



# BREAKING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

*HOW IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE  
SUPPORTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS*



**PUBLIC POLICY AND  
EDUCATION FUND** OF NEW YORK



**TheChildren'sAgenda**

Smart Choices. Bold Voices.



THE  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION





# BREAKING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

## HOW IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE SUPPORTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Breaking The School-To-Prison Pipeline is a follow-up to an earlier report—[Breaking The School-To-Prison Pipeline: The Crisis Affecting Rochester’s Students And What We Can Do To Fix It](#)—released in 2014 by Citizen Action of New York, Alliance for Quality Education, Advancement Project, and Teen Empowerment. The report addresses several questions since then:

- o How much progress has been made on school discipline and climate since the original report?
- o What interventions and policy changes were most effective, and which need modification?
- o What work remains unfinished?

*Breaking The School-To-Prison Pipeline* focuses on the last five school years (2013-2014 to 2017-2018). During this period, many new initiatives were being implemented to address school climate and discipline in the Rochester City School District (RCSD). In keeping with The Children’s Agenda’s mission, this report seeks to promote evidence-based solutions for improving children’s academic and social-emotional wellbeing, especially for those most impacted by poverty, discrimination, health disparities, and trauma.

*Note: This report was written by The Children’s Agenda in partnership with Citizen Action of New York and Teen Empowerment. All data were provided by RCSD and interviews were conducted by members of the Community Task Force on School Climate.*

## BACKGROUND

Early in 2014, local activists and community members invited Advancement Project to the Rochester City School District (RCSD) to help bolster local capacity on addressing the widespread crisis in education known as the school-to-prison pipeline. For decades, students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, economically disadvantaged students, and non-native English speakers have been suspended from school at higher rates compared to their white, general education, heteronormative, economically stable, and native English speaking peer groups. A large body of research demonstrates the negative developmental outcomes and risks of juvenile justice involvement associated with exclusionary discipline.<sup>1</sup> For instance, just one out-of-school suspension in 9th grade doubles the probability a student will drop out of high school.<sup>2</sup> Students who drop out of high school are eight times more likely to end up incarcerated than students who graduate.<sup>3</sup>

The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights shows 2.7 million children received at least one out-of-school suspension in the 2015-2016 school year. Of those children, black students were suspended 3.7 times more often than their white peers and students with disabilities were suspended 2.6 times as often as their general education peers.<sup>4</sup> These disparities are comparable to RCSD, where black students were suspended 2.5 times as often as their white peers, and students with disabilities were suspended 2 times as often as their general education peers in the 2017-2018 school year.



As a recent [report](#) by The New York Equity Coalition shows, high-need urban districts like Rochester often have lower racial and demographic disparities in suspensions than low-need suburban districts like Brighton, but much higher rates of suspensions overall.<sup>5</sup> While RCSD's racial and other demographic disparities are slightly lower than

national averages, the number of suspensions handed out by RCSD (3 suspensions for every 10 students from the 2013-2014 school year through the 2015-2016 school year) is very high compared to other school districts in New York State and nationally. The negative consequences of this practice disproportionately fall on African American and Latino students who make up 86% of RCSD's student population.

Both personal and institutional biases drive the disparities in suspensions and expulsions and not intrinsic factors as some poorly designed research papers have tried to suggest.<sup>6</sup> Students of color are more likely to be suspended for vague catch-all categories such as “disruptive behavior,” while white students are suspended for more specific categories like fighting or damaging school property. The idea that children of color are more disruptive or aggressive is itself a racist idea that has been widely refuted by multiple studies which also show that black students receive harsher punishments for the same behavior as white students.<sup>7</sup> An ever-widening body of research shows that students' developmental and life outcomes are harmed by exclusionary discipline. Thus, when bias influences which students receive exclusionary discipline, this bias perpetuates lower academic achievement among historically oppressed groups.

**“[The new Code of Conduct] is a belief system... ‘[A student] did this’ but we need to realize and understand WHY they’re doing this. And we also realize that being punitive doesn’t get us anywhere because that child is not coming back able to start functioning if he’s not been dealt with and the people who got hurt, they’re not able to move on because nothing’s been resolved.”**

**– School Principal**

Advancement Project's initial presentation in February 2014, helped launch a collaborative effort led by community stakeholders through a **partnership model** with the Rochester City School District's Superintendent and Deputies, the local collective bargaining units, foundations, non-profit agencies with expertise in mental health, juvenile justice, youth leadership and restorative practices, parents and students. These stakeholders formed the Community Task Force on School Climate to develop recommendations to improve school climate in the Rochester City School District.

At the same time, a group of local activists from the Alliance for Quality Education began compiling a report on school discipline by collecting data and stories. With help from Teen Empowerment, Citizen Action of New York, and Advancement Project, a volunteer-led campaign took shape. The report, *Breaking The School-To-Prison Pipeline: The Crisis Affecting Rochester's Students And What We Can Do To Fix It*, was released on November 18, 2014, at a press conference at Enrico Fermi School 17. The extensive media coverage and attention generated by the report became a catalyst for change in Rochester.

## THE NEW CODE OF CONDUCT

The 2014 report had six recommendations, the first of which was to promptly rewrite the discipline policies at RCSD. The new code of conduct—as school discipline policies are called—was to remove criminal language, clarify vague guidelines, make suspensions a last resort, and promote alternatives to suspension such as restorative practices.

After a lengthy revision process that involved input from hundreds of, students, parents, educators, and community members, the new code of conduct was passed unanimously by the RCSD Board of Education in June of 2016. The new code of conduct took effect the following (2016-2017) school year. The code's passage marks a clear turning point in all the data we collected for this report.

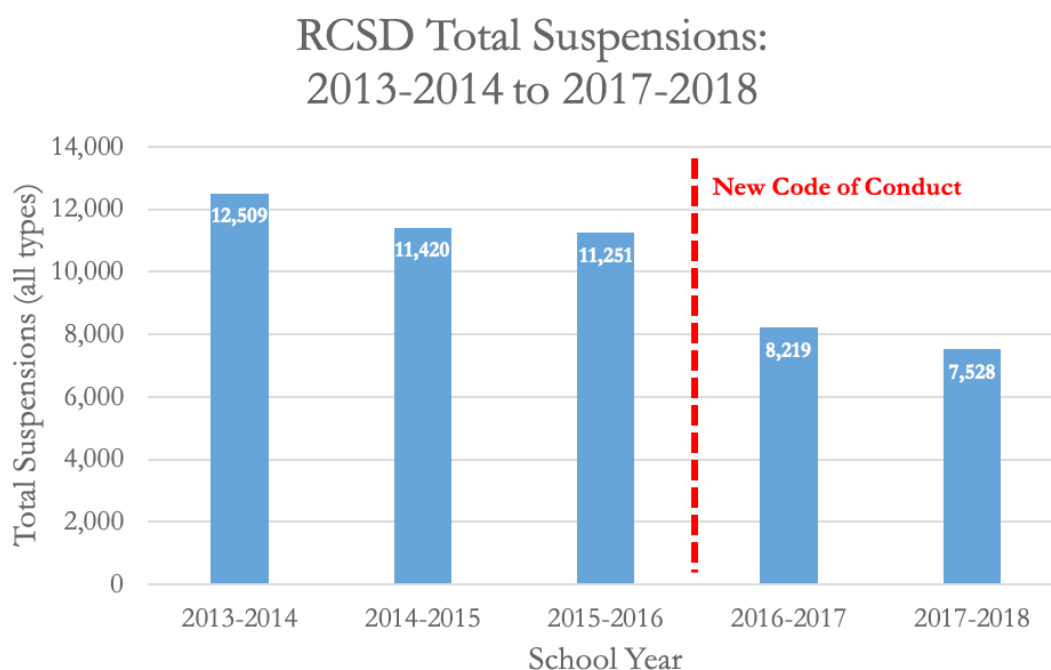


Figure 1: Total duplicated number of suspensions (all categories) districtwide from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school year. Data provided by Rochester City School District.

As Figure 1 shows, the total number of suspensions dropped by 3,032 after the new code of conduct was adopted, a 27 percent decline. Several other interventions were being implemented before and after this policy change, including professional development in restorative practices and help zones instead of in-school suspension rooms. The new code of conduct is not solely responsible for the reduction in suspensions, but progressive discipline policies appear necessary to provide a framework for other reforms. This reduction in suspensions is quite dramatic, and provides clear evidence that the code of conduct is having a significant positive impact on school discipline.

“Everyone across the District is on a continuum when it comes to restorative practices. If we can get a teacher who is all about punishment to being all about restorative practices, then that is a win. And that has happened and is happening in multiple ways...Teachers see that what is happening in one classroom should be happening in theirs and they want the atmosphere and relationships that is created by using [restorative practices].”

– Member of Roc Restorative Team

## ROC RESTORATIVE TEAM

In the spring of 2015, a professional learning community (PLC) for restorative practices was formed by three high-level central office administrators at RCSD. The goal was to conduct trainings and share best practices between participating schools. Restorative practices are about improving and repairing relationships between people, and between people and communities.<sup>8</sup> Consequences and accountability may be involved when harm has been done. This could be as simple as cleaning up papers thrown on the floor, or making amends in some creative way that builds empathy. Restorative practices may be used as an alternative to suspensions, but they are better thought of as an approach to relationships that eliminates the need for harsh discipline in the first place.

The PLC has been the backbone for scaling up restorative practices districtwide, which now includes 39 schools that have participated in 4 different cohorts. What became the Roc Restorative Team was greatly enhanced by an infusion of \$1.3 million in grant money from New York State’s “My Brother’s Keeper Program” in 2017. That funding was used to hire 10 restorative coaches. This grant is phasing out after the 2018-2019 school year. **Despite the budgetary challenges facing RCSD, it is the conclusion of this report that it is important to sustain and even expand those positions moving forward.**

Implementing restorative practices takes years of professional development and carefully cultivated buy-in from the school community. It would be a fatal mistake to scale back the important work of the Roc Restorative Team by cutting its funding. RCSD needs a strong core of restorative practices coaches to maintain and deepen the gains that have been made and expand into new buildings.

## HELP ZONES

Another key reform was help zones. A help zone is a place for a student to cool down and talk with a qualified staff person. The help zone is designed as an alternative to an in-school suspension room. There are widespread levels of trauma among Rochester's children, with 85% reporting at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) in the 2017 Rochester City School District Youth Risk Behavior Survey.<sup>9</sup> Trauma-informed practices require de-escalation and checking in with students to address underlying problems.

Help zones were added to K-8 buildings and high schools during the 2015-2016 school year. Some K-6 buildings have since added help zones but the **practice should be expanded districtwide**. Restorative practices lay the groundwork for stronger relationships, while help zones provide an immediate release for students with pent up aggression, frustration, anger, or depression.

**“People need to feel like they are part of the change and that they contributed to the plan. All too often we try to force the change and are faced with resistance and resentment. Restorative practice has been a gradual process and had to come from within.”**

– School Principal

## LONG-TERM COMMITMENT AND BUY-IN

The Community Task Force on School Climate (CTF) conducted interviews with principals and restorative coaches during the 2018-2019 school year. Participants were asked questions about school climate in their buildings, what specifically is contributing to successes, and how they can continue to improve.

Staff repeatedly stated that they had to own any reform effort for it to be successful. Many school leaders and restorative coaches saw the process of change as gradual because it could not be forced. Testimonials by staff who were already using restorative practices were the most persuasive in convincing colleagues to take it seriously.

Staff cited turnover as a serious challenge to consistently implementing restorative practices at the school level. If a few teachers leading the work on restorative practices at their school left the work dwindled. Turnover at all levels, from the superintendent and their deputies to administrators, teachers, and other support staff has required ongoing training and orientation to restorative practices. The Roc Restorative Team is needed to provide this ongoing training and be a consistent resource through the many transitions in staffing at RCSD.

The move away from harsh discipline to relationship building is a culture shift. To scale up this work will require strong leaders, long-term commitment, and consistent support from Central Office and within the buildings.

## ACADEMIC IMPACT

Annual grade-level credit attainment is necessary for on-time graduation. One of the major contributors to RCSD's persistently low graduation rates (hovering around 46% until gains over the past two years reached 53% in 2018) has been course failures accumulating over students' school careers.



**“15 kids come in a day just for a hug. You could be on the phone, they won’t interrupt, they’ll just come in, give you a hug and they’ll leave. You’re like their reset button.”**

**– School Principal**

Exclusionary discipline in the form of suspensions and expulsions harms students academically. Multiple studies show the clear link between missed class time and course failure.<sup>10</sup> Being absent from class is strongly associated with students failing their coursework.<sup>11</sup> A suspension is the same as mandating that a student be absent from class, sometimes for an entire week or even longer.

Reducing suspensions results in increased class time for students. Therefore, we would expect a significant reduction in suspensions to reduce course failures. As Figure 2 shows, this is exactly what happened. For students receiving at least one suspension, the number of total courses failed in RCSD dropped by 2,066 or 28 percent, nearly identical to the percentage drop in suspensions. **This suggests reducing suspensions may have been one of the most effective academic interventions in the past two years.**

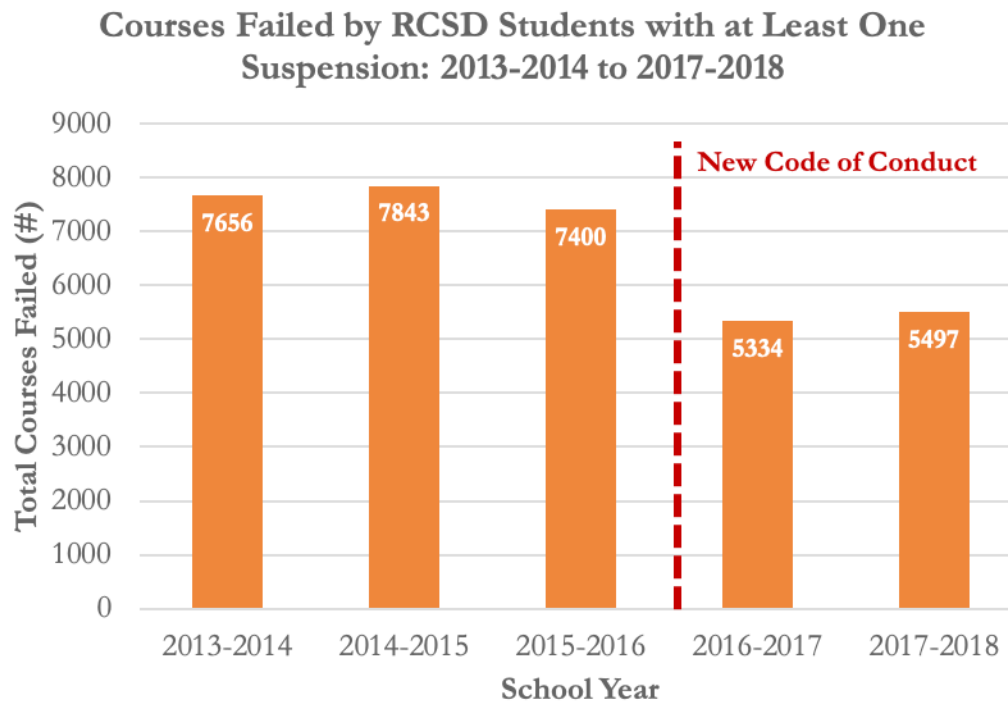


Figure 2: Total number of courses failed in a given year by all students who received at least one suspension during that same school year. Dates include 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Data provided by RCSD.

What about the impact on kids who were not suspended? Often the concern expressed about reducing suspensions and taking measures to keep students in class as much as possible is that disruptive behaviors would detract from and damage other students' success. Figure 3 shows the total course failures for kids who were not suspended in each year over the last five years. There is some normal variation, but the overall trend is flat. There is a slight increase right after the code of conduct is passed which might reflect the fact there are more students overall in the "not-suspended" category after suspensions were significantly decreased. This increase is very modest, and the following year the number of course failures by students who are not suspended drops to its lowest level in the past five years. It's easy to read too much into both the upswing and the downswing. Given all the other factors affecting course failure and that these increases and decreases are within the normal range of the past 5 years, it is not clear reducing suspensions had any effect on the number of course failures among students who were not suspended.

“Another kid jumped on my back when I had just gotten off the bus. A couple of my friends pulled him off me. Nobody was hurt, and I went to breakfast like any other day. Then later as I was walking upstairs to class, the assistant principal told me to walk with her. She called my mom and said I was suspended for 5 days.

I spent a week out of school, no work was sent home. My parents went to pick up work for me but there never was any. I missed 4 summatives which are 60 percent of my grade. I am still trying to catch up from all the work I missed, and I’m worried I’ll get an F for the first time.”

– T, Student in 8th Grade

This finding requires a deeper dive, and unfortunately we do not have the data to fully unpack what is going on here. What we can say is: Significant reductions in suspensions were associated with significant reductions in course failures. So once again, **reducing suspensions may be the most successful academic intervention of the past two school years.**

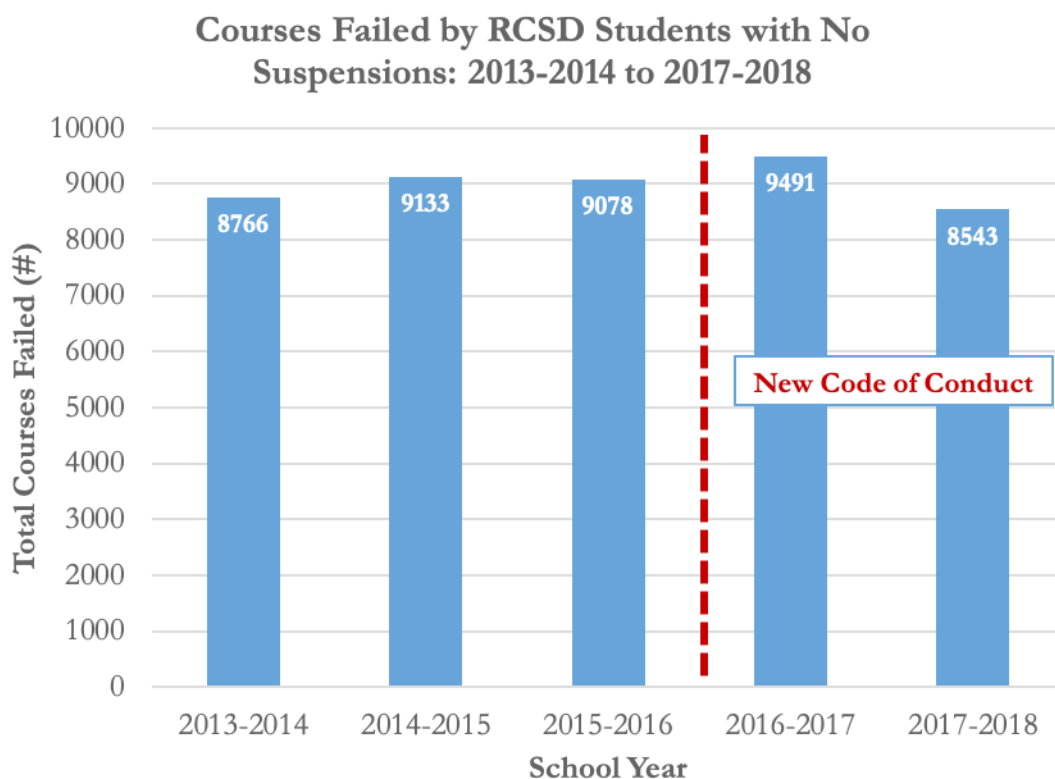


Figure 3: Total courses failed in a given year by all students who were not suspended in that same school year. Dates included are 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Data provided by RCSD.

## LONG-TERM SUSPENSIONS ARE MOST DAMAGING

Being removed from the classroom for any amount of time disrupts a student's education, and the longer the disruption the more damaging it will be.<sup>12</sup> Figure 4 shows course failures among students who were suspended more than 10 cumulative days throughout the school year. These students who received longer and/or more frequent suspensions represented a smaller proportion of the total number of students suspended at least once but they showed the most significant drop in course failures. The total drop in course failures by suspended students was 2,066 and **60 percent** (1,229) of that drop was among students suspended more than 10 days. This suggests two things: 1) Long-term suspensions have a significantly negative impact on students' academics 2) That damage is avoidable through fewer and shorter suspensions.



This also provides more evidence that reducing suspensions had an impact on reducing course failures. It's logically consistent to expect students suspended for long periods of time to fail their course work, it is also consistent to expect reducing the number of students suspended for long periods of time to have a big impact in reducing course failures. Being suspended for one day could be the tipping point that leads to a student failing a class, but the impact is small enough that it is very hard to separate from other factors that influence course failure. Being suspended for more than 10 days will certainly have a measurable academic impact and the probability of failure is much

higher. Further, we see that the trend in course failures for students suspended more than 10 days is the most consistent with the overall trend in suspensions compared to students being suspended for fewer days. This again points to the strong association between long-term suspensions and course failure.

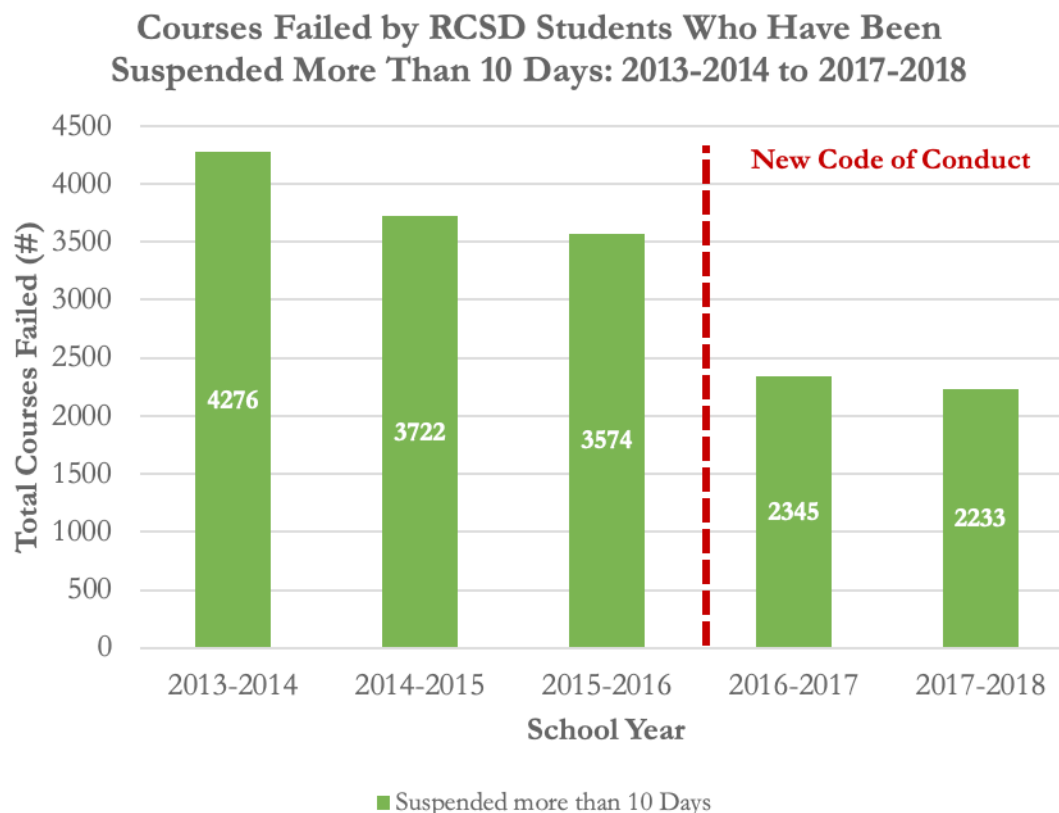


Figure 4: Total Courses failed in a given year by all students who were suspended more than 10 cumulative days in that same school year. Dates included are 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Data provided by RCSD.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, COMMUNITY, TRUST AND VOICE

The Community Task Force on School Climate (CTF) conducted focus groups with 334 students, 186 parents, and 192 RCSD staff between May and June of 2016. Parents, students, and staff were asked questions about how they would improve school climate in their respective buildings. The report was never released<sup>1</sup> because of turnover in school district leadership; however, some of the findings are presented below.

<sup>1</sup> The "Report on Student, Parent, and School Staff Focus Groups on School Climate Change in the Rochester City School District," is an important resource that should be published and utilized by district staff.

The strongest theme coming from all three groups—students, parents and staff—was the importance of relationships built on trust and a sense of community. This reflects a need stemming from a well-established pattern of misunderstanding, distrust, and hurt feelings that too often characterize relationships among students, parents, and school staff in RCSD.

Students talked about wanting a welcoming school environment where there is a sense of community. They seek a sense of working together marked by kind and caring interactions. This can be encouraged with something as simple as a smile and a positive attitude or with something more difficult to achieve such as learning to listen to others and developing mechanisms for self-correction and restorative practices.

Parents, too, mentioned smiling, making eye-contact, “welcoming” parents to the school. They want more opportunities to be in the school, interacting with teachers and other staff. For instance, some suggested creating a new role such as “parent captain” to help with communication among parents and their student’s teacher. There are many such suggestions that could be tried out depending upon circumstances, if social space for such experiments is made available.

**“The culture of the building is really crucial in order to move anything. What relationship building looks like in our building is teachers work collaboratively and families are involved in whatever decisions are made in the school... and students, they are trained to run circles.”**

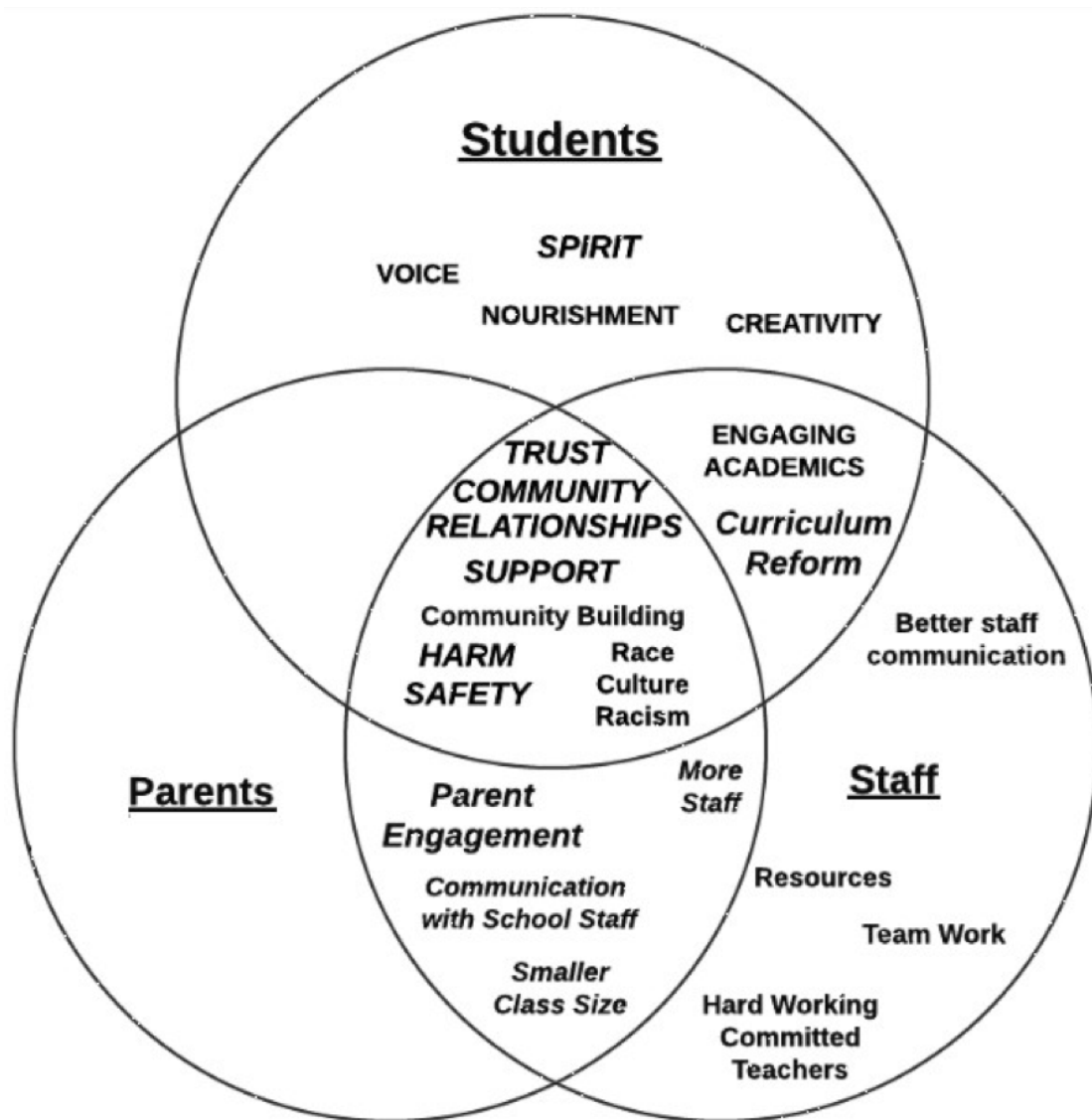
**– School Principal**

This is closely related to another concept parents and students both expressed: voice in the school and in their education. The most consistent theme students shared is that their schools are uninspiring places without a variety of activities and incentives that boost school morale, identity and spirit to feed the intrinsic desire to come to school every day. They generated an extensive list of ideas. They want to belong to a school that has meaning and helps them to join into their education.

Overall, parents would like to have more opportunities to engage the school, and be kept up to date on issues ongoing. Parents also expressed a desire to have occasions to engage with each other, and have access to leadership opportunities at the school. Parents liked the idea of participating in a focus group and having their voices heard. The existing parent groups in the schools and in the district do not seem to meet this need. The Parent Liaisons were well thought of in most schools, and were seen as a help to parents.

School staff talked about the importance of staff being loving, kind, respectful, and moral. In order to build relationships, they must develop an understanding of students, their families, and backgrounds.

Meanwhile, a distinction emerged in how students and school staff talked about the nature of these relationships. School staff expressed wanting to understand their students and what may be going on in their lives. Students want to experience trust and unconditional caring relationships before feeling ready to open up about their lives.



From Community Task Force on School Climate focus groups report.

Figure 5: Venn diagram of focus group responses to questions about how to improve school climate. Larger text indicates a theme that is mentioned more often.

## RACIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES PERSIST

Suspensions went down for every racial and demographic group after the new code of conduct was passed. For every 100 black students, 50 suspensions were handed out in 2013-2014. In 2017-2018 that number fell to 33 suspensions per 100 students. The gap in suspensions between white and black students was reduced from 29 to 20 (per 100 students). However, the disparate rates of suspension remained the same or slightly increased. In 2013-2014, black students were suspended 2.38 times as often as white students, in 2017-2018 it was 2.54 times as often.

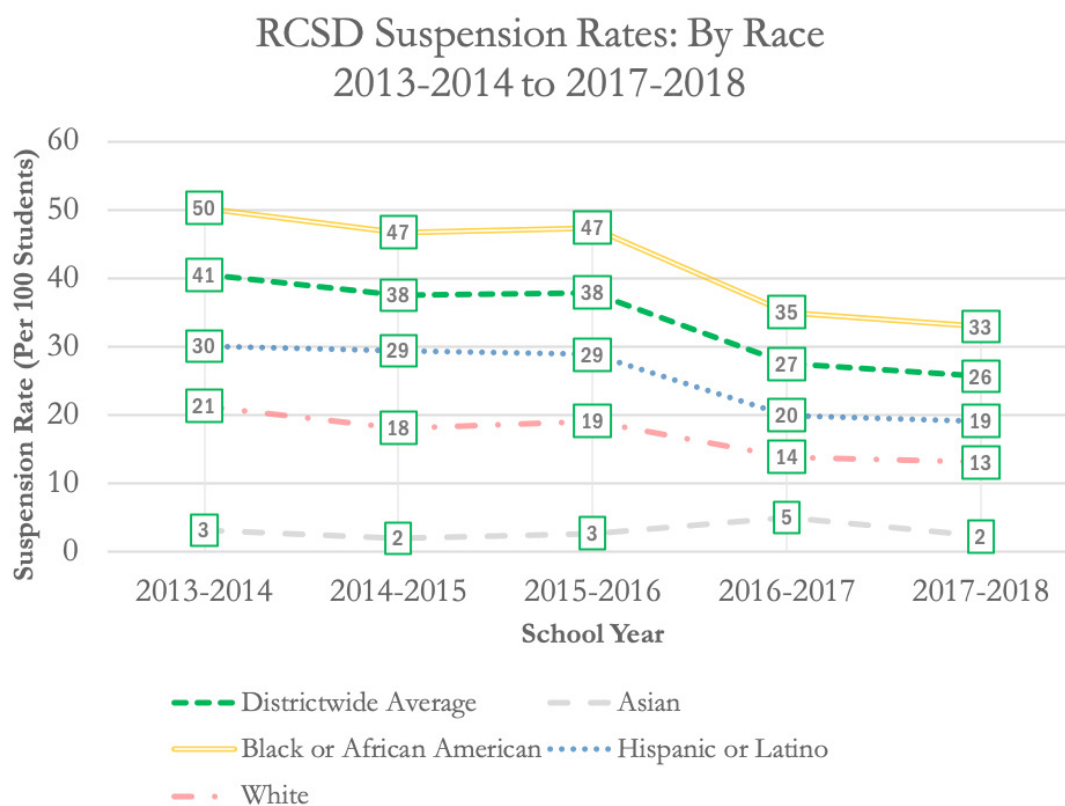


Figure 6: Total duplicated suspensions of all types for a given racial category divided by enrolled students in each category, multiplied by 100. The categories Native American and Multiracial were excluded because the number of students were too few for reliable comparisons. Dates included are 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Data provided by RCSD.

Students with disabilities (42 per 100) and black students (33 per 100) remain the most suspended groups of students. We do not know how often LGBTQ+ students are being suspended because those students are not identified or tracked for privacy reasons. National surveys indicate that LGBTQ+ students experience high rates of school discipline. LGBTQ+ students faced some of the highest rates of harassment and bullying with 60 percent of respondents saying they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation.<sup>13</sup> Improving school climate for these students is an urgent matter.

**“We do Bright Spots based on what we learned from Colorado\*, we would go into different classrooms and halls and document what we saw, only focused on the positives, building on what’s right. School X used to be one of the worst schools, we did a bright spot [assessment] there that gave me so much hope.”**

**– Member of Roc Restorative Team**

*\*Eagle Rock School in Colorado utilizes and provides pro bono training in Bright Spots “appreciative inquiry” assessments.*



The persistence of racial and demographic disparities is common in other school districts that have implemented school discipline reform, including the Syracuse City School District.<sup>14</sup> New discipline policies and practices are effective in reducing suspensions; however, they have fallen short in addressing individual and institutional biases. Professional development programs are an important component of addressing these biases, though it must be acknowledged that existing programs have not shown measurable progress.

Programs and interventions that show the most promise are integrated into relationship building tools that are culturally responsive and committed to racial equity. Several interventions have been initiated and need to be broadened to engage more schools at a deep level. For example:

- **Victorious Minds Academy**, embedded in three RCSD schools (3, 39, and School Without Walls), utilizes Dr. Joy DeGruy’s “relationship model” to realize a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy infused with the value of strong relationships.
- NYU’s Steinhardt Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality (**TAC-D**) has been providing professional learning sessions and ongoing coaching as an intervention in response to the NYS Education Department (NYSED)’s citation of RCSD for disproportionate special education classification and suspensions of Black and Latino male students.
- Dr. Malik Muhammad’s **Akoben LLC** has provided professional development to RCSD educators and the Roc Restorative Team in trauma-informed, culturally relevant uses of restorative practices.
- Professional Learning Circles and reading groups have shared discussions of books like **For White Folks Who Teach in the ‘Hood... and the Rest of Y’all Too** by Christopher Emdin and **Waking Up White** by Debby Irving, while 29 local nonprofits (several which partner with RCSD) became the first cohort of the **Racial Justice and Equity Initiative**, providing a variety of resources for organizations to examine and dismantle ways through which they perpetuate structural racism.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and linguism are deeply entrenched and widespread forms of oppression that exist beyond the school walls. To create a culture and workforce that resists these societal forces is deeply challenging and will require constant planning, evaluation, and improvement.

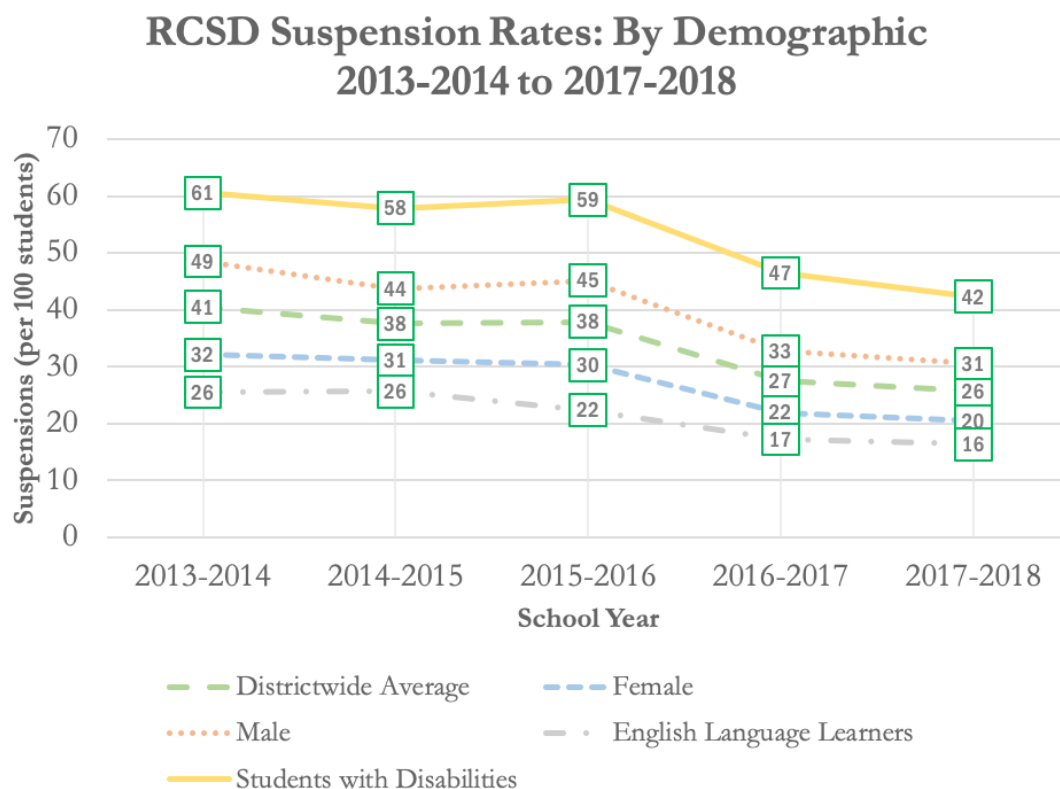


Figure 7: Total duplicated suspensions of all types for a given demographic category divided by enrolled students in each category, multiplied by 100. Dates included are 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Data provided by RCSD.

## REDUCING SUSPENSIONS FOR SUBJECTIVE REASONS

When 10,000 suspensions are handed out in one school year, it is not because 10,000 punches were thrown. Most suspensions (90% in 2016-2017) were for minor and non-violent incidents like students wandering the halls, talking back to teachers, fooling around in class, etc. These are the types of suspensions that invite bias because they are handled differently depending on the student or staff involved. They are also behaviors that could be addressed through de-escalation, classroom management, relationship building, and non-punitive forms of accountability.

In New York State, most suspensions are classified as “other disruptive incidents.” New York State tracks violent incidents in schools using the Violent and Disruptive Incident Report (VADIR). The report has 20 categories of violent incidents, usually being very specific and serious criminal offenses like arson or assault. In 2016-2017, 90 percent of suspensions at RCSD fell under 3 categories: minor altercation, IHMB (Intimidation, Harassment, Menacing, or Bullying) no physical contact, and other disruptive incident.

## VADIR Categories at RCSD 2013-2014 and 2016-2017

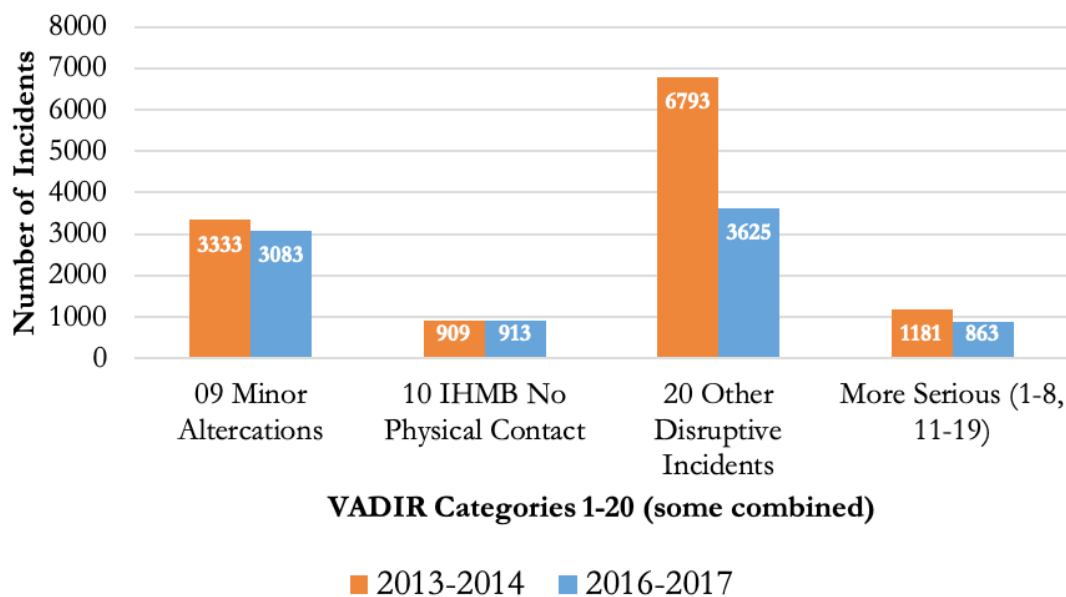


Figure 8: The Violent and Disruptive Incident Report (VADIR) categories are determined by New York State. Categories 1-8, and 11-19 can be found on the New York State Education Department website, they include more serious and specific incidents as opposed to the other three categories broken out. All data is provided by RCSD, 2017-2018 numbers were not properly reported by district staff and could not be used for this report.

The first *Breaking the School-to-Prison Pipeline* report noted that suspensions for “other disruptive incidents” at RCSD were far too high and should be dramatically reduced. The new code of conduct was meant to reduce vague reasons for suspensions and the most recent VADIR data shows it is having an impact. From the 2013-2014 to 2016-2017 school year, suspensions for “other disruptive incidents” fell 47 percent.

## TRANSITIONS AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL SPIKE

Suspensions peak for students between 12 and 16 years old. This corresponds roughly to 7th grade through the early high school years. There are anecdotal theories from staff members about the role of puberty during this time period, but the spike in suspensions at RCSD is more closely associated with student transitions between buildings. RCSD’s building configurations have two normal transition points, 7th and 9th grade. When a student is introduced to a new building they have fewer relationships with adults and students, and are now at the bottom of the social hierarchy rather than the top. A student will be more likely to get into confrontations with fellow students and less likely to have an adult they trust to offer support and empathy.<sup>15</sup>



“Now that we’ve done so much restorative [practices], and there’s so many conversations, there’s this feeling that you get when you’re in the building...kids are naturally teaching other kids ‘you have to go to an adult about that,’ ...they want the help, like ‘I can tell someone, I don’t have to fight.’ [Students] are becoming advocates and it’s passing down to the younger kids.”

– School Principal

Suspension rates are highest for 13 year-olds, with 103 suspensions for every 100 students in 2013-2014. That rate was **42 percent** lower last year (60 per 100), showing dramatic progress after the new code of conduct was passed. Positive school climate interventions like help zones and restorative practices have been targeted at K-8 buildings and high schools. Those interventions combined with the new code of conduct appear to be having a big impact. However, 60 suspensions for every 100 students is still far too high, and much work remains to be done.

The K-6 buildings have been largely overlooked, both because of a lack of capacity by central office staff and the necessary prioritization of the high schools and K-8 buildings. The suspension rates before age 11 have barely changed as a result. Though the rates of suspension are lower at these ages, the numbers are still troublingly high relative to low-need suburban districts. For 8 years-olds (typically 3rd graders), there were 18 suspensions handed out for every 100 students in the 2017-2018 school year at RCSD.

Currently RCSD, in partnership with ROC the Future, is focusing on increasing the number of RCSD students who can read by third grade, as this is known to be an important milestone for later academic success. However, suspensions are associated with lower reading achievement, with one study showing that the more days a student spent in suspension the less they gained in reading.<sup>16</sup> **If students reading by 3rd grade is a serious priority for RCSD, then there should be a ban on suspensions for K-2 students.**

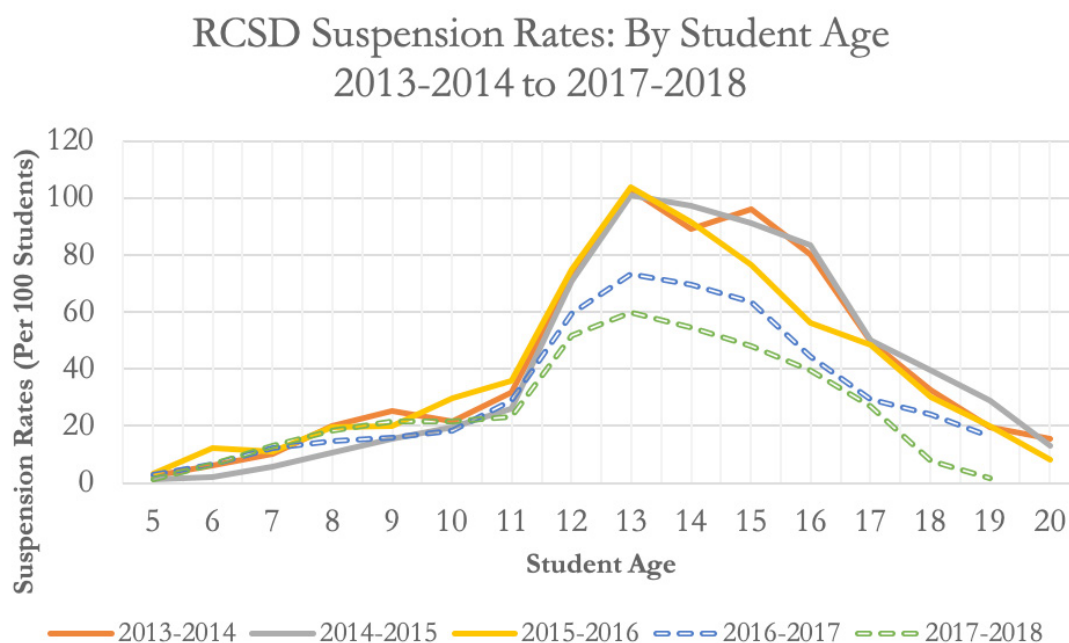


Figure 9: Total duplicated suspensions of all types for a given age group divided by enrolled students at each age, multiplied by 100, from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 school years. Dashed lines indicate years after the new code of conduct was passed. Data provided by RCSD.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Expand and Deepen Restorative Practices Districtwide

Suspensions will not be permanently eliminated without a viable alternative. Building strong relationships among the school community and forms of accountability rooted in empathy (Restorative Practices) are those alternatives. Staffing for the Roc Restorative Team, who provide vital training, coaching and hands-on support, must be maintained at a minimum, and a multi-year plan should be developed to adopt and deepen restorative practices districtwide, including building level staff capacity and a Board resolution declaring RCSD a Restorative District.

## 2. Ban Suspensions for K-2

Given what we know about the damaging effects of suspensions on academics, and how important it is for a child to be reading by 3rd grade, there should be a ban on suspensions for K-2 students. Suspensions are an ineffective discipline tool, academically damaging, and developmentally inappropriate for young children during a period of rapid brain development.

## 3. Limit Long-Term Suspensions to 20 Days

Long-term suspensions should be limited to no more than 20 days. Long-term suspensions have a detrimental impact on students' academics and that damage is avoidable through fewer and shorter suspensions. Strict limits should be placed on long-term suspensions starting with a cap of 20 days.

## 4. Robust Data Sharing Agreement and Quarterly Public Data Reports

The Roc3D Dashboard launched by RCSD this school year is a commendable step towards transparency. However, extensive quarterly reports should still be made public and discussed by the Board of Education and district leadership team. In addition, a robust data sharing agreement should be made with Roc the Future, so that outside experts are able to dive deeper into the data and partner with the district leadership team on strategies for improvement.

## 5. Adopt the School Climate Advisory Committee Recommendations

This report highlights a few key recommendations based on data from RCSD and interviews with members of the school community. This is not an exhaustive list. Members of the School Climate Advisory Committee have already developed an extensive list of recommendations that should be faithfully adopted.

## 6. Train All Staff on the Code of Conduct

The new code of conduct has a clearly defined discipline matrix. The matrix addresses a common concern among parents and staff that discipline is administered inconsistently. Training all staff on the new code of conduct and faithfully implementing the matrix will create consistency and provide detailed guidelines for handling common situations. Also, using the discipline matrix will reduce racial disparities in suspensions and promote alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

*Note on Data: To compile the graphs in this report The Children's Agenda made a formal request to the Rochester City School District for suspension data disaggregated by: race, gender, disability status, ELL status, age, grade level, and school. We asked for suspension types, suspension VADIR classifications, suspension lengths, enrollment figures, and course failures over the last 6 years. Anything less than a cell size of 5 (a reported number of 5 or less) was redacted (blacked out). Without subtotals the school level data had too many missing cells to run a proper analysis. A second request for data that was improperly pulled the first time and school level subtotals was never provided.*

*There is anecdotal evidence that suspensions are underreported districtwide because of students being sent home without any official paperwork being filed. The last two years are considered the most accurate by district staff. However, we must consider the numbers provided as a floor, and the actual numbers to be modestly higher. We do not believe underreporting is biased in a way that would significantly impact the specific findings of this report. The integrity of how suspensions are tracked is vital to this work and must be strengthened. There must be stronger mechanisms of accountability for misreporting and ongoing evaluation of the process of data collection. There is a danger that overemphasizing suspension rates will further incentive misreporting, so it is important that a balance is struck between accountability and the space for productive dialogue.*

# APPENDIX

## K-12 Enrollment For RCSD

SCHOOL YEAR	K-12 ENROLLMENT	%CHANGE SINCE 2013-14	YEAR OVER YEAR
2013-2014	28,936	0	0
2014-2015	28,316	-2%	-2%
2015-2016	27,552	-5%	-3%
2016-2017	26,687	-8%	-3%
2017-2018	26,057	-10%	-2%

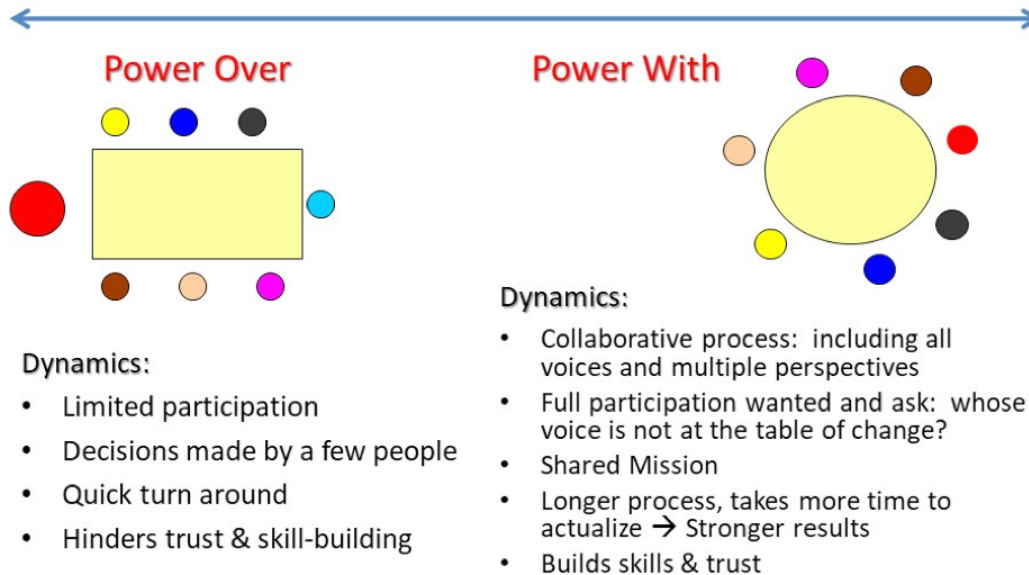
## Roc Restorative Schools

SCHOOL NAME	COHORT
3	1
17	1
19	1
22	1
29	1
41	1
50	1
58	1
Monroe	1
Northwest	1
Northeast	1
Wilson Commencement	1
5	2
10	2
12	2
16	2
23	2
35	2
42	2
46	2
Leadership Academy	2
Integrated Arts & Tech	2
Edison	2
Wilson Foundation	2
Vanguard	2

COHORT 1	2015-2016
COHORT 2	2016-2017
COHORT 3	2017-2018
COHORT 4	2018-2019

SCHOOL NAME (CONT)	COHORT
2	3
7	3
52	3
54	3
57	3
Rochester Early College	3
8	4
39	4
Youth and Justice	4
P-Tech	4
Pre-K	4
School of the Arts	4
Lynx	4
Northstar	4
RISE (41)	4
Total	39 (1 Repeat)

## Dominator Model → Partnership Model



*Note: The Rochester City School District has suspended thousands of students for decades. An internal RCSD report from 1995 listed 9,276 Short-Term Suspensions and 3,792 In-School Suspension during the 1994-1995 School Year.*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Skiba, Russell J., Mariella I. Arredondo and Natasha T. Williams (2014) "More Than a Metaphor: The Contribution of Exclusionary Discipline to a School-to-Prison Pipeline," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47:4, 546-564;550
- 2 Balfanz, Robert; Byrnes, Vaughan; and Fox, Joanna (2014) "Sent Home and Put Off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
- 3 Christle, C. A., Jolivet, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2005). "Breaking the school to prison pipeline: Identifying school risk and protective factors for youth delinquency," *Exceptionality*, 13(2), 69-88.
- 4 United States. Department of Education. Office of Civil Rights. 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate & Safety. April 2018. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>
- 5 The New York Equity Coalition. Stolen Time: New York State's Suspension Crisis. December, 2018. <https://newyork.edtrust.org/press-release/new-york-schools-disproportionately-impose-out-of-school-suspensions-on-black-students/>
- 6 Wright, J. P., Morgan, M. A., Coyne, M. A., Beaver, K. M., & Barnes, J. C. (2014). Prior problem behavior accounts for the racial gap in school suspensions. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(3), 257-266.
- 7 Bottiana, Jessika H., Catherine P. Bradshaw, and Anne Gregory. "Nudging the Gap: Introduction to the Special Issue 'Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality,'" *School Psychology Review* 47, No. 2 (2018):109-117
- 8 <https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/what-is-restorative-practices>
- 9 New York. Monroe County. Department of Public Health. 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Support Report Rochester City School District. February 2018. <https://www2.monroecounty.gov/files/health/DataReports/RCS DYRBS2017docx.pdf>
- 10 Skiba, "More Than a Metaphor," 554
- 11 Balfanz, "Sent Home and Put Off-Track," 1
- 12 Skiba, "More Than a Metaphor," 553
- 13 Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., and Truong, N. L. (2018). *The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN
- 14 Julie McMahon, "Black students twice as likely to be suspended in Syracuse despite discipline overhaul," *The Post-Standard*, Jan 12, 2017. Accessed January 30, 2019. [https://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2017/01/black\\_students\\_twice\\_as\\_likely\\_to\\_be\\_suspended\\_in\\_syracuse\\_despite\\_discipline\\_ov.html](https://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2017/01/black_students_twice_as_likely_to_be_suspended_in_syracuse_despite_discipline_ov.html)
- 15 Dupper, David R., and Matthew T. Theriot. "Student Discipline Problems and the Transition From Elementary to Middle School," *Education and Urban Society* 42, No. 2 (2010):205-222
- 16 Arcia, Emily (2006). "Achievement and Enrollment Status of Suspended Students: Outcomes in a Large, Multicultural School District" *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 38 No. 3, May 2006 359-369