

Combating the Racial Gap in School Disciplinary Referrals

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Applied Policy Project 2020
Prepared for Richmond Public Schools

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisors, Professor Daniel Player and Professor Jim Wyckoff, for their thoughtful feedback and guidance throughout my research process. I am tremendously grateful for your patience, expertise, and constant encouragement over this past year. I could not have completed this project without you. I would also like to thank Paloma Panesi of Teachstone for providing me valuable information regarding the specific costs of teacher coaching.

Finally, thank you to my friends at Batten and to my family for supporting me throughout my academic career. To my peer editors, Connor Gallagher and George Rudebusch, I am so appreciative of your feedback, constructive criticism, and hours of editing.

Disclaimer

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

Honor Pledge

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Executive Summary.....	4
Problem Statement.....	5
Background.....	6
Literature Review.....	9
Introduction to the Literature.....	9
Negative Outcomes of Disciplinary Disparity.....	10
Policy Approaches.....	11
Policy Alternatives.....	20
Alternative #1: Let Present Trends Continue.....	20
Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United in Group Setting.....	21
Alternative #3: Join Becoming a Man Network.....	21
Alternative #4: Institute Teacher Coaching Program.....	23
Alternative #5: Replace Exclusionary Discipline with Restorative Justice.....	24
Evaluative Criteria.....	25
Criterion #1: Administrative Feasibility.....	26
Criterion #2: Cost.....	26
Criterion #3: Effectiveness.....	27
Findings.....	28
Outcomes Matrix.....	28
Discussion of Alternative's Scoring.....	29
Recommendation.....	32
Implementation.....	33
References.....	37

Executive Summary

In 2019, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) founded a mentoring program called “Brothers United.” Brothers United pairs African-American male students with adult African-American males from the Richmond community and they meet one-on-one weekly. This program was designed to provide these students with a role model and source of support so that they would stay focused on academic achievement and working toward a positive future. Further, the Office of Engagement hoped that Brothers United would mitigate the racial gap in school disciplinary referrals that RPS had experienced. Within RPS, Black students receive discipline at a rate much greater than their white counterparts. This is especially problematic because studies have demonstrated that the discipline gap contributes to negative long-term outcomes for Black students, including increased likelihood of dropping out and incarceration (Ramey, 2016).

Drawing from the available literature, this report presents five viable policy alternatives to address the underlying racial gap that Brothers United was created to combat:

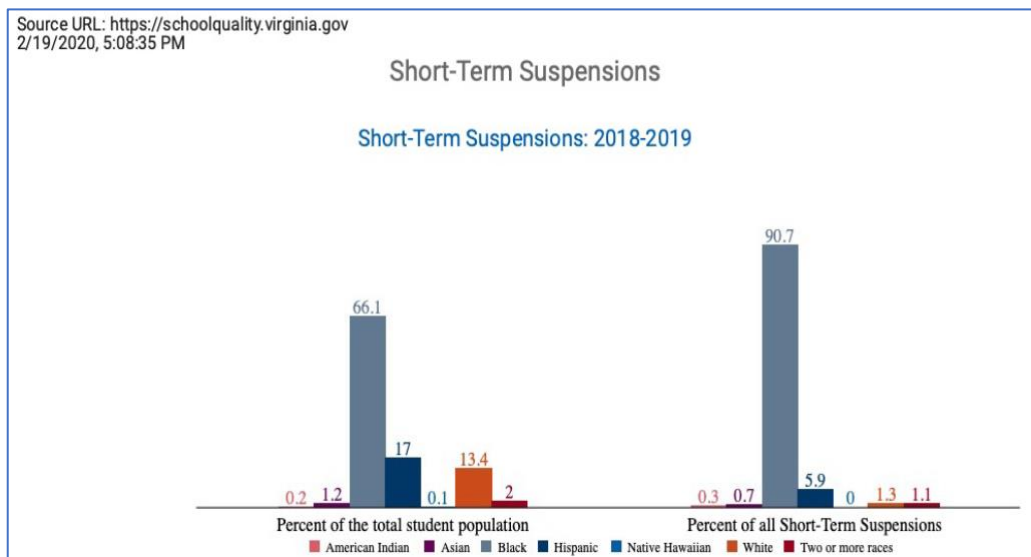
- Let Present Trends Continue
- Continue Brothers United in a Group Setting
- Join the Becoming a Man Network
- Institute Teacher Coaching
- Replace Exclusionary Discipline with Restorative Justice Practices

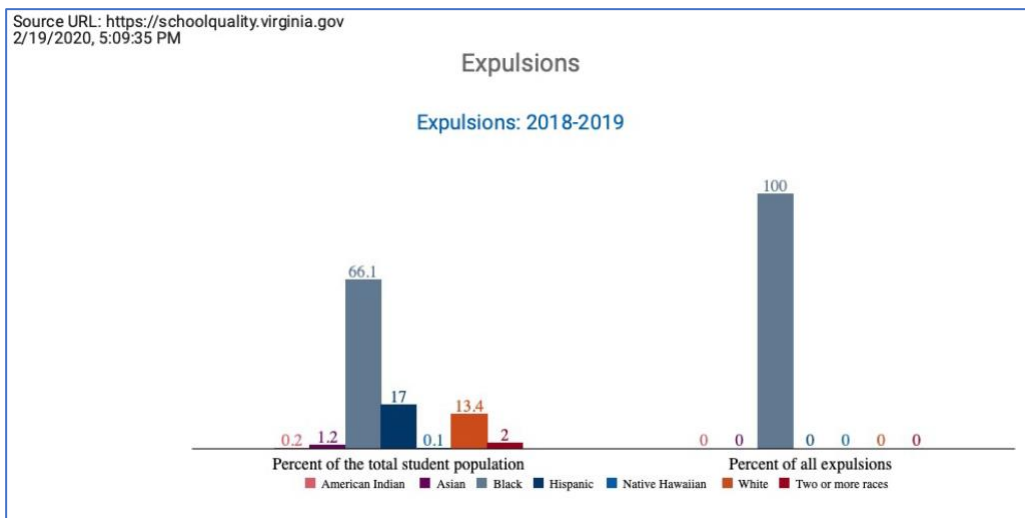
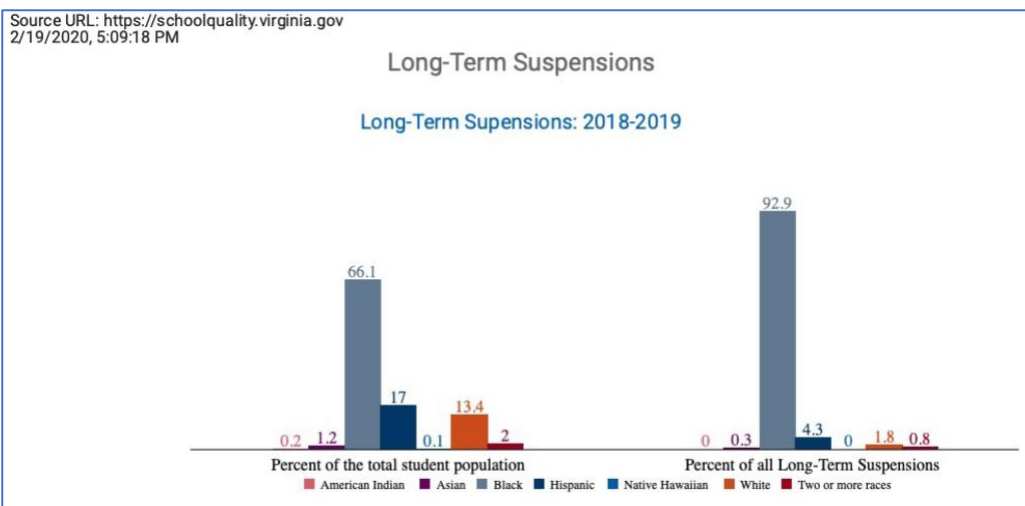
These alternatives are evaluated on three criteria: administrative feasibility of executing the alternative; monetary cost of undertaking the alternative; and effectiveness at combatting RPS’ racial discipline gap.

I recommend Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United in a Group Setting. This alternative is as inexpensive and administratively feasible as the status quo, but it has potential to be more effective in mitigating the results of the discipline gap. In encouraging participants to share the unique struggles that they experience as young Black men with their peers, it is likely that this alternative will alleviate the feelings of isolation and disconnection that the discipline gap perpetuates. Pursuing this alternative will require the buy-in of mentors and mentees, which might involve some convincing on the Office of Engagement’s part. It will also require revising current Brothers United materials to accommodate the structural change and acquiring a new meeting space to fit all participants at once. In light of COVID-19, it is likely that the timeline for implementing this alternative will see some delays, but some guidelines for ensuring a successful implementation are featured at the end of the report.

Problem Statement

Although Black students account for 66.1% of Richmond Public School (RPS)' student population, they comprised 90.9% of all short-term suspensions, 92.9% of all long-term suspensions, and 100% of expulsions in the 2018-2019 school year, indicating that there is a racial discrepancy in discipline referrals in the RPS system (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). When students of color disproportionately receive disciplinary action, they are more likely than white students to miss instructional time and resultantly, more likely to drop out of school or enter the prison system (Scott, 2019). Disciplining African-American students more frequently than white students can have lasting impacts, academically and in terms of their future success.





Background

A school discipline referral is a way for teachers to refer a student to an administrator or law enforcement to be disciplined; it typically occurs when a teacher perceives a student to be misbehaving beyond the teacher's capacity to address (Matalone, n.d.) Methods of discipline can include detention, suspension, expulsion, and arrests. Although these referrals are often necessary, racial disparities in student referrals for discipline have persisted for decades. The 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) found that Black students accounted for 40% of suspensions nationwide, even though Black students only made up 16% of total enrollment

(Gordon, 2018). Not only are students of color referred for discipline at higher rates, but they also receive harsher punishments for the same violations (Meckler, 2019).

Experts cannot definitively determine why these racial gaps persist, though there is some evidence to suggest racial biases play a large role (Morrison, 2019). Researchers have found that regardless of punishment type, school type, or rate of poverty at the school, African-American students are disproportionately referred for discipline. So, while many other factors could have an effect, biased racial perceptions appear to be correlated with higher rates of Black children receiving discipline than their white counterparts (Lopez, 2018).

Racial gaps can have especially significant effects on academic outcomes for students of color when discipline becomes exclusionary, such as suspension and expulsion. Exclusionary discipline results in decreased instructional time, and thus, lower academic performance. Some research has also suggested that receiving suspension or expulsion is correlated with higher school dropout rates and increased likelihood of receiving prison sentences in the future. Resultantly, students of color are set up to perform more poorly, both academically and in terms of future prospects, than their white peers from a young age (Gordon, 2018).

President Obama initiated policies to combat this growing problem in 2014. Under his administration, the Education Department issued detailed guidance on how to “identify, avoid, and remedy” the problem of “discriminatory discipline” (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). This guidance provided schools with alternatives to expulsion and suspension, as well as opened investigations into school districts with particularly significant racial discrepancies. President Obama’s initiative stemmed from the 1994 passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act, which encouraged schools to adopt “zero-tolerance” discipline policies and increased the number of police officers in schools, particularly those in low-income districts with

high Black and Hispanic student populations. In response to the Obama-era guidance, over 50 of America's largest school districts reformed their discipline systems and more than half of the states adjusted their laws in an effort to decrease the rate of suspensions and expulsions (Kamenetz, 2018). In 2018, however, Secretary DeVos rescinded the 2014 guidance intended to mitigate the racial disparities in school discipline referrals. DeVos claimed to have done so because the guidelines had made schools less safe for students and their teachers (Vara-Orta, 2018).

The state of Virginia, and Richmond itself, have also tried to address the problem of discriminatory discipline. In 2018, while Black students comprised roughly 70% of the RPS student population, 88% of all students referred to law enforcement were Black. In fact, all Richmond-area school divisions experienced rates of law enforcement referrals either at or worse than the national average (Mattingly, 2018). As the entire state experienced similar rates of racially disparate discipline, Governor Ralph Northam signed two bills reforming student discipline. The first mandated that schools cannot suspend students in pre-K through third grade for longer than three days, while the second decreased the maximum length of long-term suspensions from 364 calendar days to 45 school days. Delegate Bourne of Richmond also sponsored legislation (HB 1600) stating that long-term suspensions must be limited to 45 school days, with some exception in extreme cases. Similarly, State Senator Franklin introduced Senate Bill 170, which prohibits suspensions from pre-K through third grade from lasting longer than three days and expulsion altogether, except in cases involving drugs or firearms (Mattingly, 2018). Although these steps are significant, they have failed to close the gap.

The Office of Engagement at RPS has instituted some of its own programming designed to mitigate this problem. In 2019, they began a district-wide initiative that paired young men of

color with mentors of color in order to both engage with Richmond community members and to provide male students of color with a support system during their at-risk years. The students have weekly one-on-one meetings with their mentors and experiences in the community, which are aimed at encouraging the students to stay engaged in school and focused on future success (RPS Office of Engagement, n.d.) Brothers United is still in its early stages, however, so it is challenging to say how effectively it has impacted the rates at which male students of color receive discipline referrals compared to their white peers. It is, however, a shift in the right direction toward closing the disciplinary gap between white students and students of color in RPS schools.

Literature Review

Introduction:

Federal data has illustrated that racial gaps in student discipline exist not only in the RPS system, but nationwide. In fact, the disparity between white and Black student rates of discipline referrals has grown in recent years (Balingit, 2018). Experts generally believe there are two sources of this discrepancy: (1) implicit racial biases that prompt school employees to disproportionately refer Black students for discipline; and (2) students of color are disproportionately of lower socioeconomic statuses, thus making them more likely to engage in more disruptive behavior than their white peers.

Many researchers have found that implicit racial biases of school employees contribute to racial disparity in discipline referrals. Most infractions for which students are disciplined have a subjective component, meaning that it is up to the adult's discretion whether the student's action warrants discipline. As such, school employees' implicit biases may shape their perceptions on when discipline is appropriate (Staats, 2014). A 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO)

report analyzed data from nearly all public schools for the 2013-2014 school year. The report noted that Black students constituted 15.5% of public-school students, but accounted for 39% of students receiving school suspensions (Government Accountability Office, 2018). The GAO asserted that “implicit bias – stereotypes or unconscious association about people – on the part of teachers and staff may cause them to judge students’ behaviors differently based on the students’ race and sex” (Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Other studies have shown that the disproportionately lower socioeconomic statuses of Black students contributes to more misbehavior than that of their white counterparts. Children of color are significantly more likely to grow up in poverty (Patten & Krogstad, 2015), in single-mother households (Prince, 2016), and with guardians who possess relatively low levels of education (Cook, 2015). Because Black students are more frequently exposed to community and family disadvantage, they are less likely to learn “socially appropriate strategies for self-control and interpersonal interaction” than those students coming from higher socioeconomic statuses (Skiba and Williams, 2014). Resultantly, these students are likelier to disrupt the class than their white counterparts, putting them at higher risk of receiving discipline.

Both teacher implicit biases and student socioeconomic backgrounds appear to play a role in racial disciplinary gaps, though experts disagree over which source plays the greater role (Petrilli, 2017). As such, an ideal policy alternative would account for both adult biases and the socioeconomic factors.

Negative Outcomes of Disciplinary Disparity:

The racial gap in disciplinary referrals is associated with long-term negative consequences for Black students, including the school-to-prison pipeline and lower academic performance.

Disproportionate discipline referrals make Black students likelier than their white counterparts to engage in criminal activity. Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension or expulsion, reduces instructional time for students and decreases their trust in the school system, which are both correlated with involvement in criminal activity (Ramey, 2016; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014). The pathway to prison starts early in a child's education, with public pre-K programs experiencing a rate of expulsion over three times greater than that of grades K through 12 combined (American Psychological Association, n.d.) Disciplined at disproportionately high rates, students of color enter the school-to-prison pipeline at early ages.

Disproportionate discipline also helps explain why Black students perform worse on standardized tests. Up until recently, there were no peer reviewed studies exploring a link between these two disparities. In 2019, however, Stanford researchers shed light on this connection. They analyzed disciplinary data from students in third through eighth grade in districts across the U.S. They found that a 10 percentage point increase in the Black-white discipline gap in a school district predicts an achievement gap 17% larger than the average Black-white achievement gap. Researchers also determined that an increase in the achievement gap between Black and white students also predicts a discipline gap that is larger than average (Pearman et al, 2019).

Policy Approaches:

Experts have examined approaches to mitigating the racial disciplinary gap, focusing particularly on cognitive behavioral therapy, mentorship programming, teacher coaching, and decreased use of exclusionary discipline.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):

Researchers have found that well-designed CBT programs can reduce disciplinary referrals. The primary case is Chicago's Becoming a Man (BAM). BAM is a "school-based group counseling program that helps young men learn and use social cognitive skills, such as showing empathy for others and identifying and evaluating consequences before acting" (Chapin Hall, 2016). BAM operates within Chicago Public Schools in many of the city's more disadvantaged communities and focuses on six core values: integrity, accountability, self-determination, positive anger expression, respect for women, and visionary goal-setting.

In 2016, researchers underwent a qualitative study to determine how young men develop in the context of BAM programming. They interviewed youth and counselors who participated in BAM during the 2014-2015 school year (Lansing & Rapoport, 2016). They found that five components of BAM work together to foster engagement and personal development:

- Youth noted that the BAM room was a safe, welcoming, and **respectful place**
- All youth provided examples of how they apply the program's **core values**
- **Activities and missions** provide participants with a way to experience and internalize values
- Every BAM meeting begins with a **check-in**, in which members reflect on how they are feeling
- A sense of community and trust is built through **relationships** with counselors and one another

To achieve these successful patterns, Lansing and Rapoport (2016) identified the following critical requirements:

- Counselors' responsibilities must be explicit and training must be ongoing

- Curriculum should have greater focus on connecting core values to events and emotions introduced during check-ins
- Schools must designate a room for the program and integrate BAM counselors with other members of school staff
- Circumstances that would lead to youth removal from program must be made clear

Other experimenters have utilized randomized control trials (RCTs) to determine BAM's effectiveness. The most recent of which found that participation in BAM "reduced total arrests during intervention period by 28-35%, reduced violent-crime arrests by 45-50%, improved school engagement, and... increased graduation rates by 12-19%" (Heller et al, 2017). These findings are particularly insightful because RCTs are the most rigorous social science evaluation design and the four other trials to date have also produced positive results in academic and behavioral outcomes (Matthews, 2014).

Mentorship Programs:

Mentorship programs may also assist in mitigating the racial discipline gap. A 2013 cross-sectional study measured whether informal mentoring mitigated the negative effects of racial discrimination in school settings. The researchers controlled for factors such as age, family structure, social-class, self-reported grades, and daily stressors when undergoing statistical analyses. Cooper et al. (2013) found that among boys without a mentor, more interpersonal racial discrimination (the student's perceptions of frequency of and experiences involving unfair treatment within the past year) predicted more school suspensions and less engagement in school. Those students that reported having a mentor, alternatively, experienced fewer school suspensions and more school engagement, on average. In addition, a longitudinal study of rural Black high-school seniors found that those with informal mentoring, on average, exhibited less

anger, rule-breaking behavior, and aggression about 18 months after mentoring began. Kogan et al. (2011) also controlled for problem behaviors that existed prior to mentoring, gender, and intervention dosage. Although some of these studies looked at informal/natural mentorships, their results could still apply to formal mentoring programming.

Beyond addressing the disciplinary gap, mentoring can also produce beneficial academic outcomes for Black boys. For example, a 2009 evaluation of the “Brotherhood” after-school mentoring program for high-school boys reported an average GPA increase from 2.43 to 2.83 over a three-year time frame among 307 participants (Sanchez, Neblett, Hurd, & Vaclavik, 2017). In addition, a quasi-experimental study of the Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) Afrocentric mentoring program, including a sample of 8th-grade Black students, found that participants in the mentoring program reported higher identification with academics than those in the control group (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009). While a decrease in disciplinary gaps would be the ideal metric for this program’s success, the literature has illustrated that academic achievement and disciplinary referrals are correlated.

Though mentoring alone may not reverse the complex, persistent societal challenges that students of color face, it does have the potential to “empower, engage, and promote the strengths of Black boys” (Sanchez, 2016). The extent to which a mentoring program is effective, however, depends on program and mentor characteristics.

Program Characteristics –

A mentorship approach in which the students are viewed as partners in the delivery of mentoring, rather than recipients, may influence the program’s effectiveness. For example, the Young Men for Change, a school-based group mentoring program for Black male high school

students, asks mentors and mentees to co-create the curriculum and reflect on the institutional and societal forces that impact their lives as Black teenage boys (Hall, 2015).

Mentorship programs that take advantage of existing support systems also have potential for success. A meta-analysis revealed that more parental involvement in mentoring programs is associated with more positive youth outcomes, such as greater increases in GPA (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Greater parental involvement, however, was correlated with higher level of parental education, so it is possible that parents' education levels prompted the GPA increases more than the increased involvement did (Sanchez, 2016).

Finally, another influential program characteristic is dosage, or the "amount and intensity of mentoring that is received by each participating youth" (Sanchez, 2016). Evaluation of one mentoring program found that students who attended half or more of the group mentoring sessions experienced greater GPA increases than those who attended less than half of the meetings (Hanlon et al, 2009).

Mentor Characteristics –

The literature has debated whether shared life experiences play a role in the relationship between the mentor and mentee. In a U.K. study, researchers found that shared life experiences, such as similar school struggles, helped mentors experience greater empathy for their mentees and, in turn, mentees trusted their mentors more. This sense of trust fosters more meaningful relationships in which mentees value their mentor's advice (Garraway & Pistrang, 2010).

When properly executed, mentorship can alleviate the negative outcomes resulting from racial disciplinary gaps by better preparing Black youth to address instances of discrimination. A study of Black adolescents found that, for those young men who reported having a mentor, interpersonal racial discrimination was associated with fewer school suspensions and greater

school engagement (Cooper et al, 2013). These findings suggest that mentorship programs could significantly decrease the negative outcomes associated with discipline gaps because they teach young men of color to better handle instances of racial bias (Sanchez, 2016).

Mentoring programs, in sum, have shown great promise. The literature also offers the following takeaways (Sanchez, 2016):

- While research is minimal, it is likely that mentoring programs for Black male youth are more effective when they consider African-American culture, history, and values in design/implementation
- Cultural mistrust may hinder the effectiveness of white mentors, though research on this is limited
- Group mentoring may be useful in fostering brotherhood and belonging; though research has not directly contrasted group mentoring with one-on-one
- Similar life experiences between mentors and mentees may produce more trusting relationships, especially for Black students
- Mentoring has potential to decrease negative outcomes of racial discrimination on Black boys

Teacher Coaching:

Coaching programs may help teachers avoid engaging in discriminatory discipline practices. The My Teaching Partner-Secondary (MTP-S) program, for example, encourages teachers to offer their students clear routines, implement consistent classroom rules, and monitor behavior proactively. It also emphasizes the development of warm and respectful relationships that acknowledge students' need for autonomy and leadership. MTP-S pairs teachers with a coach for one school year, asks teachers to regularly reflect on video recordings of their

classroom instruction and interaction with students, and applies the validated Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS-S) to improve the quality of these interactions.

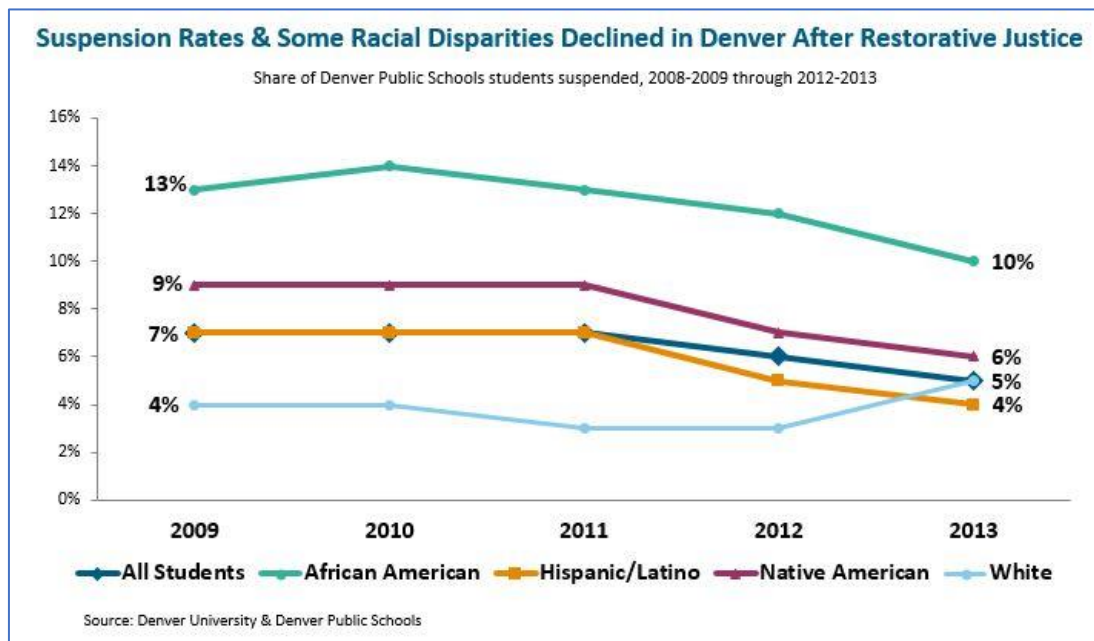
Experts feel confident that MTP-S can assist in mitigating racial disciplinary gaps. In fact, an RCT found that teachers receiving MTP-S used exclusionary discipline less frequently than those teachers in the control group who received no training. They also issued fewer discipline referrals to their Black students than those in the control (Gregory et al, 2013). This evidence is especially compelling because it was the result of experimental research. Because MTP-S specifically targets teacher-student interactions, it aims to reduce teachers' reliance on exclusionary discipline. A follow-up study sought to determine whether these effects persisted during a teacher's second year of coaching and found that the effects of MTP-S remained during the second year and lasted even after coaching was withdrawn. Overall, Black students had a lower probability of receiving disciplinary referrals under teachers who gained the skills to engage students in high-level inquiry and analysis (Gregory et al, 2016).

Other studies further support that a combination of professional development and coaching can successfully address racial disparities in discipline referrals (Jacobson, 2018). In 2018, researchers conducted an RCT of elementary- and middle-school teachers in a Maryland school district in which they compared those teachers who received coaching to those who did not. The coaching model utilized a process that equipped teachers with problem-solving strategies. While the model is intended to work in conjunction with an intervention encouraging positive interactions between students and teachers, the researchers found that it was the individual coaching that led to decreased disciplinary disparity. Following the treatment, observers recorded much more proactive behavior management and teacher anticipation of student problems, higher student coordination and less noncooperation, and fewer disruptive

behaviors in the classrooms under coached teachers relative to the teachers who did not receive coaching (Bradshaw et al, 2018).

Decreased Use of Exclusionary Discipline:

Finally, researchers have found that decreasing reliance on exclusionary discipline can alleviate the racial gap in discipline referrals. A 2018 study in Philadelphia showed that the students' test scores fell in the years that they were suspended. Further, the more days that the student was suspended, the more their test scores fell, although the effect sizes were modest (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). A similar study looked at seventh through eleventh graders and found that a single suspension did not have clear effects, but receiving multiple school suspensions led to significant drops in test scores (Hwang, 2018). Additionally, a study of Denver Public Schools, which implemented restorative practices, found that as suspension rates declined, the racial discipline gap narrowed and test scores consistently increased for all grade levels in nearly every subject for six consecutive years (Gonzalez, 2015).



Integrating restorative justice is one method of decreasing reliance on exclusionary discipline and overall suspension and expulsion rates. Restorative justice refers to attempting to strengthen the school community and repair harm in response to conflicts before resorting to punishment. Specifically, when an infraction occurs, students, staff, and community members gather to discuss the impact of the infraction, to understand how different parties were harmed, and to agree on the appropriate response. Action steps following these dialogues typically include formal apologies, behavior agreements, or community service (Jones, 2017). In 2010, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) adopted restorative justice as its official policy. Between 2012 and 2017, overall suspension rates in OUSD dropped by roughly 55% and the discipline gap decreased by 47% (Davis, 2019). In addition, RAND corporation ran the most rigorous evaluation of restorative justice practices to-date, randomly assigning schools in Pittsburgh to implement their own restorative justice program. They found that schools that implemented the program saw a decrease in both the overall number of days that students were suspended and the total number of suspensions. This progress persisted in the programs' second year, as participating schools reduced suspensions by approximately 10 days per 100 students (Augustine et al., 2018).

Though most research indicates that exclusionary discipline perpetuates disciplinary gaps, some policymakers contend that reforming discipline could have unintended consequences. Firstly, banning suspensions takes away a mechanism that teachers use to restore classroom order, making teachers less likely to comply with the reforms (Capers, 2018). Secondly, teachers have expressed that the paperwork and training associated with alternative approaches to discipline are time-consuming and limited, respectively (Adams, 2017). Finally, despite the lack

of evidence, some policymakers still argue that exclusionary discipline is simply more effective at reducing violent or disruptive behaviors (Eden, 2019).

Policy Alternatives

Based on promising research derived from my literature review, I have developed five tentative alternatives to address my policy problem. These alternatives include: let present trends continue; continue Brothers United in a group setting; join the Becoming a Man Network; institute a teacher coaching program; and replace exclusionary discipline with restorative justice practices.

Alternative #1: Let Present Trends Continue

In 2019, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) created the Brothers United mentoring program. Brothers United matches Black male students with Black adult mentors from the Richmond community and they have weekly one-on-one meetings. Additionally, the mentors and mentees have monthly opportunities to engage in community activities that encourage students to stay active in school and focus on future success.

Mentorship programming can be used to combat racial disciplinary gaps in that mentors provide Black youth with a successful role model who can assist them in navigating adolescence. Research has shown that mentorship programs, like RPS' Brothers United, tend to be most effective when mentors are of the same race and gender as their mentee because this fosters a greater sense of trust and understanding of what the youth is going through (Sanchez, 2016). As it relates to disciplinary gaps, mentors likely faced the same challenge during their time in school and can offer their mentee advice as to how to address moments of school employees' discrimination or the student's tendencies to misbehave in school. Equipping Black male

students with advice and tools on managing school situations can decrease instances of Black student discipline referrals.

Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United, but in a Group Setting

While mentoring programs come in various forms, the research has demonstrated that programs possessing certain characteristics are more effective than others. This alternative asks that RPS continue its Brothers United programming, but with a change in its design. According to Sanchez (2016), group mentoring may actually be more useful in fostering brotherhood and a sense of belonging. Youth losing trust in their school system and their potential to succeed is one byproduct of racial discipline gaps. Specifically, Black students tend to feel disconnected from their peers and school employees as a result of receiving punishment for the same violations that white students often get away with (Gordon, 2018). Group mentoring could help to alleviate these feelings of isolation and keep the students engaged in their schooling while still retaining the same benefits that Brothers United already offers.

It is important to note, however, that existing research has not directly contrasted group mentoring with one-on-one mentoring. So, while suggestive evidence is favorable to group mentoring, there is no reliable data that conclusively proves group mentoring is a superior form to one-on-one sessions.

Alternative #3: Join the Becoming a Man Network

This alternative asks RPS to partner with Chicago's Becoming a Man (BAM) program. Through either licensing or direct replication, RPS could implement BAM's successful cognitive behavioral therapy program. Once connected with BAM, they would use their expertise to determine whether RPS is better suited for licensure or program replication. Cognitive behavioral therapy is a goal-oriented psychotherapy practice aimed at changing people's

behaviors (Martin, 2019). BAM, a form of CBT, is a “school-based group counseling program that helps young men learn and use social cognitive skills, such as showing empathy for others and identifying and evaluating consequences before acting” (Chapin Hall, 2016). BAM works to change how its Black youth approach difficult situations by integrating six core values into its programming: integrity, accountability, self-determination, positive anger expression, respect for women, and visionary goal-setting. The implementation timeline consists of five phases: (1) initial interest; (2) establish BAM approach; (3) execute BAM pre-implementation; (4) launch BAM; and (5) support and strengthen BAM. This process takes approximately 9-12 months to complete (Youth Guidance, n.d.)

Pathways to Licensure/Implementation Timeline



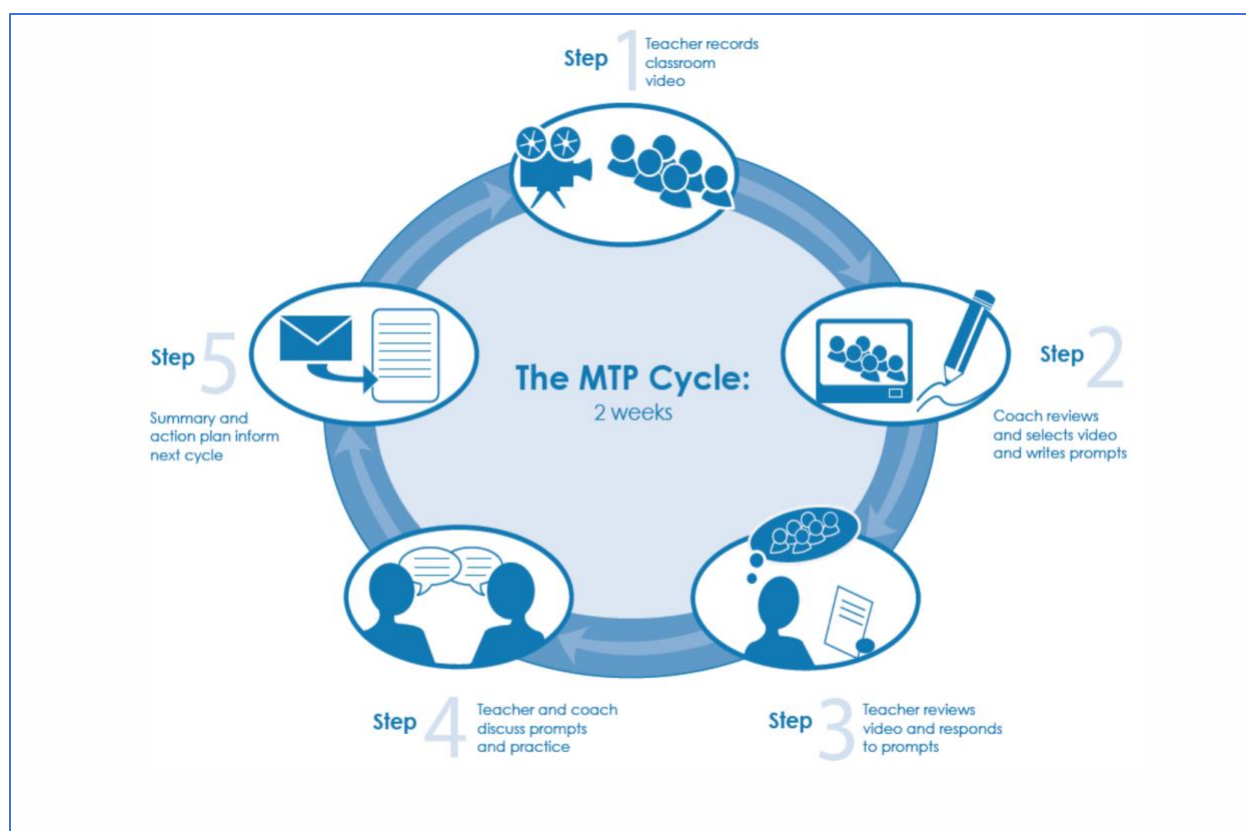
Researchers have found that well-designed CBT programs can reduce disciplinary referrals for Black students. The reasoning follows that a CBT program would help mitigate RPS' discipline gap by teaching its Black youth to productively and thoughtfully make decisions. This, in turn, would likely (1) decrease instances of misbehavior; and (2) produce more caring student-employee relationships in which implicit biases play a less significant role in disciplinary referrals. Not only does reasoning support the positive effects of CBT, but so does well-founded research. One study utilized randomized control trials (RCTs) to find that participation in BAM “reduced total arrests during intervention period by 28-35%, reduced violent-crime arrests by 45-50%, improved school engagement, and... increased graduation rates by 12-19%” (Heller et al, 2017). These findings are particularly insightful because RCTs are the most rigorous social science evaluation design.

Alternative #4: Institute a Teacher Coaching Program

Considering that school employees' implicit bias likely contributes to the discipline gap, this alternative helps teachers to avoid engaging in discriminatory discipline. It involves asking RPS to replicate the successful My Teaching Partner-Secondary (MTP-S) Program. MTP-S encourages teachers to offer their students clear routines, implement consistent classroom rules, and monitor behavior proactively. It also emphasizes the development of warm and respectful relationships that acknowledge students' need for autonomy and leadership. MTP-S pairs teachers with a coach for one school year, asks teachers to regularly reflect on video recordings of their classroom instruction and interaction with students, and applies the validated Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS-S) to improve the quality of these interactions.

Advocates of this program claim that both implementing clear and unbiased rules, as well as asking teachers to watch video recordings of themselves, make teachers more likely to be

conscious of how they are interacting with their students. The evidence supports this claim: those teachers who received training issued fewer discipline referrals to their Black students than those teachers who did not receive training (Gregory et al, 2013). In addition, those teachers who received training gave fewer exclusionary discipline referrals, overall, than those teachers in the control group. Further, researchers have shown that these results last into the second year of teacher coaching and persist even after the coaching is withdrawn (Gregory et al, 2016). In sum, not only does teacher coaching make teachers less likely to disproportionately refer their Black students for discipline but it also offers long-lasting results.



Alternative #5: Replace Exclusionary Discipline with Restorative Justice

Practices

Finally, eliminating exclusionary discipline in schools and replacing it with restorative justice practices could alleviate the racial gap in discipline referrals. Restorative justice refers to attempting to strengthen the school community and repair harm between the involved parties in response to conflicts before resorting to punishment. So instead of exclusionary practices, like suspension, this alternative recommends that RPS engage in activities that bring together the harmed student, the person causing the harm, and a group of their peers or adults to mediate a discussion, followed by the student's reintegration into the class after making amends (Davis, 2013). Transitioning to restorative justice could prove helpful in mitigating the discipline gap because it would not decrease students' instructional time and put them behind their classmates, academically, unlike exclusionary discipline. In theory, restorative justice could prove a more equitable alternative to addressing misbehavior than punitive measures.

Several school districts have undertaken this transition and seen positive results. For example, in the years after Oakland Unified School District transitioned from exclusionary discipline to restorative justice practices, overall suspension rates in OUSD dropped by roughly 55% and the discipline gap decreased by 47% (Davis, 2019). Similar results, including consistent test score increases across grade levels, occurred in Denver Public Schools (Gonzalez, 2015).

Evaluative Criteria

Using the following criteria, I will rate each alternative on a scale of one to five, with the exception of cost, wherein I will also indicate the approximate cost that I calculate for each alternative. A score of one indicates that the alternative does not satisfy the criterion well and a five indicates that the alternative perfectly satisfies the criterion. I have chosen to weigh each criterion equally because they are all of comparable value to my client.

Criteria #1: Administrative Feasibility refers to the level of ease or difficulty with which RPS' Office of Engagement could implement the policy alternative. As part of a public school system, the Office has constraints in the form of time and resources, so this criteria seeks to ensure that the ultimate recommendation is realistic given RPS' administrative capacity. In measuring administration feasibility, I will utilize my knowledge of RPS and the literature to account for anything that might make the design and implementation of an alternative more challenging. Specifically, I will take into consideration the following questions:

- Will other RPS offices or departments be involved in the implementation of this alternative? If so, how many will the Office of Engagement have to coordinate with?
- What resources would the Office of Engagement require to undertake this policy alternative and which of these do they already possess or have access to?
- How long will it likely take to design and implement this alternative?

Additionally, will choosing this alternative result in a transition period in which the Office of Engagement does not have any available programming related to the discipline gap?

Criteria #2: Cost asks how much monetary cost RPS will incur to undertake an alternative. Cost is an essential criteria because RPS, and its Office of Engagement, operate within a relatively definitive budget that the Virginia state government sets. Note that for cost, a higher score on the one-to-five scale indicates a lower cost because this means that the alternative satisfies the criterion of keeping costs as low as possible. To determine the approximate costs of each alternative, I will take into consideration the following factors:

- Cost of booking a room or space to hold the programming

- Cost of hiring teachers, teaching coaches, or any other experts necessary to implement and oversee the alternative
- Cost of recruiting community members to participate as mentors or any other necessary positions
- Cost of all materials necessary to implement the alternative

Finally, *Criteria #3: Effectiveness* will refer to how successfully the alternative addresses the disciplinary gap in RPS schools. This criterion is important because the policy alternative that I ultimately recommend should contribute to closing this gap, otherwise it is not worthwhile for the Office of Engagement to pursue. Ideally, I would like to measure effectiveness in how the alternative decreased the disciplinary gap, in percentage, when implemented elsewhere. Some policy alternatives, however, may not have undergone experiments wherein this metric was used. In which case, I will measure effectiveness in GPA increases, graduation rate increases, and crime decreases, depending upon what research metrics are available for each alternative. These metrics, while less precise than decreased disciplinary gap percentages, are still helpful in determining effectiveness because the literature has illustrated that these academic outcomes are associated with less disciplinary referrals. To score an alternative's effectiveness on my one-to-five scale, I plan to relatively compare these available metrics across the alternatives and give higher scores to those with greater impacts than others with smaller impacts. I also note that because this measure of effectiveness is aimed at addressing already inequitable outcomes, equity will not appear as one of my criteria.

Findings

Outcomes Matrix:

	<i>Administrative Feasibility</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Effectiveness</i>	<i>Total</i>
Alternative #1: Let Present Trends Continue	5	5 (\$15,000)	1	11
Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United, but in Group Setting	3	5 (\$15,000)	3.5	11.5
Alternative #3: Join the Becoming a Man Network	1.5	4 (\$1100 x 26 participants = \$28,600)	4.5	10
Alternative #4: Institute a Teacher Coaching Program	2	3 (\$98,000)	4.5	9.5
Alternative #5: Replace Exclusionary Discipline with Restorative Justice Practices	2.5	1 (\$95 x 24,000 RPS students = \$2,280,000)	5	8.5

Discussion of Alternatives' Scoring:

Alternative #1: Let Present Trends Continue – This alternative scored a five on administrative feasibility because RPS' Office of Engagement has already designed and implemented the Brothers United program since 2019. As such, undertaking this alternative would not require RPS to acquire any new resources, begin coordinating with any other offices, or take any more time to work towards its execution. Alternative #1 scored a five for cost, with an annual operating budget of \$15,000, according to the Board-approved RPS final budget documents. Relative to the other alternatives' costs, this is among the most inexpensive options. Finally, this alternative scored a one in effectiveness. The literature has illustrated that mentoring can decrease African-American students' number of school suspensions and acts of violence, though these studies predominantly looked at informal mentorships, so it is not a guarantee that their results would translate entirely to a formal mentor program. Literature has also demonstrated that African-American students with mentors tend to have higher GPAs than those that do not, though this metric was primarily obtained through evaluations of existing mentorship programs rather than through randomized control trials (RCTs). As such, mentorship has potential to help alleviate the discipline gap in schools if executed well, but the research supporting its success is not nearly as robust as for some other alternatives.

Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United, but in a Group Setting – This alternative scored a three on administrative feasibility because, while the groundwork for Brothers United already exists, implementing this alternative would require the Office of Engagement to make some changes to its design. Specifically, the Office would have to communicate to the mentors and mentees that the program's format was changing, would have to find a space large enough to accommodate all of the participants at once, and have to restructure the experiences to be

conducted in groups. This alternative received a five for cost, the same score as Alternative #1, because I estimate that reformatting Brothers United into a group activity will not cost RPS any additional funding, as there will be no new expenses associated with pursuing this policy alternative. Finally, I scored Alternative #2 a three and a half in effectiveness because the literature has illustrated that group mentoring has the potential to foster belonging and comradery among mentees in a way that one-on-one mentoring likely does not. The literature, however, is somewhat limited in that there have yet to be experiments directly contrasting the effects of one-on-one mentoring with group mentoring on decreasing the discipline gap, so the current research is relational rather than causational.

Alternative #3: Join the Becoming a Man Network – This alternative scored a one and a half in administrative feasibility because of the myriad logistical challenges that it would entail. Primarily, joining the Becoming a Man (BAM) Network is administratively difficult because it takes roughly 9-12 months to implement. In addition, it would involve bringing in outside counselors, funders, advisers, and Board members, which requires significant coordination efforts from the Office of Engagement. Alternative #3 is also low in administrative feasibility because it relies on extended communications with BAM's central office, including collecting and sending quarterly data regarding RPS' progress. In terms of cost, joining the BAM Network earned a four because it costs at least \$28,600. The most basic form of BAM costs approximately \$1,100 per participant – while the most comprehensive forms cost around \$4,400 per participant – and this is multiplied by 26, the number of RPS students currently covered under Brothers United programming, which is liable to increase over time as programming expands beyond its pilot period. While Alternative #3 might pose high costs, the supporting research is both robust and promising. Joining the BAM Network scored a four and a half in effectiveness because

numerous RCTs – conducted in 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2017 – have found that BAM reduces arrests, improves school engagement, and increases graduation rates across its participants. Evidence suggests that Alternative #3 is highly likely to effectively mitigate the disciplinary gap in RPS.

Alternative #4: Institute a Teacher Coaching Program – This alternative received a two for administrative feasibility. Implementing the My Teaching Partner-Secondary (MTP-S) program would require RPS to undergo several logistical challenges, including 10 months of coaching support and regular check-ins with coaches throughout the program. To institute Alternative #4, RPS would have to coordinate with Teachstone (the company who owns and sells MTP-S trainings) to obtain the necessary materials, software, and personnel, meaning that this alternative requires many resources that RPS does not currently possess. Alternative #4 would also cost RPS approximately \$98,000, according to an official from Teachstone, giving it a score of three. Finally, applying MTP-S is likely to decrease discipline referrals for Black students, as well as discipline referrals overall. When teachers are equipped with the tools to overcome potential implicit biases, then this source of the discipline gap diminishes. Experimental research has repeatedly illustrated that, not only does this form of teacher coaching have potential to decrease RPS' discipline gap, but that the results persisted into the second year of coaching and even after the coaching ultimately stopped. The use of RCTs coupled with the persistence of this alternative's success over time suggests that Alternative #4 could prove a highly effective option for RPS, which is why it received a score of four and half.

Alternative #5: Replace Exclusionary Discipline with Restorative Justice Practices – In terms of administrative feasibility, Alternative #5 received a score of two and a half. To pursue this option, RPS would have to go through all of the necessary organizational channels to receive

Board approval for this structural change. They would also need to spend time reading materials and understanding how to partake in restorative justice practices. Further, it might take several months to a year for students and employees to acclimate and adjust to a new means of disciplining. For cost, Alternative #5 scored a one. Denver Public Schools, which recently transitioned to restorative justice, incurred a \$95 per-student cost (Jones, 2017). Although Richmond City has a significantly higher Black population, this cost estimate was the most appropriate for comparison that was available. Multiplying this cost by the approximate number of students within the RPS system produces a total of \$2,280,000. This alternative's cost calculations are unique from the others in that they account for the entire student body undergoing this transition, rather than specifically targeting a subpopulation, which explains the significantly larger cost. Finally, replacing exclusionary discipline with restorative justice practices earned a score of five in effectiveness. Over the course of five years, the Oakland Unified School District nearly halved their discipline gap after integrating restorative justice. In addition, an experiment in Pittsburgh found that transitioning to restorative justice decreased both the number and length of suspensions. This evidence is especially convincing considering that Pittsburgh is demographically similar to Richmond City, so the findings apply well to RPS, and that the schools were randomly assigned to restorative justice, so there is minimal bias.

Recommendation:

Ultimately, I recommend that RPS pursue Alternative #2: Continue Brothers United in a Group Setting. While Alternative #1 scored highly in administrative feasibility and cost, the literature supporting its effectiveness was relatively weak. Alternative #3 similarly ranked highly in terms of its cost, as well as its overall effectiveness at mitigating the discipline gap, but joining the Becoming a Man Network would likely be too lengthy and logistically

overwhelming. Alternative #4, while likely to be effective as supported by experimental data, is too costly and would require significant time and coordination efforts from the Office of Engagement. Finally, while compelling evidence suggests that Alternative #5 could be a highly effective course of action, its associated cost is infeasible given the Office of Engagement's budget, and the schools' need to adapt to a new form of disciplinary practices could prove highly difficult. Overall, although Alternative #2 has its weaknesses, it provides the most appropriate solution for RPS given the unavoidable constraints (mainly time and resources) that it faces. Though other alternatives may rank more highly in effectiveness, they are far less viable or possible to accomplish in the near future, but should be kept in mind should the Office of Engagement ever receive any major budget increases.

Implementation

Necessary Steps:

To continue Brothers United in a group setting, RPS' Office of Engagement must first speak with the mentors and mentees whom this change would affect to gauge their willingness to cooperate. If the participants are unhappy with transitioning to a group setting, or if they felt as though leadership did not seek their opinion on the change, then it is likely that the group's buy-in might be low. The Office of Engagement must also look into revising, wherever necessary, the curriculum and materials to account for this structural change. It is possible, however, that the current structure of Brothers United is flexible enough to accommodate the change without much revision to the original design. Further, to host these group sessions, the Office of Engagement should seek out and reserve larger spaces to host all of the mentors and mentees together. One of the RPS schools' gyms or cafeterias could be ideal considering that these are large, easily accessible to students, and free for schools to use. In addition, the Office of Engagement should

consider presenting this change to the other departments within RPS just to update them on how the program has progressed. The final step would be to consider and acknowledge how the implementation timeline may be delayed as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. RPS schools are closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, so Brothers United programming has also been discontinued. Further, whenever schools do return to in-person instruction, it is likely that the majority of the district's attention and resources will go toward recovering from the pandemic and engagement activities will likely be of low priority for at least the first few months of the upcoming school year. As a result, RPS might consider building from the existing meeting structure and making the transition to group settings incrementally. Doing so would not only allow the mentors and mentees time to acclimate to the change, but it would also less likely overwhelm the school board or Office of Engagement with one large change upfront. For example, RPS could host one group meeting per month during the transition year or even offer a hybrid alternative during the transition year, such as combining a mixture of one-on-one meetings with group meetings.

Stakeholder Perspectives:

The African-American male students involved in Brothers United constitute the primary stakeholders involved in this change. We can anticipate that some students may feel resistant to this change because they have already gotten acclimated to the existing structure. In order to mitigate this resistance, the Office of Engagement should place emphasis on how they frame this change when communicating it to the students. Dr. Harris and her counterparts should reiterate the value of comradery and companionship in combatting feelings of frustration or hardship. If the mentees can understand that this change is intended to help them feel less alone in the unique struggles that they face as young men of color, they will likely be more receptive. The

community mentors are also stakeholders in pursuing this policy alternative. Similar to the students, it is likely that some mentors will resist any alterations to a program that they have already grown accustomed to. To combat these feelings of hesitation, the Office of Engagement could reiterate that mentors still have the option to work with their mentee one-on-one outside of meetings, during breaks, or on days that Brothers United does not meet as a whole. While this alternative entails transitioning to group meetings, there should still be opportunities for mentors and mentees to communicate individually if they would like to, and expressing this fact to the mentors could make them feel more comfortable with this adjustment. There is also the aforementioned option to phase group mentoring into the existing routine incrementally, which would additionally offer both mentors and mentees a chance to adjust over time. The officials who mediate these meetings are also stakeholders in converting Brothers United into group programming. They are likely to be supportive of the transition because it will involve less coordination among pairs of mentors and mentees on their part, as activities will begin operating on a group level. Finally, the students' parents are stakeholders in implementing Brothers United in a group setting. While some parents are likely to support the change, it is also possible that they might oppose it because this means less individualized mentoring for their children. The Office of Engagement should consider taking the same approach with the students' parents as with the students: reminding them of the positive benefits associated with group mentoring and explaining their rationale for making this adjustment.

Risks of Implementation:

When implementing Alternative #2, RPS' Office of Engagement should consider several potential risks. Firstly, there is the possibility that the mentors and mentees disapprove of this change and are unwilling to participate in this new format. This risk is somewhat likely to occur,

but the Office of Engagement could utilize the aforementioned tactics to seek the approval of Brothers United participants. Secondly, there could be some unanticipated expenses associated with making this adjustment to the programming. As such, it may be helpful for the Engagement team to seek additional funding if the opportunity presents itself just to be prepared and have some financial security. The likelihood of this risk, however, is relatively low as there is no known need to acquire new resources to undertake this policy alternative. Finally, there is a chance that other RPS offices oppose making this change and thus, want to suspend funding to Brothers United. Because different departments within the RPS system have unique priorities and have to compete for limited funding, they may speak out against this change in order to secure more resources for their own goals. This risk is minimally likely to occur, considering that this transition does not change the underlying purpose of Brothers United, but it is something worth keeping in mind as the implementation process begins.

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