



Equity Digest

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(RE)IMAGINING SCHOOL POLICY & PRACTICE: VIRTUAL SCHOOLING



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

This *Equity Digest* is a call to action for school community stakeholders to: advocate for district adaptation of policies and practices to the online school environment; push for administrators and teachers to be proactive rather than reactive in these online spaces; and to encourage educators to shift the gaze from discipline, surveillance, and control toward the consideration of students’ rights, as well as meaningful access to, and participation in, a high-quality education. Specifically, school community stakeholders can serve as social justice actors (Lazzell et al., 2019) by

advocating for equity for Black and Brown students during virtual/hybrid learning through the transformation of brick-and-mortar disciplinary policies and practices, disrupting the trends of increased surveillance of students and their families in their homes. School community stakeholders can push districts and educators to shift their emphasis from control of students to the implementation of strategies for online learning that attend to the diverse ways in which students learn and express knowledge (Coomer et al., 2020).

Get Informed

Discipline Disproportionality Persists in Virtual Schooling, Furthering the Disenfranchisement of Black and Brown Students



Disproportionality and Disenfranchisement for Black and Brown Students in Virtual Schooling Results in Negative, Long Term Consequences

Disproportionality, a term often used in the special education field and defined under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act), occurs when the representation of a certain ethnic group of students (Black and Brown students) in a given situation (special education identification, placement, or discipline) is significantly different from the representation of other ethnic groups (their white peers).

Black and Brown students are experiencing disproportionate disciplinary action in online spaces, which means being excluded from high quality learning and instruction due to removal from the learning environment (Belsha, 2020). Namely, students of Color are disproportionately suspended and expelled from virtual school at a higher rate compared to their white peers (Belsha, 2020; Coomer et al., 2020), replicating inequities that these students experience in brick-and-mortar schools.

Disproportionate school discipline has a long-term, negative effect on Black and Brown students. Students of Color that face disproportionate discipline in school are more likely to have encounters with law enforcement

(Annamma, 2017; Mackey, 2018), fueling what is called the **school-to-prison pipeline**, and the criminalization of the behaviors of Black students with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2014; Annamma et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006). Black Girls with Disabilities, in particular, are most often denied the civil rights protection under Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and are more likely to have encounters with the juvenile justice system compared to their white peers (Pressley et al., 2020).

The Need for School Discipline Policy Transformation in e-Learning

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many public-school districts nationwide have transferred their brick-and-mortar building policies and practices to the virtual school environment (Belsha, 2020). What is evident from the research is that some districts have not altered their disciplinary policies and practices to be responsive to the uniqueness of online spaces (Belsha, 2020; Coomer et al., 2020). Brick-and-mortar school discipline policy implementation can be in conflict with student behavior in their own homes during online school hours, “further disenfranchising” Black and Brown students in the e-learning space, risking violating students’ due process rights (Coomer et al., 2020, pg. 3).

Why You Should Care

Brick-and-mortar Building Policies Enforced in Online Spaces Focus on Student Surveillance and Control, Persecuting Black and Brown Students

The Persecution of Black and Brown Students and Families in Virtual Spaces

Throughout the nation, many districts are upholding their building policies and traditional codes of conduct in virtual spaces (Belsha, 2020; Coomer et al., 2020). During online school hours, often six consecutive hours of compulsory, monitored camera time (Koumpilova, 2020), students engaged in e-learning

are expected to adhere to brick-and-mortar building conduct policies (Fernandez, 2020). This video surveillance of students and their families can serve as fodder to “exacerbate teacher bias” (Coomer et al., 2020, pg. 3). The surveillance of students, their homes, and their families, as well as “unlimited monitoring of students’ activity on district-issued devices” (Coomer et al., 2020, pg.3; see perryschools.org), further shifts often already unhealthy power dynamics between schools and families (Coomer et al., 2020). One of the byproducts of virtual learning has been the continuance of disproportionate discipline and criminalization of Black students, with Black students with disabilities serving as the most likely subjects of this persecution and oppression (Belsha, 2020; Coomer et al., 2020; Pressley et al., 2020).

The Harm that Occurs When School Policies Fail to Adapt to New Situations

There are many examples across the nation of incidents involving school (over)surveillance of students and families in their homes during e-learning (Coomer et al., 2020). For example, some districts have upheld their building dress codes, including strict rules against hats, tank tops, and pajama-type attire (e.g. Associate Press, 2020; Page & Hargrave, 2020). One Tennessee district’s Code of Conduct, which mandates that a student’s work area “must be free of foreign objects that are not being utilized for instruction,” applied this policy to online learning. In addition, this district’s Code of Conduct barred eating and drinking during “virtual courses” (Page & Hargrave, 2020, p. 9). Parents and caregivers should have the right to enforce their own rules in their homes (Coomer et al., 2020). School community stakeholders can advocate toward the transformation of school policy to respect parents’ and caregivers’ preferences during virtual learning.

By far the most illogical and violent occurrences of district persecution through policy has occurred when schools have involved law enforcement in response to students playing with toys and personal items during

remote learning time (e.g. Cattafi, 2020; Peiser, 2020). In Colorado Springs, for example, a Black male with ADHD who played with a Nerf gun during online class was suspended for bringing a “facsimile of a firearm to school” (Peiser, 2020); police were sent to that student’s home, posing a threat to the student and his family (Coomer et al. 2020). This incident is a prime example of how districts have failed to adapt their policies to logically apply to online spaces, taking the over-policing of Black and Brown students from the physical to virtual space (Coomer et al., 2020).

Brick-and-mortar Policies in Online Spaces: The Need for Policy Transformation and Adaptation to the Virtual Classroom

Online school policies need to make sense for the context of the learning environment, tending to the needs of students and families during this pandemic, and emphasizing access, meaningful participation, and assessment that measures multiple ways of knowing and knowledge expression (Coomer et al., 2020). Districts should adjust their discipline policies and Codes of Conduct to avoid confusion and overreaching that can affect the lives of students and their families (Coomer et al., 2020). Districts must transform their policies and practices to account for conditions that exist in online spaces--to enact realistic, logical policies that are specifically designed around a home learning environment (Coomer et al., 2020). As the above example illustrates, we’ve seen the terrible consequences of districts failing to adjust building policy for the online schooling environment.

Time for a Shift from Student Control to Engagement

Not only are policy changes needed, but also a complete shift in focus is necessary, moving away from an emphasis on control of students’ bodies and behaviors towards inventive ways to engage students through virtual instruction (Coomer et al., 2020). This pandemic presents many challenges for educators, students, and their families, but also presents opportunities for districts

to transform the traditional concept of curriculum (Moore et al., 2015) to include students’ cultural assets and diverse funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992). What is needed from districts is more innovation, less regulation.

Moving Forward

Shifting the Focus from Surveillance and Control to Creating an Inviting, Engaging Online Learning Environment

The prevalence of the examples of district policy around student surveillance and discipline in online spaces in the previous section makes it clear what happens when student control is the primary focus during virtual/hybrid learning. In addition to adapting school policies to the online environment, districts need to focus more on “instructional strategies that are proactive, responsive, and supportive of student learning” (Coomer et al., 2020, pg.5). To design such instructional and assessment methods that foster learning, the principles of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** and **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy** can be woven together into a framework that cultivates student engagement (e.g. Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

Universal Design for Learning: Instruction for All Levels of Learning

Universal Design for Learning is a framework for instructional design that accounts for student difference. UDL incorporates methods of instruction that address variability in learning styles and strengths, including and attending to the instructional needs of students with disabilities (CAST, 2012). In order to create universally-accessible instruction, educators attend to and incorporate multiple ways of teaching a concept (“representation”), how students learn in a variety of manners (“action and expression”), and

engagement with the concept (CAST, 2012). UDL thinks outside the box of traditional instruction, shifting the focus of instruction from status quo behavior to the design of accessible, inclusive instruction (Coomer et al., 2020; Rose & Meyer, 2006; Rose et al., 2005).

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Instruction: Culture is an Asset

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Instruction is an asset-based instructional style that utilizes the cultural knowledges and lived experiences of culturally diverse students to make learning more engaging and effective (Paris, 2012; Paris, 2017). In Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Instruction (Moore et al., 2015), students’ cultures are a source of extensive knowledge that can be tapped to enrich curriculum and guide instruction, providing a more enriching learning experience for all students.



An Emphasis on Inclusive, Accessible Instruction vs. Surveillance, Discipline, and Control

The “cross-pollination of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning” (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016) uniquely attends to and values diverse student identities according to gender, class, race, and ability, and recognizes and addresses the multiple, compounding systemic oppressions that occur when students possess more than one marginalized identity, particularly at the intersection of race and disability (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). This cross-pollination uses students’ cultural assets and identities, combined with accessible, inclusive instructional methods, to teach

meaningful, enriching, and engaging curriculum that empowers students (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

What Does Accessible, Inclusive Instruction Look Like?

The “cross-pollination of UDL and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy” ([Waitoller & Thorius, 2016](#)) in online spaces includes:

1. Multiple means of representation (CAST, 2012; Hall et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2005) of concepts and curriculum, including creative use of virtual platforms with which students are already familiar (boredteachers.com, 2020; Coomer et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2005). When paired with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, these multiple means of representation can include the respect and valuing of cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016), fostering students’ cultural self-awareness (Coomer et al., 2017).

For example, in an English Language Arts class, students were learning about genres of fiction writing. Students organized into work groups were asked to select a source that was an example of their assigned genre of fiction to view or read, summarize, and critique. Students were encouraged to access the source material in a variety of formats, including paperback or hardcover books, e-books, graphic novels, audiobooks, or movies, as their ability and interest allowed. The sources had to include a main protagonist who possessed a non-dominant social identity and needed to reflect an important societal issue.

3. Multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2012; Hall et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2005) accounts for the myriad of ways in which students engage with the curriculum (Coomer et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2012). Educators in virtual spaces can utilize the capacities of the younger generation of “digital natives,” kids who have always grown up with digital technology (Dingli &

Seychell, 2015), encouraging them to share the digital platforms they use in their personal lives towards creative strategies that utilize these virtual platforms to create content that engages students (Coomer et al., 2020). When combined with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, students are supported to build upon practices, funds of knowledge, and resources from their home communities to demonstrate their understanding of content in innovative and flexible ways (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

In the English Language Arts example, students in each work group, drawing upon their own lived experiences, were asked to present a critique of the book, movie, or graphic novel they selected. Students were asked to describe parallels from the story they studied to real life home, community, or societal issues, including examining the power dynamics reflected in the story. The teacher gave the students many choices of how they could complete the assignment and produce a finished artifact that demonstrated what they learned together as a group.

4. Multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2012; Hall et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2005), moving away from traditional notions of the sit-and-get, webinar style of teaching during the virtual school day, which emphasizes sitting and being quiet (e.g. Koumpilova, 2020), toward meaningful activities and assignments that build upon students’ existing skill sets and allows for asynchronous, creative engagement with the material through an independent style of e-learning (Coomer et al., 2020). Combined with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, instruction uses these different ways of engagement with the curriculum to interrupt traditional power relationships between students and teachers, and among students, in order to expand notions of the “expert learner (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).”

The ELA class assignment example used asynchronous, online learning such that students, at

their own pace and time, were invited to select a family member(s) or other trusted adult to listen to them discuss their small group project. All submissions were posted on the homework platform and the teacher encouraged the students to view the work of their peers and leave text or video comments, providing constructive feedback and posing critical questions. In this assignment, students were repositioned, assuming the teacher role by explaining their assignment to a family member or adult, and by providing feedback to their peers.

What Can I Do as a School Community Stakeholder to Advocate for Black and Brown Students?

School community stakeholders can advocate for districts to move away from a focus on compliance, surveillance, and control, toward a focus on creative instructional strategies for engaging all students in enriching, online learning by viewing culture as an asset and attending to diverse ways of accessing, knowing, and engaging with course material. Virtual school should not be a place where students are forced to comply with prescribed behavior, but rather a place where they are invited to share their unique backgrounds and identities. By reimagining school for online spaces, creative and novel methods of instruction and engagement will benefit all students during the pandemic and beyond.



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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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