support. It was hypothesized that when students receive messaging from adults that they belong at school, and have the skills and support to experience success, the developmental cascade (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010) will be disrupted and reversed—resulting in decreased disciplinary interactions after DAEP placement.

In summary, the driver diagram illustrates that there were multiple levers with the potential for improving educational outcomes for students placed at the DAEP. Drivers and change ideas were reviewed with consideration of the system, the literature, and feasibility of implementation by the implementers/users. Through this process, the team selected change ideas

that leverage MTSS practices and existing DAEP procedures. In the following section, these change ideas will be discussed in detail within the context of a PDSA cycle.

Do: Intervention Implementation

Through RCA and theory development, the team identified key components within the current disciplinary process and procedure that could be enhanced to provide additional supports to 9th grade students placed at the DAEP. Primary components of the intervention will include:

1. Pro Social-Skills Training: As previously discussed, students placed at the DAEP undergo regular performance reviews. These reviews include an assessment of the student's academic performance, attendance, and discipline. The team determined that the addition of a behavioral growth skill that relates to the placement offense may help students learn skills needed to meet behavioral expectations in the school building. This skill will be identified during the intake with the student and parent (see Appendix D). Then, the school psychologist will explicitly teach this skill through Skillstreaming, a psychoeducational curriculum that utilizes direct, systematic instruction of prosocial skills through modeling, role playing, feedback, and transfer opportunities (McGinnis et al., 2012, p. 2). See Appendix E for a curriculum synopsis and sample lesson.
2. Adult Support: A school-based mentor will be identified early in the school year for students identified as "at-risk" for DAEP placement. At-risk students will be determined based on prior years' data regarding district-level hearing referrals and DAEP placements. See Appendix F for mentor protocols.
3. Supportive Transition Plan: The use of supportive transition plans will be implemented to bridge intervention and skill development between the DAEP and the home school. See Appendix G for transition forms.

Each component of the intervention is intended to support skill development and provide adult support to students across settings through MTSS practices. As discussed in the literature review, use of tiered systems of support is effective in supporting the SEB needs of student populations (Bal, 2016; Fallon et al., 2021; Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2019). However, there has been limited research on which populations specifically benefit from such systems, whether these positive effects transcend known disparities in educational discipline practices, and the efficacy of tiered supports within DAEPs (Fallon et al., 2021). Research on effective practices in improving outcomes of students placed at DAEPs is hardly extensive; however, some studies show that explicit skill-teaching, mentoring programs, motivational interviewing, and somatic therapy have a positive impact (Baroni et al., 2020; Henry et al., 2021).

The theory of improvement (Figure 2.2) hypothesizes that the change idea will decrease disciplinary interactions after students return to the freshman campus from the DAEP. A logic model (Figure 2.3) illustrates in more detail how the proposed intervention will increase student sense of belonging, develop skills to navigate the district's behavioral expectations and have opportunities to practice those skills. In effect, this would essentially disrupt the developmental cascade of internalized delinquency and improve not only educational outcomes but also life outcomes.

Figure 2.3

Logic Model

Context	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-Term Outcomes	Long-Term Outcomes
9th grade students that are identified as either being 1) at-risk of being placed at DAEP based on prior rosters or 2) are placed at the DAEP through the disciplinary process will be provided with specific interventions and support in order to improve overall educational outcomes.	Use of Skillstreaming with students placed at DAEP to help support success in the school environment. Intentional matching of mentors to students. Supportive transition plan.	Integration of growth skill goal into current DAEP procedures (performance reviews). Individualized training and coaching with mentors. Development of supportive transition plan that allows for practice and application of learned skills.	Students feel connected to school and supported by adults—disrupts internalized deviant self-concept. Students have skills to meet behavioral expectations as set by policy.	Decreased disciplinary interactions, improved attendance and grades	Increased graduation rates. DAEP model shifts from a punitive model to a intervention-focused, supportive model.

During intervention planning, the team developed further details around intervention implementation:

1. At the beginning of the school year, the freshman campus team will review 8th grade DAEP rosters to identify incoming, at-risk 9th grade students. These students will be placed with a mentor. Mentors will be trained and coached by school administration.
2. When a student is referred to the DAEP, as part of the initial intake meeting, the team will work with the parent and student to determine a growth skill that relates to the disciplinary offense (Appendix D). The term "growth skill" will be used instead of "skill deficit" to encourage a growth mindset instead of a deficit mindset.
3. During the students' 4.5 weeks at the CSSD DAEP, they will participate in weekly, pro-social lessons related to their goal with the school psychologist (Appendix E).

4. Students will be paired with a school-based mentor from their home school, who will check-in with the student once weekly—with no other agenda but to build a relationship. Mentors will receive training that outlines expectations (Appendix F).
5. When the student is released from the CSSD DAEP, a supportive transition plan will be developed with the student, parent, and team at the student's home school (Appendix G).
6. Student progress will be monitored by the school-based MTSS team. The team will use a variety of data sources to track progress, including grades, attendance, and discipline interactions (see Appendix H).

These steps were intended to occur as part of the Do Phase of the PDSA cycle. The team determined that intervention implementation would occur during the first two quarters of the school year (August-December). The team would then convene in January to review student progress and determine next steps for implementation. These actions are referred to in improvement science as the Study and Act phases.

Figure 2.4

PDSA Timeline

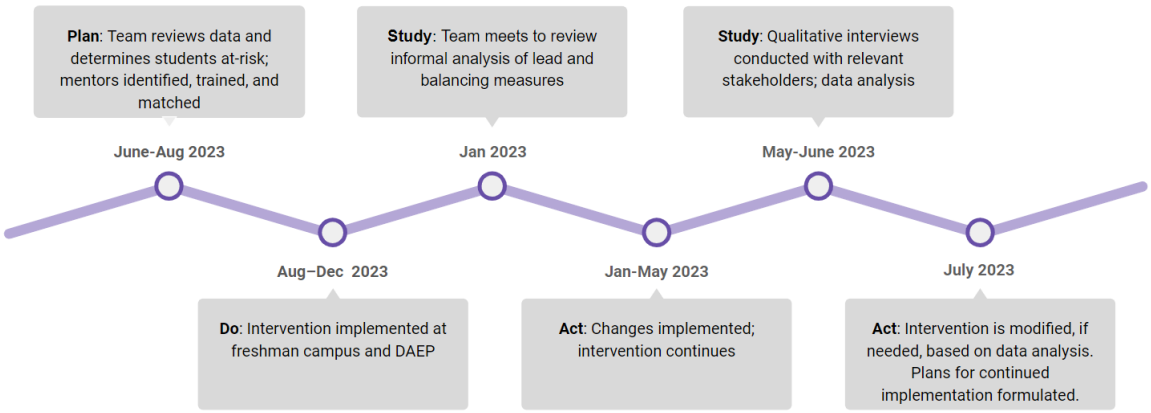


Figure 2.4 illustrates the intended timeline for intervention implementation, as well as the Study and Act phases of the PDSA cycle. These phases will be detailed in the following section, including a summary of proposed practical measurements for assessment of intervention impact.

Study/Act: Practical Measurement

The goal of improvement science is to identify problems of practice within a system and implement a change idea that results in a positive impact on the problem. In order to determine if a change idea is effective, improvement science utilizes practical measurement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Practical measures are directly related to the identified drivers in the theory of improvement, are collected often, and used to plan next steps for implementation (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). There are four primary types of practical measurement utilized in an improvement science design: outcome, driver, process, and balance measures (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry et al., 2020). In the following sections, each type of measure will be defined within the context of both improvement science and this study.

Outcome Measure

An outcome measure evaluates the impact of the change idea on the Problem of Practice and directly correlates with the aim statement (Perry et al., 2020). An outcome measure is infrequent and analyzed after the intervention is implemented (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). In the context of this study, the outcome measure being utilized is disciplinary interactions, as measured by office discipline referrals and log entries. The frequency of disciplinary interactions experienced by students after they return to the freshman campus after their placement at the DAEP were measured and compared with incidents prior to placement.

Driver Measure

Driver measures aid scholarly practitioners in determining whether the change idea is having an impact on the system (Perry et al., 2020). Driver measures are meant to measure changes in the primary and secondary drivers identified through RCA. As stated by Perry et al. (2020), “whereas outcome measures let us know if the changed worked…driver measures let us

know if the change is working." In terms of frequency, driver measurement occurs more frequently than an outcome measure, but less frequently than process measures (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

The primary drivers related to the chosen change idea in this study are Policies & Procedures related to DAEP placement, school-based MTSS practices, and sense of belonging. Secondary drivers are performance reviews, explicit skill teaching, and differentiated Tier 3 interventions. The driver measures utilized in this study are as follows:

1. DAEP Policy & Procedure/Performance Reviews: Documents were collected and reviewed quarterly to ensure that the growth skill is discussed at performance reviews and transition meetings.
2. MTSS Practices: MTSS practices and implementation were measured with a teacher/staff survey (see Appendix I). This was a brief survey that gaged teacher and staff perceptions regarding behavioral MTSS practices at the school level.
3. Sense of Belonging: Student sense of belonging was measured utilizing a brief Sense of Belonging scale (Appendix J) developed by Boston College as part of a multi-component international study. Permission to use this scale was acquired.

Process Measure

The process measure is meant to quickly and frequently measure whether the change idea is working as predicted (Perry et al., 2020). Process measures occur most frequently and often include surveys, checklists, rubrics, observations, and other measures of fidelity (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Three process measures were used as part of this study. First, a checklist (Appendix H) was utilized during bi-weekly MTSS meetings at the freshman campus to verify intervention implementation (mentoring and check-ins), as well as to monitor academic,

behavioral, and attendance progress of students that were placed at or returned from the DAEP. Second, a Child Session Rating Scale (CSRS) was utilized with students receiving direct skills instruction at the DAEP. The CSRS (Appendix L) is a brief, four item scale that is often used by counselors to measure the effectiveness of a session from the client's perspective (Duncan et al., 2003). This scale was adapted to the purpose of this study and used to measure student perspectives on Skillstreaming lesson sessions. Third, qualitative interviews were conducted with students, parents, and educators that participated in the intervention. These interviews were transcribed and coded to identify important themes regarding stakeholder attitudes and perceptions of the intervention.

Balance Measure

Finally, balancing measures are "like vital signs" of the system (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 145). These measures help to ensure that the change idea is not producing negative, unintended effects on the system. Balancing measures in this study included attendance, disciplinary interactions, and grades for students that were placed at the DAEP and returned to the home school. In addition, the number of district level hearings and DAEP referrals for this school year was compared to previous years.

Methods of Data Analysis

This section details analysis methods applied in this study. Data gathered through practical measures were analyzed utilizing a multi-methods approach that involved both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative methods included the use of Shewart charts, independent-samples T-test, and dependent samples T-test. Qualitative methods included iterative rounds of coding of semi-structured interviews and MTSS notes. Each method is described in further detail below.

Shewart Charts

A Shewart chart, a type of control chart, was used to assess for changes over time in hearing data and alternative placements (Kahraman & Yanik, 2016). These charts were created for both district-level data as well as data from the freshman campus. The purpose of utilizing a Shewart chart was to determine if the intervention had any effect on the system.

t-tests

Independent and paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted to analyze balancing and outcome measures. An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare end of year class period absences between 9th grade students placed at the DAEP, and 9th grade students placed at the DAEP that received intervention. The same analysis was run to compare end of year GPAs between the two groups. In addition, a paired-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in disciplinary interactions received by the intervention group before placement at the DAEP and after.

Descriptive and Visual Analysis

An MTSS survey was conducted with teachers as a driver measure. Results of this survey will be analyzed using descriptive methods and visual analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with users of the intervention as an outcome and process measure. These interviews were conducted with four educators, two parents, and one student. In addition to these interviews, MTSS notes were gathered with relevant details regarding students that received intervention at the DAEP. Both deductive and inductive coding strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021) were used to analyze for themes:

- Round One: A first round of coding was conducted using deductive structural codes related to the research questions and theoretical framework of this study.
- Round Two: A second round of inductive, open coding included in-vivo and descriptive codes.
- Round Three: A third round of coding was conducted, focusing on themes and values.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

There are a number of ethical considerations that will guide this research study moving forward. Some components of this study are currently occurring as part of a school-based intervention that is being implemented as part of standard school operations. However, a portion of data analysis and collection will rely on direct contact with participants in the form of formal interviews and surveys. In addition, findings from this study will be shared publicly and used to inform and further research regarding exclusionary discipline practices in public schools. Therefore, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Clemson University will be required for data analysis and involvement of human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study will rely on involvement of students, educators, and parents, which means that certain ethical considerations regarding human subjects is warranted. First, informed consent will be obtained from interview participants and guardians. Informed consent involves communicating the purpose of the study and ensuring the participant understands that participation is voluntary (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, it is important to reduce potential harm to participants by protecting confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This will be done by using pseudonyms for the research site and participants.

As a member of the organization I am researching, it is also important to not “lose track of the need to present multiple perspectives and a complex picture of the central phenomenon”

(Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p.57). This means that I will need to be mindful of gathering and reporting multiple perspectives so that a holistic portrait of the research findings can be presented.

Finally, it is important to discuss the potential limitations of this study. While the findings of this study do have the potential to provide insight for schools and districts with similar populations, it should be noted that the sample size of students receiving the intervention is fairly small and non-randomized. This does impact the generalizability of results. In addition, the proposed intervention in this study involves multiple components that are reliant on fidelity of implementation by various educators. When conducting action research within a school setting, it is challenging to control for all variables that may impact fidelity of implementation, which impacts the final results of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

In this chapter, I will discuss research findings. As previously discussed, this study utilizes an improvement science design, using a PDSA cycle to address an identified Problem of Practice. Whereas the previous two chapters focused primarily on the Plan stage of the PDSA cycle, this chapter will present results within the context of the Do and Study phases. This will be accomplished by first detailing the intervention implementation phase that occurred during the months of August-December of 2024. While there were "wins" that took place during implementation, there were also a number of challenges that impacted both the intervention design and fidelity of implementation. Acknowledging the implementation process allows for a more holistic interpretation of qualitative and quantitative results.

Next, data analysis and findings will be presented and discussed. This study utilizes practical measurements consistent with an improvement science design. In addition, multiple statistical methods were used to further analyze data collected throughout the Do phase. These findings will be discussed within the context of emerging patterns and themes that aim to answer this study's research questions. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of the final stage of the PDSA cycle: the Act phase.

Implementation Journey

In this section, I will discuss the implementation of the change idea, which occurred from August of 2023-December of 2023. The change idea included three primary components: mentorship, skill teaching, and supportive transition. The implementation process, including insights from process measures, will be described within the context of these components.

Finally, this section will conclude with a discussion of successes and challenges associated with implementation, with a focus on how these factors impacted fidelity.

Mentorship and Adult Support

During the months of July and August, the team worked to define protocols for the mentor program, recruit teacher/staff mentors, and create forms for data collection and fidelity. In addition, the MTSS team at the freshman campus met to review rising 9th grade student data to identify at-risk students based on historical hearing referrals and DAEP placements. It was determined that Tier 3 students would be matched with a mentor and Tier 2 students would receive a check-in with an administrator at the beginning of the year. The team aimed to have mentors recruited and trained by August 7th so that the intervention could begin on August 14th (second week of school).

Unfortunately, the team had significant challenges in recruiting individuals to serve as mentors. Recruitment attempts included e-mails and in-person appeals during teacher/staff meetings. However, despite these efforts, only one teacher volunteered to serve as a student mentor by the August 7th date. At an MTSS meeting the week of August 21st, the team reconsidered how adult support could be provided to at-risk students, and students that may be placed at the DAEP.

It was determined that the assistant principal and academic interventionist would provide periodic check-ins with students that were placed at the DAEP. A specific frequency was not defined due to the fact that both individuals are not housed at the DAEP and would have to find time in their daily schedule to travel there in the midst of daily operations at the freshman campus. However, MTSS check-list and logs indicate that check-ins occurred on a weekly to bi-weekly basis. These check-ins would be an informal, positive meeting to remind students of their

goals and offer support in accomplishing those goals. In addition, it served as an opportunity to remind the student that they were still a student of the freshman campus, and that adults were looking forward to their return. In addition to these check-ins, students that returned to the freshman campus from DAEP would receive quarterly check-ins from the DAEP behavior coach. This check-in would serve to remind the student of any skills learned while at the DAEP, as well as provide an additional opportunity for the student to seek support.

Through the months of September-December, MTSS forms were used to document data conversations regarding students that had been placed at or returned from DAEP, including check-ins from adults across settings.

Skill-Teaching

Skill-teaching was accomplished through two modalities: working with students to set a behavioral growth goal as part of their in-take at the DAEP, and explicit skill instruction with this researcher (a school psychologist). Before the school year began, forms and protocols used by the DAEP principal were modified to include a Behavioral Growth Goal. While this study focused on 9th grade students, the principal planned to use this with all students that were placed at the DAEP. The DAEP principal planned to use this form as part of each student's intake meeting.

Explicit skill instruction took place utilizing the Skillstreaming curriculum. Once students were placed at the DAEP, administration would send an email as notification of the student's placement. The student would then have an initial intake where we would discuss the student's identified Growth Goal, as well as skills related to meeting that goal. Then, I would meet with the student on Fridays (or Monday if they were absent) to deliver Skillstreaming lessons

associated with the student's goal. This intervention component took place from August-December for 9th grade students placed at the DAEP during that time frame.

The Skillstreaming curriculum is designed to be delivered to small groups of students. However, the delivery was adjusted to working with students individually. The primary reason for this was that given the small sample size, it was predicted that only one student from the freshman campus may be placed at the DAEP at any given time. Instead of waiting for another freshman to be placed, the team felt it best to initiate skill instruction immediately.

Supportive Transition

The third component of the intervention was the implementation of supportive transition from the DAEP to the home school. This was accomplished through a conference with the student and parent prior to re-entering the freshman campus. Using a form (Appendix G), the team developed a plan for support utilizing existing MTSS structures with input from the student and parent. The student's progress was then reviewed at MTSS meetings.

Implementation: Challenges with Fidelity, Strengths in Attitude

Effective intervention implementation requires fidelity. Intervention fidelity can be conceptualized into five components: adherence to design, participant exposure, quality, participant responsiveness, and differentiation (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Mihalic, 2004). During the planning stages in the summer of 2023, our team was enthusiastic and hopeful, expressing a commitment to executing all facets of the intervention. However, as time progressed, we were met with challenges that significantly impacted adherence to the original design of the intervention, student exposure, and quality of delivery.

As early as August, it was clear that issues with capacity would require us to change course. We could not recruit enough volunteers to serve as school-based mentors. While the team

was creative in devising an alternative method of providing adult support to students, the solution resulted in an intervention with lesser intensity and frequency. In addition to challenges with staffing capacity, the team was also met with challenges related to time. MTSS meetings were regular and consistent for Quarters 1 and 2, however, as the school year progressed, meetings became less consistent.

Finally, my personal capacity to deliver the Skillstreaming intervention at a maximum dosage was diminished by the fact that I am not based at the DAEP. Many students that were placed at the DAEP did not consistently attend school, meaning that if they were not there on a Friday or Monday, I could not always deliver the intervention that week. In addition, the Skillstreaming intervention was adapted from its original format as a group intervention to an individual intervention. While I did help students practice skills by roleplaying different scenarios with them, it is likely that roleplaying with peers is more effective. It's important to note this change because it impacts the quality of the intervention.

In addition to capacity, effective communication was a roadblock to effective implementation. Swift and consistent delivery of the Skillstreaming instruction was reliant on administration communicating with me when students were placed at alt. This communication was inconsistent and often resulted in my learning about a student's placement weeks after they had arrived. This, along with my physical distance from the DAEP throughout the week had an impact on student exposure to the intervention.

It was mentioned at the beginning of this section that during the Planning phase, the team was enthusiastic and voiced commitment. These attitudes did not change throughout the entire cycle, which in my opinion, is a mitigating factor. While it is true that intention alone does not bring about meaningful change, it is also true that buy-in is half the battle when implementing

new practices. With every challenge, the educators that comprised our improvement team were open-minded and demonstrated care and concern for our target students. The general attitude toward intervention components was positive and the intention was to follow through.

Results

In this section, I will present qualitative and quantitative data results derived from the practical measures as described in the previous chapter. I will begin with a quantitative analysis of outcome, balancing, and driver measures. Then, I will discuss thematic findings from a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with educators, parents, and students involved with the intervention this year.

Balance Measures

The balance measures utilized in this study were attendance and academics. In order to test whether there was a significant difference in total class period absences between the 9th graders that received intervention (N=8) and all 9th grade students placed at the DAEP (N=10), an independent samples t-test was performed. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied with the Leven's F test, $F(16)=1.726$, $p=.208$ (Table 3.1). It should be noted, validity of this measure is impacted by the fact that the data was right skewed and leptokurtic (Table 3.1). The t-test indicated that there was not a significant difference in total absences between 9th grade students that received the intervention (M=206.5, SD=160.87) and those that did not (M=97.2, SD=117.58), $t(16)=-1.667$, $p=.115$ (Table 3.2).

Table 3.1

Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Normality and Variance for Absences and GPA

	DAEP Only			DAEP Intervention			Levene's Test			
Variable	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	F	Sig	Skew	Kurtosis
Absences	10	97.2	117.58	8	206.5	160.86	1.726	.208	1.613	1.93
GPA	10	1.41	.80	8	1.48	.80	.32	.58	-.13	.168

Note: DAEP Only refers to 9th graders placed at the DAEP that did not receive intervention. DAEP Intervention refers to the group that received the intervention.

A second independent samples t-test was performed to measure whether there was a significant difference in academic achievement, using final GPA as a metric. Again, assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied using Leven's F test, $F(16)=.32$, $p=.58$ (Table 3.1). GPA distributions were found to be normal. Results of the t-test (Table 3.2) indicate that there was not a significant difference in final GPA between students that had received the intervention ($M=1.48$, $SD=.80$) and those that did not ($M=1.41$, $SD=.80$), $t(16)=-.189$, $p=.853$.

Table 3.2

Results of Independent Samples t-tests

	DAEP Only			DAEP Intervention			*t*-test		95% CI	
Variable	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	t(16)	P	Lower	Upper
Absences	10	97.2	117.58	8	206.5	160.86	-1.667	.115	-248.27	29.67
GPA	10	1.41	.80	8	1.48	.80	-.189	.853	-.88	.73

Overall, these results indicate that while there were slight differences in attendance and academic achievement between the two groups, these differences are not statistically significant. In terms of a balance measure, this suggests that the intervention did not have any significant, unintended consequences. However, it also indicates that the intervention did not necessarily help to improve attendance and achievement outcomes for 9th graders referred to the DAEP.

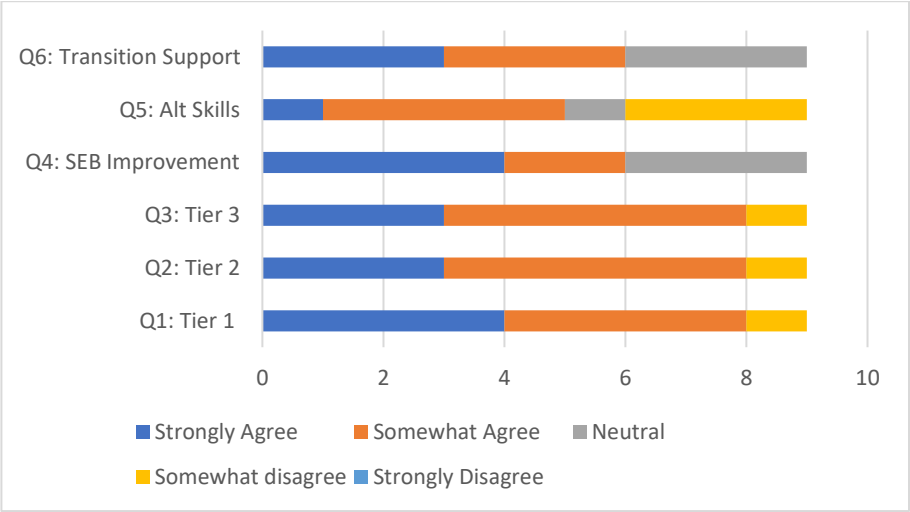
Driver Measures

The proposed driver measures in this study were a brief survey conducted with faculty and staff at the freshman campus regarding overall MTSS practices, a Sense of Belonging Scale, and document collection to confirm the adoption of the behavioral growth goal into performance reviews. The Sense of Belonging scale was a measure that was intended to be utilized as part of the mentor program. Since this component was not implemented, this measure was not utilized. Document collection indicated that the Behavior Growth Goal was utilized for each student, however, it was not always set immediately upon a student's enrollment. The goal was also not adopted into official performance reviews, or always clearly communicated to the home school.

The MTSS Survey (Appendix I) consisted of six basic questions regarding MTSS at the school level. The purpose of this survey was to measure impact of the change idea on overall MTSS functioning on the school level. Of the 18 individuals that received the survey, 9 responded (50% response rate). Survey results are below.

Figure 3.1

MTSS Survey Results



Note: See Appendix I for full survey questions.

Results of the MTSS survey (Figure 3.1) suggest that overall, teachers and staff at the freshman campus agree that Tier 1, 2, and 3 instruction and interventions are taking place at the school level. In addition, 6 out of 9 respondents indicate that they perceive these practices as improving since last school year. However, there is less consensus regarding intervention specific to students placed at the DAEP. Five respondents endorsed responses indicating that students are learning behavioral skills at the DAEP, and three indicated the students do not appear to be learning these skills. Regarding supports available to students as they transition from the DAEP back to the freshman campus, 6 out of 9 respondents indicated that supports are adequate, and three indicated that they did not agree or disagree.

Overall, results associated with the driver measures indicate that there were positive changes in DAEP Policy and Process, and school-level MTSS practices.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcome measure in this study was discipline outcomes for students that participated in the intervention. Discipline outcomes were measured using disciplinary referrals, as well as disciplinary interactions that were recorded by teachers, but did not result in an official referral. A comparison of means suggests that the average number of interactions experienced by students (N=8) was reduced from 1.63 to .63.

Table 3.3

Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Normality for Disciplinary Interactions Pre/Post

Variable	N	M	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
DI Pre	8	1.62	1.06	1.96	3.93
DI Post	8	.62	1.41	2.53	6.5

A paired-samples t-test was performed to determine if that difference was statistically significant. In order to test this hypothesis, disciplinary incidents before being placed at the DAEP (*M*=1.63, *SD*=1.06) were compared to those received after returning to the freshman campus (*M*=.63, *SD*=1.41). The assumption of normal distribution of data was explored. It was found that both data sets were right skewed and leptokurtic (Table 3.3), therefore, this assumption was not satisfied, impacting the validity of this measure. Results of the *t*-test indicate that there was not a significant difference in disciplinary interactions before and after DAEP placement, *t*(7)=1.41, *p*=.20 (Table 3.4). While not technically significant, a p-value of .20 indicates that these results would only occur 20% of the time due to chance.

Table 3.4

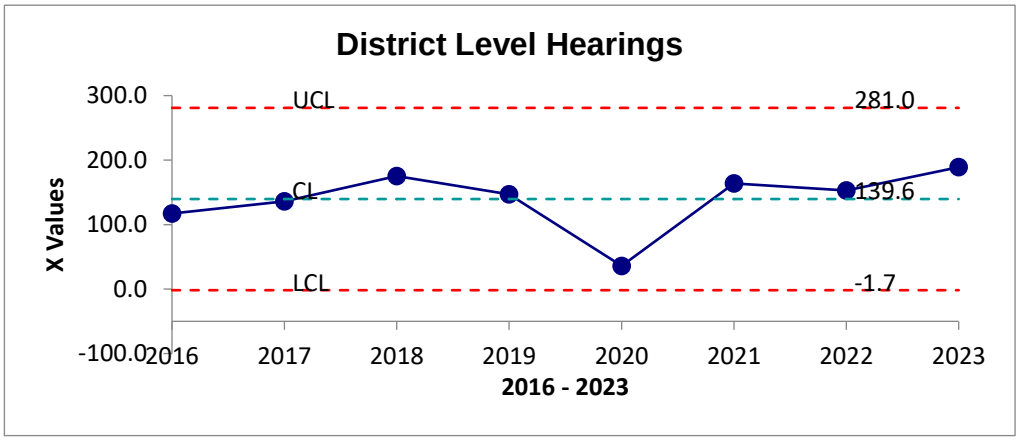
Results of Paired Samples t-test

			t-test		95% CI	
	M	SD	*t*(7)	*p*	Lower	Upper
DI Pre/Post	1	2	1.414	.2	-.672	2.67

In order to assess for variation in both district and school level hearing data, Shewhart charts were utilized. First, the number of district level hearings was charted to measure for variance in overall referrals for hearings (Figure 3.2). As discussed in the beginning chapter, the charts illustrate an overall upward trend in hearing referrals, with the exception of the 2020 school year, when a majority of students were engaged in virtual learning due to COVID-19. Hearing data from this school year indicates a continuation of this trend both at the district and school level. Overall, data points are within the upper and lower control limits, indicating that the system is fairly stable.

Figure 3.2

Shewhart Charts of District Level and Freshman Campus Hearings



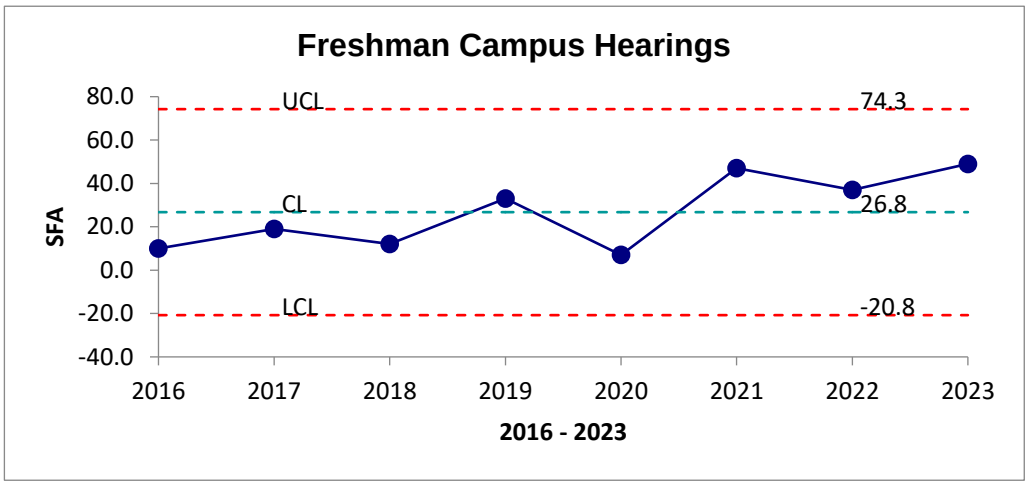
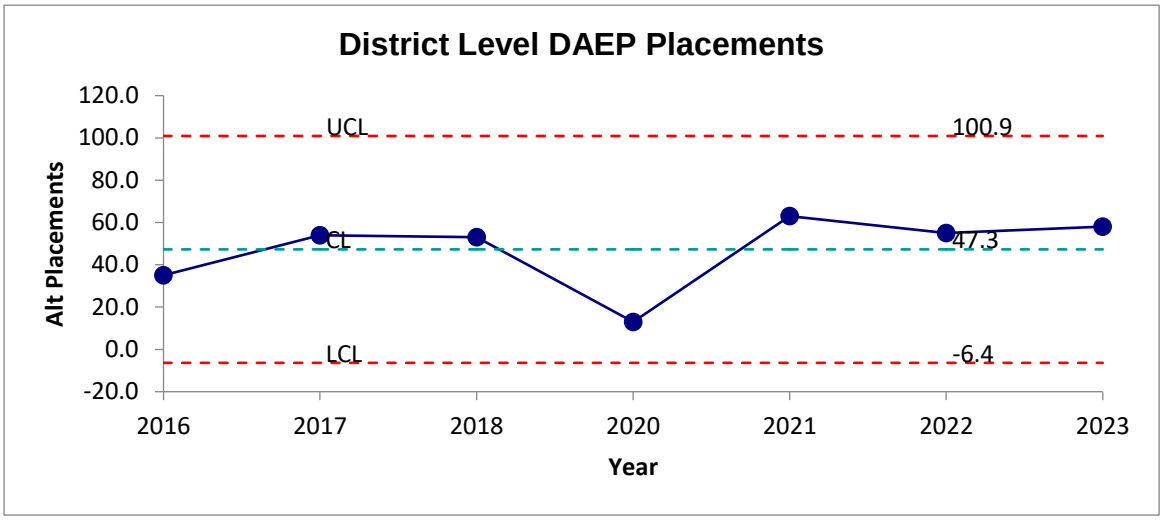
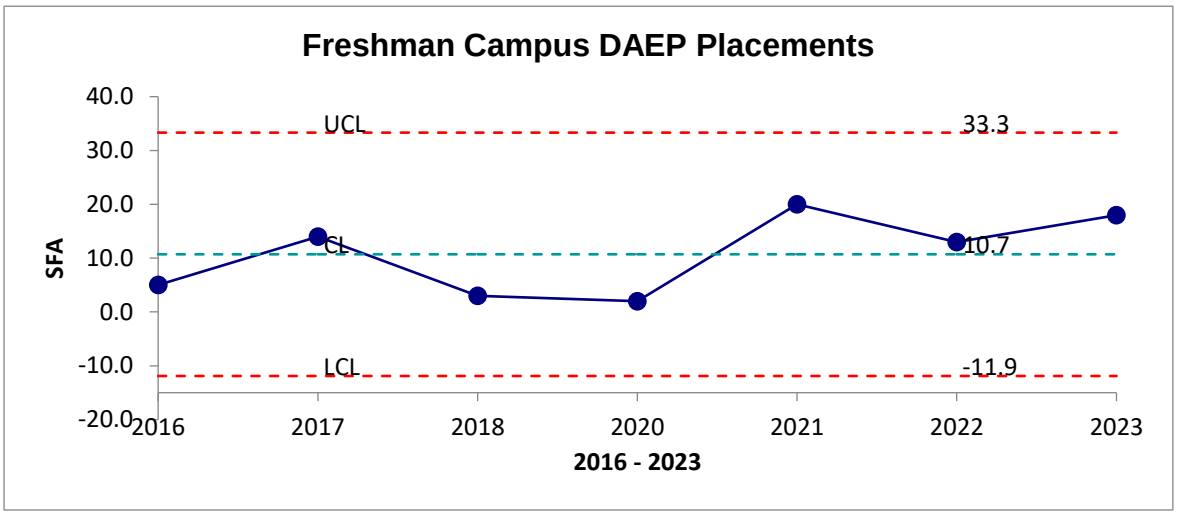


Figure 3.3 illustrates the number of DAEP placements overtime, both at the district and school level. When interpreting a Shewhart chart, a “trend” is defined as 6 or more data points that are decreasing or increasing (Kahraman & Yanik, 2016). Based on this method of analysis, while the system is stable, the data suggest the beginning stages of a continued upward trend in hearings and DAEP placements. Overall, this suggests that the change idea was not large enough in scale to disrupt the existing pattern on a school or district-level.

Figure 3.3

Shewhart Charts of District Level and Freshman Campus DAEP Placements





Note: There was not data available for the 2019-2020 school year for hearing outcomes.

In summary, the outcome measures described above suggest that there was a reduction in disciplinary interactions experienced by students that received the intervention. While this difference may not be statistically significant, it is likely that the small sample size of students that participated in the intervention had an impact on the power of the analyses performed. Further qualitative analysis, below, emphasizes the *felt* impact of the change idea on key stakeholders.

Qualitative Results

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals that were involved with the intervention. Four educators, two parents, and one student participated in interviews either in-person or over the phone. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the coding process outlined in the previous chapter. Final analysis yielded themes around equity, insufficiency of policy, and the need for effective intervention.

Equity: Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit

Perspectives regarding the equity of CSSD's discipline policy varied depending on role. Administrators expressed an appreciation for the policy, citing consistency, uniformity, and precedent as strengths. One administrator stated that referring to precedent "helps keep things equitable across the board." Another suggested that the policy is "equity-based" because it "ensures that…students are receiving [the same] certain consequences." Overall, administrators appeared to be using the terms consistency and equity interchangeably in conversations about policy.

There were some educators, especially those with more of a support role, that expressed concerns that the policy doesn't always feel "appropriate…it's very black and white, [but] students are people and things are just not as black and white." These educators voiced that although the goal is to apply discipline consistently across all students, there are also individual factors that "differentiate" outcomes. Such factors cited by participants included internet access, transportation, age/development and disability status.

While it appears educators are striving to apply the policy consistently, this consistency is not necessarily felt by parents and students. Parents expressed concerns that some students receive preferential treatment—specifically if they have parents who are educators, or if they've

been in the community a long time. One parent stated, “it seems like there’s nepotism.” Another described an instance where her child was experiencing relational conflict with another student, which eventually resulted in a physical altercation. This parent expressed concerns that the situation was preventable, but wasn’t addressed early enough because the other student’s parent is a teacher in the district.

Policy without Intervention is Insufficient

An area of consensus in participant perspectives was that consequences in the absence of intervention is unproductive. One administrator discussed a recent change to the policy where vape infractions were recoded to yield a higher consequence, with the intention of deterring vapes at school. However, the outcome appeared to be even more suspensions related to vapes than last school year. That administrator stated:

> Now we’re suspending more kids when we weren’t doing that before. Not only are we suspending more kids, the actual statute says we have to have a treatment for them if we’re going to do that, but we don’t have a treatment, so we’re not following policy, right? So, with me, the whole thing is that we have to make sure that we understand what it is we’re really looking to do. For me, it’s always, discipline is about a change of behavior. That’s the whole thing. It’s not to give a consequence, it’s to change the behavior.

Another administrator echoed these sentiments, expressing that policy provides “accountability” but that:

> there has to be intervention that goes along with it. It’s not one and done. I always tell my staff members, writing a kid up is not going to change their behavior. Some kids could care less to be honest with you. And the consequence doesn’t align with the behavior,

> because [they] get to go home….there's two fold: the code of conduct and intervention. If there's no intervention, it doesn't matter about the code.

A student confirmed this administrator's theory that excluding a student from the learning environment isn't effective, stating, "I ain't gonna lie, the suspending me and stuff. That don't do nothing but make me not want to come to school ever again…getting kicked out, that's not doing nothing."

"Listen to Me When I First Tell You"

How do we effectively intervene with students? This study implemented a behavioral skill-teaching intervention, which garnered generally positive feedback. Educators appreciated having a "structure" that could be used to "build capacity in students." Parents expressed that communication logs detailing what skill their student was working on helped them to "reiterate" and practice skills at home. One parent believed that the skills her child learned while at the DAEP helped her to stay at the freshman campus longer:

> Basically, I thought it was real good because it was like. Okay, from the old school she went to, it was like, she got in trouble. She went to alternative school. They sent her back to regular school, and she got in trouble again, and they sent her back to alternative school. So she had to finish out the year over there, but see this year when she ended up going to CSSD. So she got into the fight. Her first fight, got in trouble, went to alternative school, came back like the not even the middle of the year, but close to the middle of the year, and finish out with no problems at all. Right? Now you got little like, you know, little referrals, but it was no major referrals, to the point where you but you can tell that she's making a difference. So it was like, whatever she learned there at the alternative school, It made her not want to go back. And I really appreciate it.

In contrast, there were concerns regarding transference of skills back into the home school due to lack of communication and decreased staffing capacity. One educator stated, “for us on the school level, when they returned…to us, it is difficult to keep that going.” A parent noted that while at the DAEP, her child “was able to bring her grades up a lot…but it’s kind of deceiving.” While her student was making above average grades in the smaller setting, her grades plummeted once returning to the freshman campus. These observations are consistent with ongoing notes from MTSS meetings regarding *who* would implement interventions and *how* to provide adult support without assigned mentors.

While participants had positive comments regarding social/emotional skill building, what emerged as a more prolific theme was the need for social/emotional *support* from adults. While the exact type of support suggested was varied (mentoring, coaching, parents, therapy, etc.), the commonality was that students need adults to help them solve modern-day problems. This concept is best summarized by Jessica, a 9th grade student that was placed at the DAEP this year for a physical altercation: “I feel like will be more helpful if you listen to me when I first tell you. If I'm telling you constantly, somebody bothering me...if I'm telling you something bothering me and you don't do nothing, I'm going to take it into my own hands.”

Modern Problems

What are the modern-day problems faced by students? Social media, cellphones, and cyber-bullying were a few challenges identified. “Phones are our big issue…these kids just literally cannot function without a phone,” stated one administrator. Social media and constant cell phone use not only creates a distraction from instruction, but also opens up additional opportunity for bullying and social conflicts: “kids can put something up for 24 hours and then

it's gone and creates an issue in the school…there's a lot of inappropriate interactions that happen over technology…the majority of what we deal with is that it happened on social media, and then the kids get together at school." Vapes were also consistently brought up as a challenge that results in discipline. An educator at the DAEP stated that "about 60% of our kids at one time were all up here for some type of vape charge."

Educators often cited "society" and "societal factors" as challenges. Administrators made note that students placed at DAEP face significant stressors at home. Two students experienced the death of a parent. One student was removed from their home and placed in state care. In reflecting on an experience with a student in the past, an educator shared, "It would usually end up that something would happen in their home life, but we had a kid that was doing great. I mean, he was just doing excellent, then his dad got put in jail. And when his dad got put in jail, it just wrecked this whole world, everything he'd been working, he was a leader, all of those sort of things. But then he just went off the cliff. He started acting up." These factors were often discussed in relation to the impact on mental health, and the need for additional mental health supports in schools.

In summary, individuals that participated in interviews expressed varied attitudes regarding equity and fairness of policy, which was typically dependent on their role. An encouraging finding was that all educators identified that policy without intervention is ineffective. Assessments of this study's intervention were positive, however, concerns regarding transference and sustainability were identified. What appeared to be a more salient factor in student success is social/emotional support through adults.

Data Synthesis

In this section, I will discuss the results from the preceding sections in context of this study's Problem of Practice and research questions. I will begin with a brief review of this study's aim and guiding research questions. I will then address the research questions in light of the findings described above.

The Problem of Practice that guides this study is the increasing rates of exclusionary discipline in CSSD, with a focus on DAEPs. This study utilized an improvement science design with multiple methods of analysis, and aimed at reducing disciplinary interactions experienced by 9th grade students placed at DAEP by 50% through the implementation of a three-pronged intervention that included mentorship, skill-building, and supportive transition. The mean number of referrals of students placed at DAEP was reduced from an average of 1.62 to .62, indicating a 50% reduction (Table 3.3). A paired-samples t-test did indicate that this is not necessarily a statistically significant reduction.

In regards to the overall effectiveness of the intervention, quantitative analysis suggests that the intervention did not have a significant impact on district or school level hearings and DAEP placements. A survey indicates that the intervention had some positive influence on school-level MTSS (Primary Driver 3). Qualitative analysis through interviews and document collection suggests that the intervention did have some impact on DAEP Policy and Process (Primary Driver 4). In addition, qualitative interviews indicate overall positive feedback regarding skill-teaching, but did yield next steps for improvement around fidelity and transference.

In addition to the aim, this study posed the following questions:

1. How can disciplinary alternative education programs be leveraged to mitigate, rather than perpetuate, educational inequities caused by exclusionary disciplinary practices?
2. How does supporting the social/emotional/behavior needs of marginalized students placed at disciplinary alternative education programs impact their overall educational outcomes?

The first research question seeks to understand how DAEPs can be used to mitigate educational inequities. In light of the findings, DAEPs can mitigate educational inequities through targeted, individualized support that balances skill instruction with adult support. Students that receive exclusionary discipline are facing challenges that have a direct impact on their social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. The supportive engagement of empathetic adults is a critical component that allows for successful skill development, as well as transference of skills into other settings.

The second research question aims to understand how supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students placed at DAEP impacts overall educational outcomes. Quantitative analyses indicate there was not a significant difference (negative or positive) in attendance or GPA for students that received the intervention. A comparison of means indicates that there was a decrease in disciplinary interactions. Based on interviews, supporting social emotional needs of students through skill building had a positive impact on student success. Parents and educators noted a perceived reduction in repeated offenses. All perspectives lauded the importance of adult support.

In summary, the change idea appears to have had a positive impact on the Problem of Practice, as evidenced through a reduction in referrals, MTSS survey responses, and feedback from interviews. Balance measures and Shewhart charts indicate that there were no unintended,

negative consequences as a result of the change idea. The next section will introduce the Act phase of the PDSA cycle in light of these findings.

Spreading Change through Action

Next, I will discuss the final phase of the PDSA cycle: Act. During the Act phase, the team uses results from practical measures to determine whether the change idea should be adopted, adapted, or abandoned (Bryk et al., 2015). This section will detail recommended next steps in adapting the intervention, including adjustments, further research, and systemic factors that will impact the next cycle.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, intervention implementation was met with issues of fidelity and sustainability. While users reported that they found value in aspects of the intervention, and there is evidence of positive impact, it is recommended that the intervention be simplified for more focused implementation. Given that the intervention included three components (prevention, intervention, postvention), a simplified adaptation of this intervention would be to focus on one component of the original intervention plan. Based on feedback from interviews, it is recommended that the team shift focus away from skill-teaching toward adult support (both as a prevention and intervention). Recruiting individual mentors for students proved to be a challenge at the start of this PDSA cycle. Therefore, rather than seeking to recruit individualized mentors for students, the focus will be increasing generalized adult support through educators at the DAEP and freshman campus. This will be accomplished through the following:

1. Providing skill training to educators at the beginning of the school year regarding positive discipline techniques with a focus on mental health and social/emotional functioning. This harkens back to research discussed in Chapter One, which

suggests that training teachers and staff in restorative discipline practices has a positive impact (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010).

2. Leveraging the existing Behavior Growth Goal form to increase communication between adults regarding specific student needs. The rationale being that if educators with training have an awareness of student needs, they can provide more effective support.
3. Incorporating the Behavioral Growth Goal into Performance Reviews.

For the purposes of continued research, it is recommended that the adapted intervention be expanded to all 9th grade students for the entirety of the school year, with the intention of gathering a larger sample size for analysis. Additionally, given that the Sense of Belonging Scale was not utilized during this PDSA cycle, it is recommended that it be used in the next iteration. This will allow for a more robust measurement of Sense of Belonging as a driver in disrupting the developmental cascade.

Regarding potential challenges to continued implementation, it will be important for the team to create a clear protocol and process for timely communication. In this past cycle, communication was inconsistent between myself and administrators, which resulted in some students not receiving immediate intervention after placement.

In summary, the change idea will be adapted to focus on adult support, simplified for fidelity, and expanded for increased effect size. The importance of increased support from adults was a theme that emerged through interviews and is also supported through the existing research.

Conclusion

This study sought to address increasing rates of exclusionary discipline and associated negative outcomes through an improvement science design, utilizing a PDSA cycle. This section will conclude with a summary of the PDSA cycle, findings, and next steps.

During the Plan phase, the team conducted an analysis of the system, in light of the extant research, to develop a change idea that addressed multiple system drivers. This phase of the PDSA cycle went smoothly and was marked with collaboration and excitement. However, the Do phase presented with some challenges. First, the team was unable to recruit enough mentors to implement the mentorship component of the planned intervention, requiring some significant adjustments. Second, as time progressed, there were break downs in communication and capacity that impacted fidelity of implementation. A strength that was noted throughout the process was the ongoing positive attitude demonstrated by the team. There was no lack of desire to implement evidence-based practices that help students.

The Study phase consisted of a multi-methods analysis of practical measures. Quantitative analysis suggests that students that 9th grade students that received the intervention experienced similar outcomes in attendance and achievement as students that did not. A pre/post comparison of average disciplinary interactions indicates that students that received the intervention did experience a reduction in disciplinary interactions (a decrease of 1.63 to .63). These results were not statistically significant, however, additional measures summarized below do suggest that positive change was felt by stakeholders.

Faculty and staff surveyed at the freshman campus report overall positive changes to the school's implementation of tiered interventions for students at the school-level. There were mostly positive results regarding skill development at the DAEP, with 5/9 respondents agreeing

that student's learned behavioral skills during their placement. In regards to procedural changes, document collection indicated that the establishment of Behavioral Growth Goals was adopted into the DAEP intake procedure.

In addition to quantitative methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals that participated in the intervention process. Themes that emerged from this analysis included differing perspectives on equity, insufficiency of policy in changing student behavior, the need for adult support in addressing behavior, and unique challenges faced by students that require that support. There were some concerns regarding transference of skills between settings, however, overall perceptions indicated that the change idea was effective in reducing repeated disciplinary interactions.

The Act phase involved a review of findings and plans for next steps. Based on findings, the change idea will be adapted for continued implementation and study. The primary change is to simplify the intervention so that implementation fidelity is more feasible. The intention is to shift focus to providing training to all adults in order to increase support available to students. Additionally, the intervention will be expanded to all 9th grade students to increase positive change on the system.

In summary, this study's PDSA cycle began with a dedicated team and a strong plan. There were challenges met along the way that impacted fidelity of implementation, however, results indicate that there was still a positive impact on stakeholders. The intervention will be adapted based on the findings and continued with a larger group of students. In the subsequent chapter, I will conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the findings in the context of this study's theory of improvement, limitations of this study, and implications of these findings for other educators, policy, and research.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Problem of Practice guiding this research was increasing rates of exclusionary discipline in CSSD. Since 2016, there has been a steady increase in district-level discipline hearings, despite a relatively stable population. This increase in hearings has also resulted in a significant increase in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as DAEP and disciplinary homebased placements. A review of district data indicates that these type of exclusionary placements disproportionately impact Black males and students living in poverty. Research indicates that not only is exclusionary discipline ineffective, it also leads to adverse consequences for students metered these consequences (Bal, 2016; Baroni et al., 2020; Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Gerlinger, 2022). The focus of this study was to mitigate such negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline by utilizing improvement science to implement and intervention with 9th grade students placed at CSSD's DAEP.

In the following chapter, I will begin with a reflection on the improvement science process, discussing how the approach shaped this study's design and outcomes, as well as lessons learned. These reflections will include a revisitation of this study's theory of improvement in context of the findings, and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention at accomplishing the aim. Then, I will discuss implications of this study's findings as it relates to the Problem of Practice on a broad scale. Following that, I will conclude with how this study contributes to the existing body of literature regarding exclusionary discipline and DAEPs, as well as how it relates to other practitioners. Finally, I will close with recommendations for future practice and policy.

Improvement Science: A Flexible Structure for Change

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of the implementation journey and concluded with a summary of the PDSA cycle. In this section, I will reflect on perspective shifts and insights gained through decisive moments that occurred during the PDSA cycle. In addition, I will discuss how the iterative approach of improvement science guided implementation.

During this PDSA cycle, the team laid a strong foundation during the Plan phase. However, at the onset of the Do phase, the team was required to make a significant adjustment in the intervention due to a lack of mentor volunteers. This was a disheartening shift, as I perceived the mentor component to be the most significant component for increasing student's sense of belonging. From this point forward, the team attempted to provide adult support through increased check-ins with administrators, counselors, and interventionists—however, this contact was only inconsistently implemented due to challenges associated with traveling between campus'. I faced a similar challenge in delivering skill-building lessons to students with frequent absences because I was not housed at the DAEP.

Through this challenge, it was learned that recruitment of mentors requires perhaps early action (we waited until August) and a larger pool of potential candidates (we only reached out to faculty and staff at the freshman campus). In addition, we learned that intervention complexity impacts fidelity. It's important to be mindful of how many new tasks are being added to any one individual's "plate." This change idea involved quite a few forms, communication requirements, and the movement of staff between physical locations. If it requires driving to a separate campus to deliver an intervention, it is less likely to happen with consistency. Filling out multiple forms for three components of an intervention may be overwhelming. The most well-meaning

educators did not always follow through with their intentions. It is important to note that this was not because of a lack of competency or desire, but likely capacity and time.

While the challenges we met were frustrating, the cyclical nature of improvement science allowed for continuous adjustments. For each derailment encountered, the team looped back around to the Plan phase using what data was available at the time to make changes. For example, when there were not enough volunteer mentors, the team was able to look back at our RCA work (specifically the driver diagram and theory of improvement) to identify additional drivers and change ideas. The improvement science approach allowed for flexible implementation to occur within a living system. Rather than throwing in the towel, it provided a framework for readjustment.

In summary, the improvement science process illuminated the need for simplicity and flexibility when working to effect change in a system. This is especially true for the educational system, where many stakeholders are already stretched thin within their existing roles. In the next section, I will reflect upon this study's theory of improvement within the context of our findings.

Theory of Improvement

During the Plan phase, the team developed a theory of improvement (Figure 2.2) based on identified system drivers. Our theory of improvement hinged on a model that included a prevention, intervention, and postvention. This theory posited that through school-based mentorship and explicit skill teaching, student sense of belonging and skill development would increase, which would then decrease disciplinary interactions experienced by those students. Harking back to the larger theoretical framework of this study, the theory of improvement was intended to disrupt the developmental cascade (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010) that leads to negative

outcomes for students placed at the DAEP. This section will discuss how this theory within the context of intervention implementation, findings, and modifications moving forward.

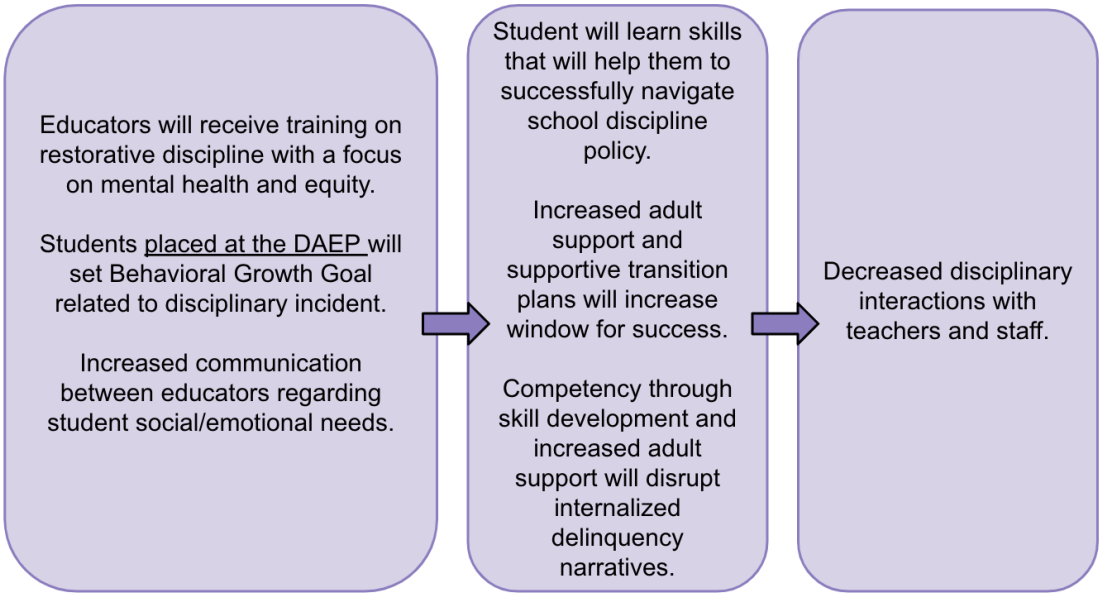
As previously discussed, the intended intervention design was disrupted fairly early in the process due to a lack of mentor volunteers. A key driver in disrupting the cascade was sense of belonging, which was dependent on increased adult support through mentorship. When the team had to make adjustments to the intervention, it was this component of the theory that kept the "spirit" of the intervention in the forefront. Although we couldn't match individual mentors to individual students, we remained committed to attempting to increase student sense of belonging through adult support. The theory of improvement also included drivers related to DAEP and MTSS practices. The related change ideas were skill instruction at DAEP and supportive transition plans into the freshman campus.

In terms of efficacy of the theory, findings discussed in the previous chapter, indicate that the components of the intervention that were delivered had a positive impact on student disciplinary interactions, which were reduced by 50%. In addition to a reduction in interactions, a significant impact on the problem was how the process of the PDSA cycle brought awareness of the problem to educators. While this wasn't formally measured, educator attitudes toward discipline appeared to soften when presented with the literature and district trends. Educators with power in the system, such as the hearing officer and the DAEP principal, were key players in intervention development and implementation. Through the improvement science process, they gained knowledge and awareness of how exclusionary practices impact student outcomes. A major theme identified through qualitative interviews was the need for adult support, which lends validity to the theory that adult support is a critical component of reversing the cascade.

Moving forward, refinements to the theory will include a narrowing of focus. Bryk et al. (2015) assert than an effective theory of improvement considers the system, research, and feasibility of implementation. Upon reflection, the initial theory of improvement incorporated so many components that feasibility of implementation was impacted. Therefore, the theory of improvement should be modified to increase feasibility of implementation. Figure 4.1 illustrates an updated theory of improvement to match proposed intervention changes proposed as part of the Act phase described in the previous chapter.

Figure 4.1

Modified Theory of Improvement



In summary, the theory of improvement, along with identified drivers, served as an anchor for continued implementation when circumstances necessitated change. Developing a theory of improvement in collaboration with other educators not only helped to facilitate the change idea, it also helped to bring awareness of the problem to key stakeholders. While awareness alone does not induce change, awareness of a problem is the first step. Next, I will revisit the aim of the study.

Aim

As part of the Plan phase, a driver diagram (Figure 2.1) was developed in conjunction with the theory of improvement in order to narrow the focus of this study. In this section, I will revisit the aim statement of the driver diagram in light of the research findings. I will also discuss with how these findings implicate further change within the local context of CSSD and South Carolina.

The aim of this study was to reduce the number of disciplinary interactions experienced by 9th grade students placed at the DAEP by 50%. Based on a comparison of average disciplinary interactions before and after DAEP placements, this goal was achieved. In addition, feedback received through qualitative interviews suggests that participants found the intervention to be effective in reducing disciplinary interactions. Multiple participants, educators and parents alike, cited perceived reductions in recidivism of students.

Successful achievement of the aim supports the continued allocation of resources into social, emotional, and behavioral supports for marginalized students, both in CSSD and within the state of South Carolina. Even with issues related to fidelity and implementation, providing adult support and skill instruction resulted in positive change for students, parents, and educators. Educators are often pressured to believe that meaningful change can only occur with flashy, expensive programs. However, an intervention does not need to be expensive or complicated to provide support to students. This is especially important for districts like CSSD, where resources and funding are limited. In the next section, I will delve further into implications of these findings outside of the local context of this study.

Implications and Contributions for Practice and Research

In this next section, I will discuss the significance of this study's findings for existing research and practice. I will offer implications of this study for educators, leaders, and equity. I will then discuss the theoretical framework underpinning this study and provide a comparison of this study's results to those found within the literature. I will then detail how this study contributes to the extant body of research through reiteration of findings and addressing gaps. Finally, I will conclude with recommended topics for continued research.

Implications for Educators, Leaders, and Equity

This study offers many practical implications for educators that may be seeking to implement a similar intervention. First, educators will want to consider simplicity over complexity when implementing a change to the system. While the improvement team developed an intervention that was well-rounded and grounded in research, we did not have the personnel to execute the entirety of the intervention with fidelity. Second, in planning an intervention that involves adult support for students through mentorship, educators may want to consider expanding their recruitment pool. Finally, as discussed at the close of the previous section, findings of this study indicate that even small changes can work to mitigate negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline. Most educators do not have the power or influence to rewrite policy or overhaul codes, however, they do have the power to provide support to students through their respective roles.

This work also provides practical insights for educational leaders. Utilizing an improvement science design encourages a bottom-up leadership approach. The first phase of a PDSA cycle calls for a complete understanding of a problem from all stakeholder perspectives. Additionally, improvement science calls for a shift from deficit ideology to a focus on the

system. These components help educational leaders develop change ideas that are holistic, sustainable, and equitable. Finally, PDSA cycles are reiterative in nature, which allows for real-time changes. Educational systems are complex and ever-changing. For this reason, effecting change requires both flexibility and structure. This study illustrates that the improvement science design allows for such structured flexibility when implementing intervention.

As mentioned, improvement science designs emphasize outcomes for increased equity and social justice. The goal of this study was to improve educational outcomes for students that are metered exclusionary discipline through leveraging of the district's DAEP. Data on both a national and local scale indicates that these practices disproportionately impact marginalized students—specifically Black students, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021). Quantitative results of this study demonstrate improvement for 9th grade students placed at the DAEP. Interviews also indicate an improvement for students. One student in particular, a Black female and her mother, expressed that, in comparison with a DAEP in a neighboring district, CSSD's DAEP helped the student learn skills needed to be in school for a longer period of time.

In summary, findings of this study offer valuable implications for fellow practitioners seeking to improve outcomes of students receiving exclusionary discipline. It also provides practical insight into the efficacy of the improvement science design when approaching complicated, system-level problems that impact equitable outcome of students.

Existing Research: Consistencies and Contributions

This section will conclude with a comparison of this study's findings to literature and theory discussed in Chapters One and Two. I will begin with a revisitation of developmental cascades theory and conclude with a comparison of the outcomes of this study's change idea

with interventions found in the literature. I will also discuss how this study addresses gaps in research regarding DAEPs. Finally, I will conclude with opportunities for additional research.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study was the developmental cascades theory. This theory posits that, over time, each instance of exclusionary discipline experienced by a student results in a cumulative effect that influences that student's internalized narratives around self (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Mowen & Brent, 2016). In many cases, repeated instances of exclusion from school results in a student internalizing a delinquent self-concept, which ultimately manifests through increases in negative behavior and decreased academic motivation and achievement (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016). The theory of improvement (Figure 2.2) of this study was based on the notion that this cascade could be disrupted and reversed utilizing a combination of adult support and explicit skill teaching. Findings suggest some validity to this theory. Quantitative analysis indicates that the intervention mitigated negative academic and disciplinary outcomes for students. In addition, feedback received through qualitative interviews illustrates a perceived improvement from previous disciplinary experiences.

This study's change idea was based on evidence-based practices found through literature regarding social, emotional, and behavioral support of students. The research indicated that utilizing MTSS-B is effective in increasing positive outcomes for students (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Fall et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2019). A specific study, conducted by Henry and colleagues (2021) utilized a combination of mentoring and skill instruction, which resulted in significant decreases in negative behavior and increases in academic achievement. This study mirrors similar results in mitigating negative outcomes for students.

As discussed in Chapter One, there is extensive research on exclusionary discipline and associated outcomes. There is also a large body of research around social, emotional, and behavioral interventions for students. This study contributes to this existing research through corroboration of findings, as described in the preceding paragraph. A significant gap in the literature is a lack of research on DAEPs, despite their continued growth. This study aids in narrow that gap. This study provides insight into practical implementation of interventions aimed at supporting students placed at DAEPs. In addition, results suggest that DAEPs can be leveraged to increase positive outcomes for students through a combination of skill instruction and adult support.

This study encompasses one iteration of an ongoing improvement process. There are a number of opportunities for additional research that address exclusionary discipline practices in schools. First, the sample sized used during this first iteration was fairly small. An area of future research should include an expansion of the intervention to a larger sample size of students for more valid statistical analysis. A larger sample size would also allow for a comparison of outcomes between different marginalized groups, which would help practitioners understand how to design more equitable interventions. Qualitative results of this study suggest that adult support is a significant factor in student success. Future research regarding whether skill instruction or adult support is more influential would help educators focus limited resources when planning interventions. Finally, the impact of adult support on sense of belonging, and the potential for disrupting the developmental cascade warrants further exploration. This was a key driver identified during the Plan phase of this PDSA cycle that was not brought to fruition due to changes in the intervention.

In closing, the findings of this study offer practical implications to practitioners. Additionally, they are aligned with theory and findings within the extant literature regarding exclusionary discipline practices. While the current within a developmental cascade may be strong, interventions involving support and skill instruction can disrupt the flow. Proposals for future research include expanding the intervention to include a larger sample size, increased focus on equity, and differentiating between effects of adult support versus skill instruction.

Recommendations

In this final section I will emphasize practical recommendations for practitioners and implications for policy-makers, both at the local and state level. A foundational concept in improvement science is the development of an improvement theory that drives change. Bryk and colleagues (2015) assert that an effective theory considers the system, research, and feasibility of implementation. Throughout this and the preceding chapter, fidelity of implementation has been discussed repeatedly. It is recommending to practitioners that when formulating a theory of improvement, teams ensure that all facets of implementation feasibility are considered. Our team primarily considered the feasibility in terms of educator's competency. However, the team did not fully consider capacity or access to resources when evaluating feasibility, which proved to complicate implementation.

This study also holds implications for local decision-makers. Results of this study indicate that providing increased support and skill-teaching to students placed at the DAEP mitigated negative academic and disciplinary outcomes often associated with exclusionary discipline. Local decision-makers within CSSD will want to consider these implications when determined allocation of staff and resources at the DAEP. Providing more support to our most marginalized students is worth the investment. Another finding of this study that warrants

consideration is the fact that while educators expressed appreciation for the consistency that policy brings, they also expressed concerns regarding equity, developmental-appropriateness, and sensibility of some practices. While it may be necessary to maintain a discipline police, decision-makers may want to consider an audit of the existing policy in terms of cultural responsiveness, development, and equity.

As previously mentioned, the only forms of exclusionary discipline monitored by the state of South Carolina are suspensions and expulsions. Not only does this study highlight the increasing use of DAEP placements, it also calls attention to increasing usage of disciplinary homebased. Policy-makers may want to consider expanding monitoring systems to include all forms of exclusionary discipline, as they all have similar impacts on student outcomes. In addition, given the positive results associated with providing targeted support to students placed at DAEPs, and the potential for DAEPs to serve as therapeutic (as opposed to punitive) settings, policy-makers may want to consider allocating funds specifically for DAEPs.

Conclusion

This study utilized an improvement science design to address increasing exclusionary discipline practices in a small, rural school district in South Carolina. This Problem of Practice was narrowed to focus on the use of DAEPs as a form of exclusionary discipline, and how these programs can be utilized to mitigate, rather than perpetuate, inequitable outcomes. Such outcomes include decreased achievement, and increased likelihood of dropping out, special education placement, and incarceration in adulthood (Bal, 2016; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Fenning & Jenkins, 2018). These effects are most deeply felt by marginalized students, who are disproportionately metered exclusionary discipline as a result of behavioral infractions (Cruz et al., 2021; OCR, 2022).

Through a single iteration of a PDSA cycle, it was found that providing behavioral skill instruction and adult support to 9th grade students placed at DAEP decreased disciplinary interactions and helped to mitigate negative academic outcomes. These findings highlight the efficacy of improvement science to approaching complex educational problems through a systems perspective. Further, this study illustrates how improvement science can be successfully utilized to effect positive change, even when teams are met with challenges.

This dissertation began with an acknowledgement of Horace Mann's assertion that education is the great equalizer of society. While his sentiment may be erroneous, it is, in my opinion, the most worthwhile of goals. Education is a massive system that, as it stands, works in many ways to perpetuate inequities in society. However, within the framework of improvement science, a massive system presents a massive opportunity for change.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

IRB Approval

Division of RESEARCH
Research Compliance

To: Edwin Nii Bonney
Re: Clemson IRB Number: IRB2024-0322
Review Level: Exempt
Review Category: 1,2
Determination Date From: 29-Apr-2024
Determination Date To: 30-Apr-2027
Funding Sponsor: N/A
Project Title: Disrupting the Cascade: Using Improvement Science to Mitigate Negative Outcomes Associated with Exclusionary Discipline

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The Clemson University IRB office reviewed your initial submission packet (IRB application and any required supplemental documents) and determined that the proposed activities involving human participants meet the criteria for Exempt level review under 45 CFR 46.104(d). The Exempt determination is granted for the certification period indicated above. A description of the Exempt categories is available on the IRB webpage.

Principal Investigator (PI) Responsibilities: The PI assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects as outlined in the Principal Investigator's Responsibilities guidance.

Non-Clemson Affiliated Collaborators: The Exempt determination only covers Clemson affiliated personnel on the study. External collaborators have to consult with their respective institution's IRB office to determine what is required for their role on the project. Clemson IRB office does not enter into an IRB Authorization Agreement (reliance agreement) for Exempt level reviews.

Modifications: An Amendment is required for substantial changes to the study. Substantial changes are modifications that may affect the Exempt determination (i.e., changing from Exempt to Expedited or Full Board review level, changing exempt category) or that may change the focus of the study, such as a change in hypothesis or study design. **All changes must be reviewed by the IRB office prior to implementation.** Instructions on how to submit an Amendment is available on the IRB webpage

PI or Essential Study Personnel Changes: For Exempt determinations, submit an amendment ONLY if the PI changes or if there is a change to an essential study team member. An essential team member would be an individual required to be on the study team for their expertise or certification (i.e., health expert, mental health counselor). Students or other non-essential study personnel changes DO NOT have to be reported to the IRB office.

Reportable Incidents: Notify the IRB office within three (3) business days if there are any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, adverse events, complaints from research participants and/or incidents of non-compliance with the IRB approved protocol. Incidents may be reported through the IRB online submission system using the Reportable Incidents eform or by contacting the IRB office. Review the IRB policies webpage for more information.

Closing IRB Record: Submit a Progress Report to close the IRB record. An IRB record may be closed when all research activities are completed. Research activities include, but are not limited to: enrolling new participants; interaction with participants (online or in-person); collecting prospective data, including de-identified data through a survey; obtaining, accessing, and/or generating identifiable private information about a living person.

New IRB Application: A new Exempt application is required if the research activities continue for more than 3 years after the initial determination. **Exempt determinations may not be renewed or extended and are valid for 3 years only.**

Non-Clemson Affiliated Sites: A site letter is required for off-campus non-public sites. Refer to the guidance on research site/permission letters for more information. Submit the Amendment eform to add additional sites to the study.

International Research: Clemson's determination is based on U.S. human subjects protections regulations and Clemson University human subjects protection policies. Researchers should become familiar with all pertinent information about local human subjects protection regulations and requirements when conducting research internationally. We encourage you to discuss any possible human subjects research requirements that are specific to your research site with your local contacts, to comply with those requirements, and to inform Clemson's IRB office of those requirements. Review the FAQs for more information about international research.

Contact Information: Please contact the IRB office at IRB@clemson.edu or visit our webpage if you have questions.

Clemson University's IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. All research involving human participants must maintain an ethically appropriate standard, which serves to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Compliance
Clemson University

IRB Number: IRB00000481

Appendix B

Central Sandhills School District Discipline Policy

Level 1: Disorderly Conduct

Student behaviors **which impede** orderly classroom procedures and/or orderly school operations.

1.A Offenses	**Progression of Sanctions**
● Cheating / Plagiarism (190) ● Computer Violation (220) ● Dishonesty (006) ● Dress Code Violation (280) ● Inappropriate Affection (015) ● Off Limits (200) ● Phone Violation (330) ● Student ID Violation (360) ● Tardy (180)	1st referral: Administrative Conference Parent Notification
	2nd referral: Loss of Privileges / Detention Parent & Student Conference
	3rd referral: Detention / ISS Parent & Student Conference
	4th referral: ISS Discipline Conference @ School
	5th referral: OSS / ISS Pending Resolution School Discipline Hearing
	6th referral: OSS / ISS Pending Resolution District Discipline Hearing

1.B Offenses	**Progression of Sanctions**
● Disrupting Class (007) ● Failure to Comply w/Sanction (271) ● Inappropriate Behavior/Horseplay (017) ● Inappropriate Language (016) ● Leaving Class Without Permission (320) ● Obscene Gesture (290) ● Refusal to Obey (270)	1st referral: Administrative Conference & ISS Parent Notification
	2nd referral: ISS & Loss of Privileges Parent & Student Conference
	3rd referral: 2 days ISS Discipline Conference @ School
	4th referral: OSS & ISS Pending Resolution School Discipline Hearing
	5th referral: OSS & ISS Pending Resolution District Discipline Hearing

Additional Notes:

- Cheating (190) includes no credit (50) given until a required reassessment is completed.
- Computer Violation (220) loss of privileges should not interfere with a student's academic progress. Loss of privileges may include assignment to the district "penalty box."
- Dress Code Violations (280) may require immediate removal from the general school environment depending on the nature of the violation. Principal has direct responsibility.
- Phone Violation (330) should follow district policy and guidelines to include confiscation and return to a parent on the first and second offenses.
- Inappropriate Behavior / Horseplay (017) is first of a continuum that continues to Level 2 (407).
- All "progressions" are a guide for administration and are subject to adjustment.

Possible Reparations	**Possible Restorative Actions**

• Formal Apology Letter • Community Service • Deeper Learning • Leadership Project • Mentoring Others	• Restorative Circle (Parent, Student, School) • Teacher & Student Conversation • Explicit modeling & teaching of skills • Setting of clear limits • Clear goal-setting & self-reflection • Assignment of school-level mentor • Periodic check-ins and follow up

Level 2: Disruptive Conduct

Student behaviors **directed against persons or property** and which the consequences of endanger the health or safety of the school community and/or result in damage to property.

2.A Offenses (Property/Non-Violent)	Progression of Sanctions
• Cutting Class (160) • Cutting School (150)* • Disrespect (420) • District Medication Violation (031) • Inappropriate Materials (018) • Property Misuse (023)* • Tobacco Violation (230)*	1st referral: ISS & Administrative Conference Parent Notification
	2nd referral: 2 days ISS & Loss of Privileges Discipline Conference @ School
	3rd referral: OSS / ISS Pending Resolution School Discipline Hearing
	4th referral: OSS / ISS Pending Resolution District Discipline Hearing

2.B Offenses (Persons/Violent)	Progression of Sanctions
• Harassment (012) • Confrontation / Altercation (407) • Fighting (009)* • Major Disruption (020)* • Sexual Harassment (013)* • Threat (027)*	1st referral: Immediate removal from class OSS (1-3 days) / 1+ ISS on return Discipline Conference @ School
	2nd referral: Immediate removal from class OSS (2-3) & ISS Pending Resolution School Discipline Hearing
	3rd referral: Immediate removal from class OSS (3-5) Pending Resolution District Discipline Hearing

Additional Notes:

- ***May require notification of law enforcement.**
- Disrespect (420) refers to blatant disrespect towards school officials.
- District Medication Violation (031) refers to unintentional possession of non-prescription medication. Any offense may result in district discipline hearing at the principal's discretion.
- Property Misuse (023) refers to vandalism/theft below a value of $50.00.
- Tobacco Violation (230) includes possession of or use of tobacco & vaping products.
- Harassment (012) is when someone who have more power at the time, deliberately upsets or hurts another person, their property, reputation, or social acceptance. Acts of harassment must be a response to class (e.g. race, gender, orientation) and must be tagged in PS as such.
- Confrontation/Altercation (407) refers to verbal & physical action that provokes misbehavior. This escalates from Level 1 (016 & 017) within its intent and severity.
- Major Disruption (020) refers to actions that substantially interfere with the regular, orderly operation of the school. This could refer to blatant noncompliance with administration.
- All "progressions" are a guide for administration and are subject to adjustment.

Possible Reparations	Possible Restorative Actions

• Formal Apology Letter • Financial Restitution • Community Service • Deeper Learning • Leadership Project • Mentoring Others	• Restorative Circle (Parent, Student, School) • Teacher & Student Conversation • Explicit modeling & teaching of skills • Setting of clear limits • Clear goal-setting & self-reflection • Assignment of school-level mentor • Periodic check-ins and follow up

Level 3: Criminal Conduct

Student behaviors **which result in** violence towards oneself or another's person or property; and/or pose a direct and serious threat to the safety of oneself or others in the school.

Offenses	Sanctions
• Alcohol Violation (680) • Arson (500) • Assault, Aggravated (510) • Assault, Simple (520) • Bomb Threat (260) • Bullying (651) • Cyberbullying (652) • Drug Distribution (570) • Drug Possession (580) • Drug Usage (575) • Fire Alarm (350) • Fireworks (010) • Gang Activity (250) • Intimidation (650) • Unauthorized Device (390) • Vandalism / Theft (760) • Weapon (789)	1st referral: Immediate removal from school Notification of Law Enforcement OSS (5+ days) District Expulsion Hearing

Additional Notes:

- District hearing should be scheduled within 5 day suspension window.
- Resolution may take longer than 5 days.
- Additional offense codes may be used from Power School (500 – 700) as appropriate.

Possible Reparations	Possible Restorative Actions

• Formal Apology Letter • Financial Restitution • Community Service • Deeper Learning • Leadership Project • Mentoring Others	• Change of placement • Restorative Circle (Parent, Student, School) • Explicit modeling & teaching of skills • Setting of clear limits • Clear goal-setting & self-reflection • Assignment of school-level mentor • Periodic Probation Conferences

Accumulation District Hearing Triggers:

Accumulated Suspensions: A student who is subject to suspension a third time in any given year (or a total of 5 days) may be recommended for expulsion.

Referrals: **Level 1:** 6 total **Level 2:** 4 total **Level 1 & 2:** 6 total

***School Discipline Hearing should occur prior to a District Hearing for Accumulation**

Appendix C

Central Sandhills School District Performance Review

***CSSD* Alternative Services**
2023-24 Performance Placement Review

The 2023-24 Performance Review is conducted by the Hearing Officer. The Alternative Administration submits a summary of the student's grades, attendance, and conduct from the student's time in the Alternative Program. The Hearing Officer reviews this information with the student and Alternative Program administration and/or staff.

The Performance Review results in one of four outcomes based on the student's current performance and the student's original disciplinary issue that caused alternative placement.

1. The student qualifies to return to the regular educational program at their assigned home school on **District Level Probation for the 2023-24 school year**.
2. The student continues with placement in the Lexington Four Alternative Program and is assigned a new date for a potential return to their home assigned school.
3. The student is assigned to the **Disciplinary Homebased Virtual Instruction Model** placement. The administration at your home school will contact you to schedule an intake conference with program details and expectations.

If you have questions, please contact [redacted] Hearing Officer, at *phone number* ext.

Student name **School:**

2022-23 Performance Placement **Date**

1. The *Student* qualifies to return to the regular educational program at his assigned home school on District Level Probation for the 2023-24 school year.

Return Date:

Appendix D

DAEP Intake and Behavioral Goal Setting Forms

Intake Checklist		
Student Name:	**Date:**	**In person or phone:**
Item	✓ ***Reviewed***	***Notes***
Goal of Alternative Services -Instruction -Attendance -Case Manager -Student Handbook		
Review of Daily Schedule		
Review of Daily/Weekly Forms		
Review of Rules/Expectations -Student Contract -Chromebook (Internet) -Phones -Bathroom -Dress Code (Hats/Hoodies) -Clear Bookbags Only		
Schedule for Review Meetings		
Demographics Update (Pick-up List)		
Transportation		
Medication Forms		
IEP/504 Plan		
Discipline Review- Goal Setting		

Behavioral Growth Goal	
Identify Area(s) of Growth:	
Impulse Control /Emotional Regulation	*Conflict Resolution / Social Problem-Solving*
Health/Vaping	*Organizational Skills*
Effective Communication	*Compliance with Rules*
Written Goal:	
Action Steps for Improvement:	
1)	
2)	
3)	
4)	
5)	
Student Signature:	**Parent Signature:**
Lead Teacher Signature:	**Date:**

Appendix E

Skillstreaming Lesson Sequence and Sample Lesson

Skillstreaming Program Content and Implementation

Group I—Beginning Social Skills
1. Listening
2. Starting a Conversation
3. Having a Conversation
4. Asking a Question
5. Saying Thank You
6. Introducing Yourself
7. Introducing Other People
8. Giving a Compliment

Group II—Advanced Social Skills
9. Asking for Help
10. Joining In
11. Giving Instructions
12. Following Instructions
13. Apologizing
14. Convincing Others

Group III—Skills for Dealing with Feelings
15. Knowing Your Feelings
16. Expressing Your Feelings
17. Understanding the Feelings of Others
18. Dealing with Someone Else's Anger
19. Expressing Affection
20. Dealing with Fear
21. Rewarding Yourself

Group IV—Skill Alternatives to Aggression
22. Asking Permission
23. Sharing Something
24. Helping Others
25. Negotiating
26. Using Self-Control
27. Standing Up for Your Rights
28. Responding to Teasing
29. Avoiding Trouble with Others
30. Keeping Out of Fights

Group V—Skills for Dealing with Stress
31. Making a Complaint
32. Answering a Complaint
33. Being a Good Sport
34. Dealing with Embarrassment
35. Dealing with Being Left Out

36. Standing Up for a Friend
37. Responding to Persuasion
38. Responding to Failure
39. Dealing with Contradictory Messages
40. Dealing with an Accusation
41. Getting Ready for a Difficult Conversation
42. Dealing with Group Pressure

Group VI—Planning Skills

43. Deciding on Something to Do
44. Deciding What Caused a Problem
45. Setting a Goal
46. Deciding on Your Abilities
47. Gathering Information
48. Arranging Problems by Importance
49. Making a Decision
50. Concentrating on a Task

Skill 22: Asking Permission

SKILL STEPS

1. **Decide what you would like to do for which you need permission.**
   Ask if you want to borrow something or request a special privilege.
2. **Decide whom you have to ask for permission.**
   Ask the owner, manager, or teacher.
3. **Decide how to ask for permission.**
   Ask out loud; ask privately; ask in writing.
4. **Pick the right time and place.**
5. **Ask for permission.**

SUGGESTED MODELING DISPLAYS

School or neighborhood: Main actor asks shop teacher for permission to use new power tool.

Home: Main actor asks parent for permission to stay out past curfew or to use parent's new cell phone.

Peer group: Main actor asks friend for permission to borrow sporting equipment or video game.

Job: Main actor asks supervisor to come in late in order to study for a test at school.

COMMENTS

Prior to practicing this skill, it is frequently useful to discuss situations that require permission. Some adolescents tend to ask permission for things that could be done independently (without permission), whereas others neglect to ask permission in situations that require doing so.

From *Skillstreaming the Adolescent: A Guide for Teaching Prosocial Skills* (3rd ed.), © 2012 by E. McGinnis, Champaign, IL: Research Press (www.researchpress.com, 800-519-2707).

Appendix F

Mentor Protocols and Forms

Mentor Program: Protocols and Procedures

Identification
Students will be identified by the MTSS based on risk.
Parents of identified students will receive a Parent Notification Form, with the opportunity to opt out.

Intake

1. Introduce student to mentor program; explain purpose
2. Have student complete Student Assessment–provide help with reading comprehension as needed
3. Complete the Intake Form with the student using their input and results from the Student Assessment–identify a goal and a Growth Skill
    a. The student's goal can be self-identified–it may become more refined if they are engaged in the disciplinary process or placed at alt
4. Share Intake Form with the student's mentor and school psychologist

Mentor Responsibilities

1. Mentor greets student 3x weekly (greetings are short and can occur naturally during transitions, breakfast, lunch, or after school)
2. Mentor checks in with student 1x weekly
    a. Check-ins are informal and are an opportunity to relationship build and check-in about student's goal
    b. For students that have been through skill training at the alt program–mentors can remind students of the skills and strategies they've learned as situations arise
    c. Provide praise in instances where the student successfully navigates challenging situations
3. Mentor completes Check-In form and submits to the school psychologist on Fridays
4. Complete GAS as needed (this will depend on the student if if they have been to alt)

Progress Monitoring

1. Students that have not been placed at alt:
    a. Student progress will be monitored through ODRs, attendance, and grades by the MTSS team
    b. School Psychologist will complete MTSS Form for students assigned to a mentor during meetings
2. Students that have been placed at alt:
    a. Monitoring by the MTSS as described above
    b. GAS using goal developed as part of transition from alt to freshman campus

Mentor Program: Brief Student Assessment

Directions for use: During intake with the student, have them complete the questions below. Provide assistance with reading items as needed.

Student:	**Date:**

Sense of Belonging Scale*

What do you think about your school? Tell how much you agree with these statements:

	Agree a lot	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree a lot
I like being in school.				
I feel safe when I am at school.				
I feel like I belong at this school.				
Teachers at my school are fair to me.				
I am proud to go to this school.				

Needs Assessment Scale I:

In the past month, how often have you…	Not at all	Sometimes	Often	Everyday
Had trouble communicating with peers	1	2	3	4
Had difficulty collaborating with peers	1	2	3	4
Said something inappropriate to a peer	1	2	3	4
Preferred to work alone	1	2	3	4
Felt like you don't get along with other students	1	2	3	4
Sum of Scores by Column:				
	SUM OF ALL TOTAL SCORES:			

Needs Assessment Scale II:

In the past month, how often have you…	Not at all	Sometimes	Often	Everyday
Ignored what an adult told you to do	1	2	3	4
Been in trouble for bad behavior	1	2	3	4
Bullied peers	1	2	3	4
Lied or cheated	1	2	3	4
Broke school rules	1	2	3	4
Used inappropriate language in the school setting	1	2	3	4
Been out of area	1	2	3	4
Had any ID violations	1	2	3	4
Sum of Scores by Column:				
	SUM OF ALL TOTAL SCORES:			

Mentor Program: Intake

Student:	
Person Completing Form:	
Mentor:	
Growth Skill: (Identify with student after completing assessment scales)	☐ Effective Communication ☐ Social Problem Solving ☐ Conflict Resolution ☐ Impulse Control (Verbal / Physical) ☐ Emotional Regulation ☐ Organizational Skills ☐ Compliance with Rules

Needs Assessment Scale Scores

Needs Assessment I (Social):

Needs Assessment II (Behavior):

Discussion of Current Concerns/Issues:

Potential Goals:

Mentor Program: Weekly Check In

Student:	
Mentor:	
Student Goal:	
Growth Skill:	☐ Effective Communication ☐ Social Problem Solving ☐ Conflict Resolution ☐ Impulse Control (Verbal / Physical) ☐ Emotional Regulation ☐ Organizational Skills ☐ Compliance with Rules

3 Greetings:
Briefly list the three times you greeted this student this week:

Goal Check-In:
Briefly describe the student's perception of their goal progress.

Additional comments:

Goal Attainment Scale

Student Name:	**Rater:**	**Date:**
Goal 1 Rating (circle one): +2 +1 0 -1 -2 **Goal 2 Rating (circle one):** +2 +1 0 -1 -2		

	Goal 1: One angry outburst per week with manageable intensity (is able to calm down in 5-10 minutes, with no physical aggression).	**Goal 2:**
Intervention Cycle	interim (4.5 weeks)	
-2 **Much less progress than expected**	No improvement in angry outbursts–3 or more per week with physical aggression.	
-1 **Somewhat less progress than expected**	2-3 angry outbursts per week with moderate intensity (takes longer than 10 minutes to regulate, no physical aggression).	
0 **Expected outcome**	1-2 angry outbursts per week with manageable intensity (is able to calm down in 5-10 minutes, with no physical aggression).	
+1 **Somewhat more progress than expected**	One or two angry outbursts per week that are mild and short in duration (less than 5 minutes to regulate).	
+2 **Much more progress than expected**	No angry outbursts for entire interim (4.5 weeks).	

Comments

Appendix G

Supportive Transition Plan

Alternative Program Transition

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____

Current Quarter Data

Course	Grade	Pass for Year?	Absences	Unexcused
Earth Science				
DFSA				
Geometry				
English				
Physical Education/JROTC				
Elective				
Elective				

Notes from Alternative Program:

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
☐ Classroom Instruction w/ identified strategies and interventions ☐ College and Career Readiness ☐ Microburst ☐ Code of Conduct ☐ After School Tutoring ☐ Grading Policy ☐ Retake summatives ☐ VirtualSC for ELA, math, and science ☐ Attendance ☐ Year - 10 ☐ Semester - 5	☐ WIN Assignment ☐ Interventions ☐ Class ☐ Counselor Group ☐ Slow Transition ☐ Check-ins ☐ Coach Britt ☐ Counselor	☐ Individual Interventions ☐ Counselor ☐ Interventionist ☐ Mental Health ☐ Recovery ☐ Attendance ☐ Content

Student Goals

Academic	
Attendance	
Behavior	

Parent/Guardian Notes:

Student: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____ Date: _____

Teacher: _____ Date: _____

Counselor: _____ Date: _____

MTSS Representative: _____ Date: _____

Appendix H

Process Measure: MTSS Checklist

MTSS Checklist–Tier 3

Student:	
Date:	
Goal:	
Interventions	
Special Factors:	☐ SPED ☐ 504 ☐ Previous alt placement
Growth Skill:	☐ Effective Communication ☐ Social Problem Solving ☐ Conflict Resolution ☐ Impulse Control (Verbal / Physical) ☐ Emotional Regulation ☐ Organizational Skills ☐ Compliance with Rules ☐ Other
Grades	
Attendance	
Discipline Interactions	

Appendix I

Driver Measure: Teacher MTSS Survey

MTSS for Social/Emotional/Behavioral Support

This survey is intended to gather educator feedback regarding MTSS practices within the school building for social/emotional/behavioral needs. All responses are confidential and anonymous and will be used for continuous improvement and research purposes only.

Which of the following best describes your role:

Tier 1 practices to support student's social/emotional/behavioral needs within the classroom and school building are defined and communicated to teachers/staff.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Tier 2 interventions to support student's social/emotional/behavioral needs are delivered to students that demonstrate some risk.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Tier 3 interventions to support student's social/emotional/behavioral needs are delivered to students that demonstrate high risk.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Social/emotional/behavioral MTSS practices have improved at our school since last school year.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Students that are placed at the alternative program learn skills needed to meet behavioral expectations at our school.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Students returning from the alternative program have adequate supports to help them transition back to our school successfully.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Appendix J

Driver Measure: Sense of Belonging Scale

PIRLS 2016 4th Grade

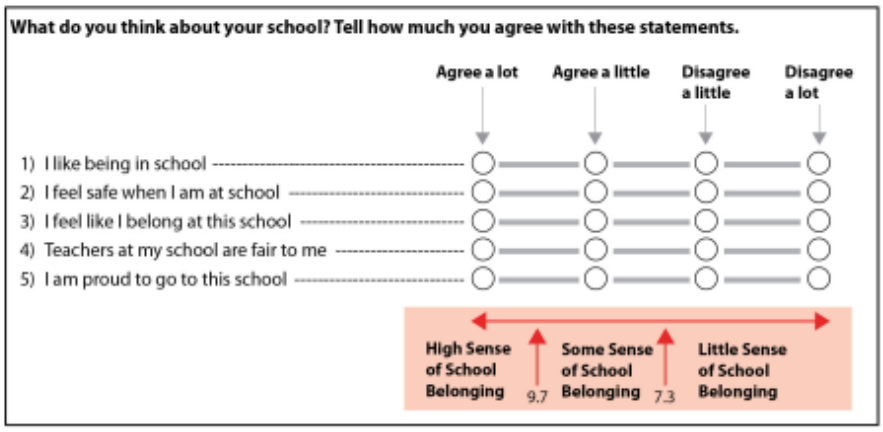
Exhibit 6.6: Students' Sense of School Belonging

To develop the *Sense of School Belonging* scale, students were asked how much they agreed with five statements about their attitude toward school. Exhibit 6.6 presents students' very positive responses. On average, more than half (59%) had a **High** sense of belonging, 33 percent had **Some** sense of belonging, and only 8 percent of the fourth grade students had **Little** sense of belonging. A higher sense of school belonging was related to higher average reading achievement (518, 505, and 495, respectively).

Downloaded from http://pirls2016.org/download-center/

Country	High Sense of School Belonging		Some Sense of School Belonging		Little Sense of School Belonging		Average Scale Score
	Percent of Students	Average Achievement	Percent of Students	Average Achievement	Percent of Students	Average Achievement	
Benchmarking Participants							
Andalusia, Spain	71 (1.2)	528 (2.1)	23 (0.9)	519 (3.0)	6 (0.5)	509 (6.3)	10.5 (0.06)
Norway (4)	70 (1.2)	522 (2.4)	25 (0.9)	508 (3.7)	5 (0.5)	493 (5.9)	10.5 (0.05)
Madrid, Spain	69 (1.5)	551 (2.0)	26 (1.3)	547 (3.2)	5 (0.5)	531 (5.2)	10.4 (0.07)
Dubai, UAE	61 (0.8)	532 (1.9)	32 (0.7)	502 (2.8)	8 (0.3)	455 (6.0)	10.1 (0.04)
Eng/Afr/Zulu - RSA (5)	60 (1.7)	405 (5.1)	31 (1.2)	418 (9.1)	9 (1.0)	400 (12.5)	10.2 (0.08)
Denmark (3)	58 (1.3)	510 (2.9)	35 (1.1)	491 (3.9)	7 (0.5)	475 (7.1)	10.0 (0.06)
Ontario, Canada	53 (1.5)	554 (3.7)	38 (1.3)	539 (4.2)	9 (0.6)	514 (6.5)	9.8 (0.06)
Buenos Aires, Argentina	52 (1.1)	484 (3.4)	37 (0.8)	484 (3.7)	11 (0.7)	478 (5.8)	9.7 (0.05)
Quebec, Canada	51 (1.8)	553 (3.3)	40 (1.6)	545 (2.9)	8 (0.7)	527 (5.2)	9.7 (0.06)
Moscow City, Russian Fed.	50 (1.2)	616 (2.4)	42 (1.0)	611 (2.4)	8 (0.6)	597 (5.1)	9.6 (0.05)
Abu Dhabi, UAE	49 (1.6)	437 (5.3)	38 (1.2)	401 (5.9)	12 (0.9)	391 (9.0)	9.7 (0.07)

SOURCE: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS 2016



Appendix K

Driver Measure: Interview Protocols

Educator Interview Protocol

Time:	
Date:	
Place:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee/Position:	

Description of Project

Confidentiality

Questions

1. What are your thoughts on our district's overall discipline policy?
    a. Do you think our discipline policy is equity-based?
    b. Do you think our discipline policy is culturally-responsive?
2. What is your role in the disciplinary process?
3. What are your thoughts on our district's alternative program?
4. What is your experience with students placed at the alternative program?
5. This year, the alternative program implemented a new behavioral intervention with 9th grade students as a strategic action cycle. Students set behavioral goals and were then explicitly taught skills related to their goals. Based on your interactions with students that returned to your classroom from the alternative program, how would you assess the effectiveness of this intervention?
6. Is there anything important you think I should consider on this topic?
7. Is there anyone else you think I should speak with?
8. What questions do you have for me?

Closing & Thank You

Student Interview Protocol

Time:	
Date:	
Place:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee/Position:	

Description of Project

Confidentiality

Questions

1. What has your experience been with the alternative program?
2. What are your thoughts on the district's alternative program?
3. In general, what are your thoughts about the discipline policy?
    a. Do you think it's fair? Reasonable?
4. This year, we tried something new where we tried to work on a skill so that students could be more successful at their home school. What was your experience with that?
5. Is there anything important you think I should consider on this topic?
6. Is there anyone else you think I should speak with?
7. What questions do you have for me?

Closing & Thank You

Parent Interview Protocol

Time:	
Date:	
Place:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee/Position:	

Description of Project

Confidentiality

Questions

1. What are your thoughts on our district's overall discipline policy?
    a. Do you think our discipline policy is equity-based?
    b. Do you think our discipline policy is culturally-responsive?
2. What has your experience been with the district's disciplinary process?
3. What are your thoughts on our district's alternative program?
4. What is your experience with your child's placement at the alternative program?
5. This year, the alternative program implemented a new behavioral intervention with 9th grade students as a strategic action cycle. Students set behavioral goals and were then explicitly taught skills related to their goals. How would you assess the effectiveness of this intervention for your child?
6. Is there anything important you think I should consider on this topic?
7. Is there anyone else you think I should speak with?
8. What questions do you have for me?

Closing & Thank You

Appendix L

Process Measure: CSRS

Child Session Rating Scale (CSRS)

Name _____ Age (Yrs): ___
Gender: _____
Session # ____ Date: _____

How was our time together today? Please put a mark on the lines below to let us know how you feel.

Listening

_____ did not always listen to me. I----------I _____ listened to me.

How Important

What we did and talked about was not really that important to me. I----------I What we did and talked about were important to me.

What We Did

I did not like what we did today. I----------I I liked what we did today.

Overall

I wish we could do something different. I----------I I hope we do the same kind of things next time.

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