

# Last Girls Standing: Evaluating Harm and Educational Opportunity in Alternative Schooling for Black Girls

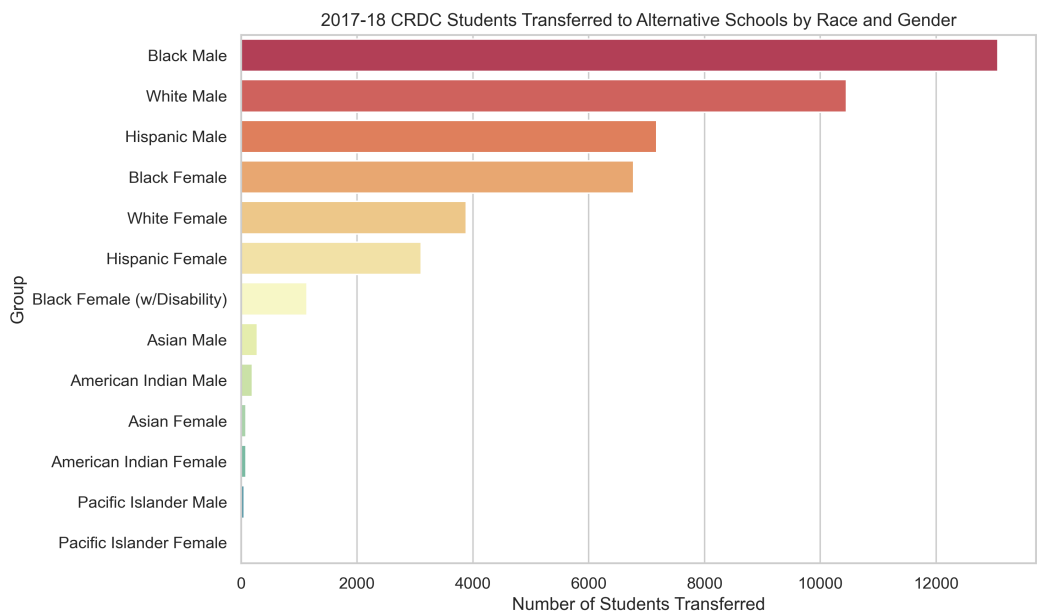
Joya Wheatfall-Melvin

McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University

## Abstract

This study investigates the institutional conditions in which Black girls experience harm or support within alternative school settings across the United States. Utilizing data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), this study analyzes 1,748 alternative schools serving Black girls in grades 6 through 12 to assess both the prevalence of educational harm and the presence of educational opportunity. While alternative schools were originally designed as spaces for personalized instruction and rehabilitation, many have evolved into punitive environments that serve as the final institutional stop before dropout or institutional correction. By applying predictive modeling techniques, this research identifies patterns that signal systemic risks and institutional strengths in evaluating the integrity of these institutions. In offering models that flag environments where educational integrity is either upheld or denied for this specific population, this study contributes to a more equitable vision of alternative education; one that reimagines alternative routes as spaces of care, growth, and possibility.

**Index Terms:** Black girls, Alternative Schooling, School-to-Prison pipeline, school discipline



**Figure 1.** *Students by Demographic Transferred to Alternative Schools for Disciplinary Reasons.* 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights (CRDC) (2017-2018)

## 1 Introduction

"It is important to contextualize punitive school discipline practices and the School-to-Prison Pipeline as part of this larger carceral state, where the mass criminalization and imprisonment of bodies different from the norm is the goal."

– Alexander, 2012, as cited in Annamma et al., 2016, p. 213

### 1.1 Carcerality and the Purpose Drift of Alternative Education

The complex relationship between education and incarceration for youth in the United States is longstanding and structural, tracing back to the 1839 *Ex parte Crouse* decision, which established the legal foundation for confining children in custodial institutions "for their own

benefit." (Robison, 2023) This ruling justified punitive confinement under the guise of rehabilitation, setting precedent that continues to shape how marginalized youth, especially Black youth, are managed through institutional control within educational contexts as well. Today, that legacy is painfully visible in the modern configuration of alternative schooling, which has regressed from its original purpose as spaces of personalized and enriching instruction and instead become punitive environments that operate as the final stop before incarceration or permanent pushout.

The American Civil Liberties Union (2008) reports that in some jurisdictions, students who have been suspended or expelled are entirely denied further access to education. In others, they are diverted into disciplinary alternative schools that fail to offer equitable learning opportunities, reinforcing, rather than disrupting, trajectories towards the justice system. In theory, these institutions exist as an extended option to furthering education; however the harm experienced in these spaces are not episodic; they are structural and institutionalized. These schools often lack certified teachers, mental health support, and/or college-preparatory curricula to provide adequate education to those with either academic and/or disciplinary issues.

### 1.2 Centering Black Girls in Educational Policy Reframing

The educational experiences of Black girls are further obscured by layered forms of epistemic injustice, where what is known, measured, and acted upon systematically excludes them. Although Black boys are often framed as the primary subjects of educational inequity and carceral injustice, Black girls are routinely absent from both data narratives and policy interventions. Despite being statistically visible, as shown in Figure 1, where they constitute the most frequently transferred female group, they remain functionally invisible in systems of educational accountability and reform.

Brown et al. (2024) states that, "culturally, many Black girls navigate the cultural norms and expectations that impose standards of femininity that are said to significantly impact their formal and informal learning experiences." Their unique positionality, shaped by adultification, hyper-surveillance, and intersectional bias, is rarely acknowledged, let alone addressed, in pivotal institutional frameworks like the educational system. As this study reveals, the same students who are disproportionately suspended are often situated in alternative school systems that do not provide nor have Black girls participating in SAT/ACT preparation, advanced coursework, and/or gifted programs. The gap between harm and opportunity is neither accidental nor isolated, it is systemic and critical in the development of our youth.

### 1.3 Absence of Accountability

Creating specialized and rigorous evaluation criteria is imperative to restore alternative schooling. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to implement a single statewide accountability system, thereby prohibiting separate standards for evaluating alternative education settings. (Government Accountability Office, 2020) As a result, schools designed for students with behavioral or academic challenges are folded into general performance categories that fail to capture the socioeconomic realities of their student populations.

Limited research has analyzed the role of institutional racism in this growing overrepresentation of Black youth in alternative schools, leaving unanswered questions across racialized and gendered experiences. (Brown et al., 2024) This study argues that evaluating harm alone is insufficient; it is imperative to utilize machine learning to identify conditions under which Black girls are most likely to thrive. By focusing on indicators of opportunity access (such as AP enrollment, dual credit courses, and college readiness exams) and school climate conditions (such as support staff presence, safety, and funding allocation), this research moves beyond a deficit-based framework. It promotes a vision of equitable education evaluation that prioritize enrichment, care, and dignity, rather than mere compliance and containment.

It is in this spirit that this paper asks: *How do school-provided opportunities and climate conditions shape student outcomes for Black girls in alternative schools?*

## 2 Data Acquisition

This study draws on count and indicator data from the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2017–18 academic year. The CRDC is a comprehensive, federally mandated survey administered by the Office for Civil Rights that collects school-level data from all public, charter, and alternative education institutions that receive federal funding. It offers disaggregated data on student demographics, disciplinary actions, academic program participation, staffing, and school funding indicators. The 2017–18 CRDC dataset was selected due to its scope, completeness, and the availability of funding indicators relevant to understanding the educational experiences of Black female students in alternative schools. All data used in this project were accessed through the publicly available CRDC platform U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2020) beginning February 2, 2025.

The Civil Rights Data Collection defines an *Alternative School* as a *public elementary or secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school program and is designed to meet the needs of students with academic difficulties, students with discipline problems, or both students with academic difficulties and discipline problems. Alternative education schools may be sited in locations other than a traditional school building, such as hospitals, mental health centers, jails, or juvenile detention centers.* All variables presented in this analysis are centered around black female student experiences through Grade 06-12. Black female students with disabilities identified under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 are accounted for in this analysis, as well.

## 2.1 Target Indicators: School Harm

**School harm** is conceptualized as the structural and institutional conditions that subject Black girls to exclusion, punishment, and carceral surveillance within alternative school settings. These harms are not isolated incidents but are systemic patterns embedded in disciplinary and environmental practices that disproportionately affect marginalized students. To operationalize this concept, I identified several key indicators that reflect measurable dimensions of school-related harm: **(1) grade-level retention**; **(2) suspensions** (both in-school and out-of-school); **(3) expulsions** (with or without continued educational services); **(4) the use of physical and mechanical restraint and seclusion**; **(5) incidents of harassment or bullying** on the basis of race, sex, or disability; and **(6) law enforcement involvement**, defined as either school-based arrests or referrals to police. The additional enrollment variable included was utilized for normalization during the feature engineering stage.

**Table 1**

Target variables used to define school-level harm toward Black girls.

Variable Name	Definition
corporal_vars	Black female students with and without disabilities who received corporal punishment.
retention_vars	Black female students who were retained between Grade 06 - 12.
expulsions_vars	Black female students with and without disabilities who received an expulsion (with/without educational services/under zero tolerance policies).
hb_vars	Black female students reported or disciplined for harassment / bullying on the basis of sex, race, and disability.
referrals_arrests_vars	Black female students with and without disabilities who received school-related arrests or law enforcement referrals.
restraint_seclusion_vars	Black female students with and without disabilities subjected to mechanical or physical restraint and seclusion.
suspension_vars	Black female students with and without disabilities that received one or more in-school and out-of-school suspensions.
enrollment_vars	Overall Black female students with and without disabilities (under IDEA and 504) enrolled.

## 2.2 Feature Indicators: School-Provided Opportunity and Structure

In conceptualizing **school-provided opportunity and structure**, this study focuses on institutional inputs and support that facilitate academic access, enrichment, and development for Black girls in alternative education settings. These indicators represent a counterbalance to the harm metrics by identifying school environments that offer resources and care. The goal is not only to understand where harm occurs, but also where opportunity is withheld or cultivated. I selected indicators that reflect four key dimensions of school structure: **(1) academic opportunity**; **(2) school safety**; **(3) funding allocation**; and **(4) staff support**, represented through these variables:

**Table 2**

Feature variables used to define school-provided opportunity and structure in alternative school settings.

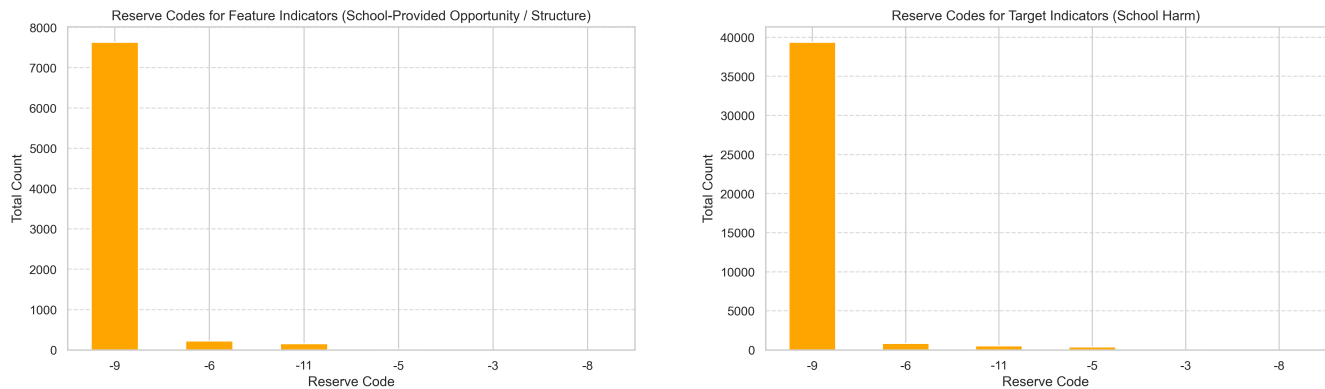
Variable Name	Definition
<i>Academic Opportunity</i>	
advanced_math_vars	Whether school provides advanced math courses and the number of Black female students taking advanced math courses.
dual_enrollment_vars	Whether school provides dual-enrollment and the number of Black female students dual-enrolled.
gifted_enrollment_vars	Whether school provides gifted programs and the number of Black female students enrolled in gifted programs.
ib_program_vars	Whether school provides the International Baccalaureate program and the number of Black female students enrolled in IB program.
act_vars	Number of Black female students participated in SAT or ACT testing.
<i>School Safety</i>	
offense_vars	Incidents of Rape, Sexual Assault, Robbery, and Physical attack with and without a weapon.
<i>Funding Allocation</i>	
salary_vars	Salary expenditures for Total Personnel (instructional, support services, and school administration), Teachers, Administrators, and Support Services staff (Funded by Federal, State, and Local Funds).
<i>Staff Support</i>	
teachers_vars	Number of Full-Time Equivalency count of counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, law enforcement officers, security guards, and certified and uncertified teachers.

## 2.3 Data Limitations

**Table 3**

Reserve codes used in the 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection.

Reserve Code Value	Definition
-3	Skip Logic Failure
-5	Action Plan
-6	Force Certified
-8	EDFacts Missing Data
-9	Not Applicable / Skipped
-11	Suppressed Data



**Figure 2.** Distribution of reserve codes across feature and target indicators. High frequencies of ‘-9’ highlight widespread missing or unreported data.

Captured within the 2017-2018 CRDC Public-Use Data File Manual, reserve codes provide information on variables that do not have reported values. In order to accommodate a seamless transition to other software packages, reserve codes are standardized and use negative values that are not an actual count. As shown in Figures 2, the majority of missing data across both target indicators (School Harm) and feature indicators (School-Provided Opportunity and Structure) are coded as -9. All indicators represented have been disaggregated by race and gender and school type. For example, when evaluating whether Black girls in alternative schools had access to dual enrollment, programs, AP courses, or support services like school psychologists and counselors, large amounts of schools either did not report the data or marked it as not applicable. The structural missingness of these variables reflects the underreporting of certain student groups within school accountability collections. Future research would benefit from more robust reporting requirements, as well as a cross-examination of "missingness" relating to gender and race.

Other limitations to study design that should be taken into account is the absence of graduation data included as an essential indicator of school-provided opportunity and structure. The CRDC data does not contain student demographic data that measure successful matriculated through each school, which in retrospect to analyzing the integrity of said institutions, would be an integral indicator for this study. Partly due to limited national databases including raw and intersectional graduation data; future research will include state-wide graduation indicators as it is essential in fully capturing Black female students’ path to equitable education.

## 3 Methods

### 3.1 Preprocessing Data

To prepare both the target and feature datasets for analysis, several key preprocessing steps were taken to ensure consistency, minimize bias, and retain interpretability across both binary and continuous indicators. After preprocessing, a sample of **1,748** alternative schools were retained and used for analysis. Note: All reserve code values were removed during the preprocessing stage.

#### 3.1.1 Cleaning Target Indicators: School Harm :

- **Enrollment Filter;** Rows were dropped entirely for alternative schools with missing or zero enrollment of Black female students, as these institutions fall outside this study’s scope.
- **Dropped (>95% missing);** Corporal Punishment counts were removed as data was highly limited.

- **Aggregated (60% - 95% missing);** All retention indicators (Grade 6-12) were aggregated to form a composite retention indicator: `bf_retention_total`. While no single grade had strong coverage, the aggregate variable provided a more complete picture of retention as a harm indicator.
- **Event-based Harm indicators (imputed with 0);** Other harm indicators with up to 60% missing values were imputed with 0's. To eliminate bias or the creation thereof, these missing values are under the assumption that the event either did not occur or was undocumented. Imputation with 0 avoids overstating harm and/or "creating" a narrative.

### 3.1.2 Cleaning Feature Indicators: School-Provided Opportunity and Structure

- **Dropped (>95% missing);** IB Enrollment and Dual Enrollment were removed as data was highly limited.
- **Binary Indicators (imputed with "No" );** Program indicators that reflect whether schools offer Dual Enrollment, Gifted & Talented, and International Baccalaureate programs with missing values were imputed as "No," interpreting non-reporting as non-availability.
- **Academic Access and Offense indicators (imputed with 0);** Missing values were assumed to indicate that there were no Black female students participating in those courses and no offense occurred.
- **Salary indicators (imputed using MICE);** All `salary_vars` missing values are likely due to inconsistent reporting rather than true absence of funding. *Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE)*; was used to impute those values. MICE avoids underestimating school funding by drawing on patterns in related variables (e.g., staffing levels and enrollment size) rather than defaulting to zero.

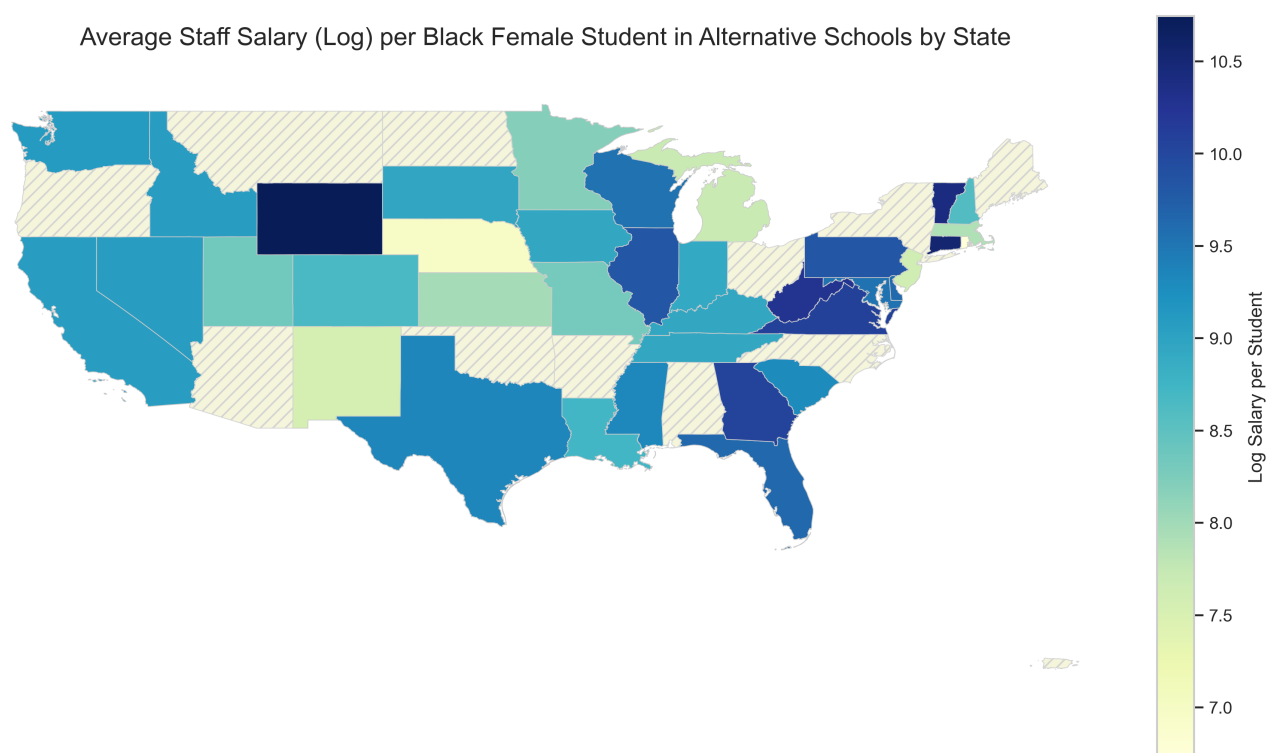
## 3.2 Feature Engineering

**3.2.1 Composite Harm Indicator.** To construct a usable target variable for predictive modeling, I created binary flags for each harm indicator. A school was flagged as "harmful" in a given category if more than **10%** of its enrolled Black female students were affected. In choosing a 10% threshold, we are accounting for small disparities, but in the context of school-related harm, even small disparities matter. This threshold reflects both the distribution of the data and the documented disparities in how Black girls experience discipline relative to their peers. A final **composite harm flag** was then generated for each school: a value of 1 indicates that a school surpassed the harm threshold in at least one of the six categories, and 0 otherwise:

**Table 4**  
Binary harm indicators for Black girls in alternative schools

Indicator	No (0)	Yes (1)	Explanation
<code>bf_retention_binary</code>	1403	345	345 schools had retention rates for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all student retentions.
<code>suspension_binary</code>	1264	484	484 schools had suspension rates for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all students suspensions.
<code>expulsion_binary</code>	1633	95	95 schools had expulsion rates for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all student expulsions.
<code>restraint_binary</code>	1704	44	44 schools had restraint rates for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all student restraints.
<code>harassment_binary</code>	1691	57	57 schools had harassment rates for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all harassment incidents.
<code>police_involvement_binary</code>	1546	202	202 schools had police involvement for Black female students that exceeded 10% of all police involvement occurrences with students.
<code>composite_harm_flag</code>	1033	715	715 schools (~40%) were flagged as environments where at least one serious harm indicator was present for Black female students.

**3.2.2 Normalizing Feature Indicators.** Understanding that all of the school-opportunity indicators are reported in raw counts, all continuous feature indicators were normalized to ensure comparability across schools with different enrollment sizes. I constructed enrollment-normalized versions of each relevant variables by dividing the raw count by the total number of enrolled students, and when applicable, by the number of enrolled Black female students. This transformation allows the model to interpret school resources as proportions, rather than absolute counts, which would skew predictions toward larger institutions. For example, a school reporting 5 counselors for 500 students should not be treated the same as a school with 5 counselors for 50 students.



**Figure 3.** Average staff salary (Log) per Black female student in alternative schools by state. Exploratory Data Analysis; This map visualizes the average staff salary per student across U.S. alternative schools, highlighting disparities in school funding. Darker shades represent states with higher salary investments per student, while lighter beige states reflect missing or unavailable data. The variations in financial investment reflect broader inequities in educational resources available to Black female students in alternative schools.

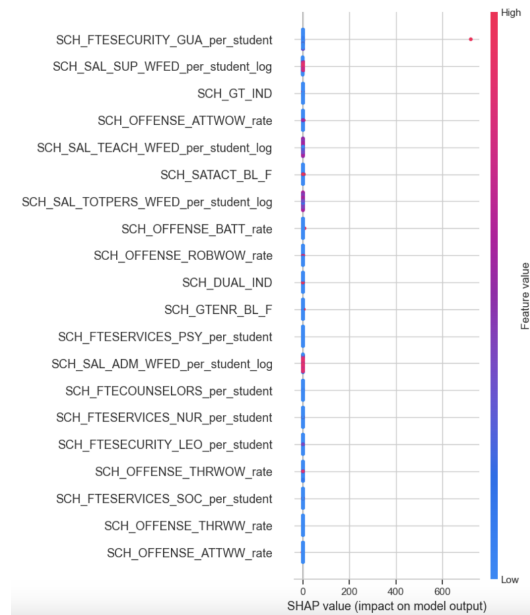
## 4 Results

**Table 5**  
Comparison of Predictive Model Performance for Harm = 1

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	AUC
Logistic Regression	0.62	0.52	0.83	0.63
Random Forest	0.67	0.61	0.54	0.76
XGBoost	0.67	0.62	0.52	0.76
Decision Tree	0.70	0.63	0.64	0.72

### 4.1 Logistic Regression

Prior to tuning, the model struggled to detect harmful environments, likely due to class imbalance and multicollinearity across highly correlated features. Initially, it correctly identified only 39% of harmful schools, favoring the majority class. However, after hyperparameter tuning, model sensitivity improved by correctly predicting 52% of harmful schools. Improvements in recall and AUC indicate the model became more effective at identifying high-risk school settings. Although there is high recall, the data contains high multicollinear points, which is not ideal for logistic regressions. Identifying harmful environments is the goal, and this model is moderately lower in detecting harmful events compared to the other models.



**Figure 4.** Logistic Regression SHAP Summary Plot

**4.1.1 Interpretation** A larger SHAP value means the feature had more influence. The more red, the model is more likely to predict harm. Logistic regression models are not the best in analyzing feature importance, so interpretation is minimal.

- SCH\_FTESECURITY\_GUA\_per\_student : Number of security guards per student had the highest impact on predicting harm.
- SCH\_SAL\_SUP\_WFED\_per\_student\_log : Support services salary s indicative, but the effect is more neutral. Logistic regression models are not the best for
- SCH\_GT\_IND, SCH\_SATACT\_BL\_F : These had smaller but still meaningful effects. For example, higher SAT/ACT participation for Black girls seems to slightly decrease harm prediction.

### 4.2 Random Forest

After tuning the hyperparameters, the Random Forest model correctly identifies 54% of environments that are harmful. While the precision and recall for harmful cases are modest, the model achieves a strong AUC score of 0.76, indicating solid overall discriminatory power. Compared to the untuned version, the recall on harmful environments has improved slightly, and the reduction in false negatives suggests the model is now better at flagging harmful schools. Since detecting harmful school environments is the priority, this tuned model has a better balance between sensitivity and specificity.

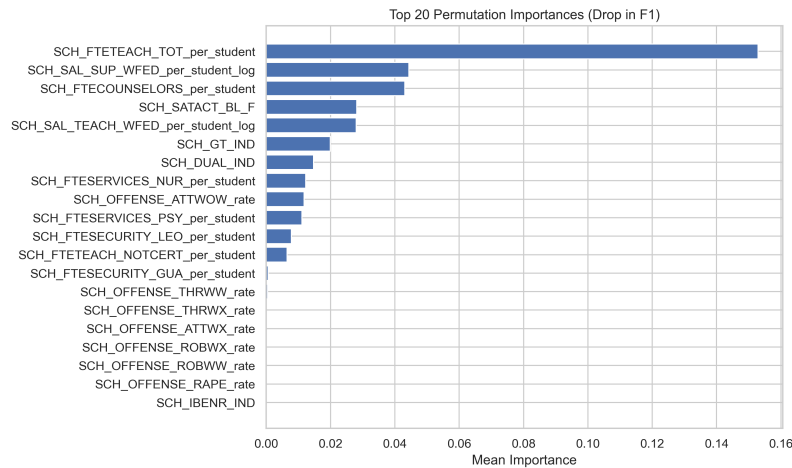


Figure 5. Random Forest Top 20 Permutation Importances

**4.2.1 Interpretation** The most influential features in predicting harmful school environments using the tuned Random Forest model were:

- SCH\_FTETEACH\_TOT\_per\_student: A higher number of full-time equivalent teachers per student appeared to be the most important predictor, suggesting that teacher staffing ratios may play a crucial role in harm identification.
- SCH\_SAL\_SUP\_WFED\_per\_student\_log: Increased salary expenditures on support staff (log-transformed) were associated with differences in harm classification, possibly reflecting school resource allocation.
- SCH\_FTECOUNSELORS\_per\_student: More counselors per student may relate to schools being better equipped to handle student needs, which impacts the model's predictions of harm.

Interestingly, indicators like SCH\_OFFENSE\_ROBWOW\_rate (robbery with weapon, without injury) were less influential compared to staffing and support service indicators, meaning that resourcing factors may have a stronger relationship with harmful conditions in alternative schools.

### 4.3 XGBoost

Before tuning for hyperparameters, the model correctly 63% of harmful environments. After tuning, the XGBoost model correctly identified 52% of harmful environments. The AUC increased to 0.76, suggesting strong overall discrimination between harmful and non-harmful school settings. While recall for the positive (harmful) class slightly decreased, the model still demonstrated a solid balance between precision and recall. Compared to other models, the tuned XGBoost achieved the highest AUC and maintained relatively strong performance even in the context of class imbalance and limited sample size.

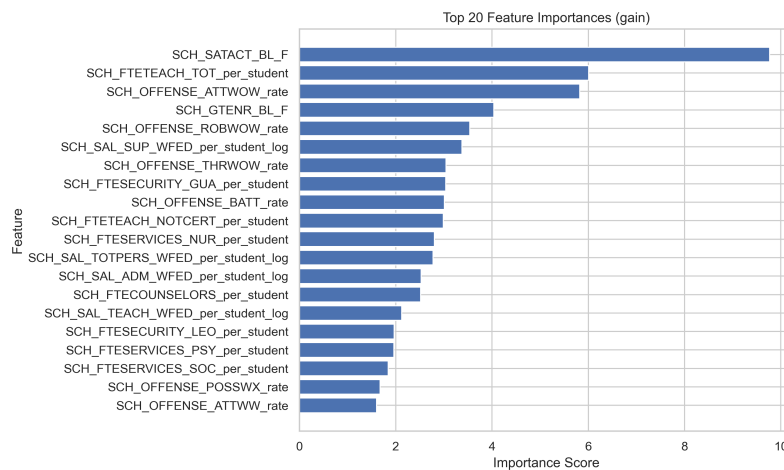


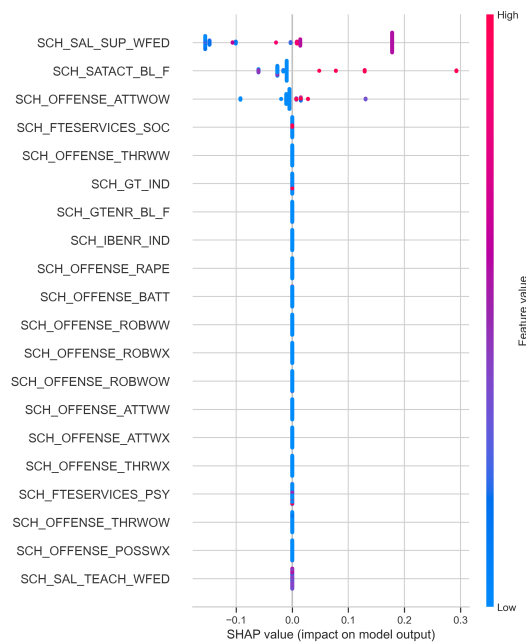
Figure 6. XGBoost Top 20 Feature Importances by gain

**4.3.1 Interpretation** XGBoost top features reflects how much each feature contributes to the model based on gain:

- SCH\_SATACT\_BL\_F : Higher Black girl participation in the SAT/ACT might be negatively associated with harm, or reflect supportive academic environments that reduce harm indicators.
- SCH\_FTE\_TEACHTOT\_per\_student : More teachers per student are a strong predictor, meaning that better staffing reduces harm.
- SCH\_OFFENSE\_ATTWOW\_rate : High attempted offenses without weapons are a top harm signal; high offense rates correlate with school safety issues, adding to harm.

#### 4.4 Decision Tree

After pruning for optimal complexity, the decision tree correctly classified 64% of harmful environments. The model achieved a test accuracy of approximately 70% and an AUC of 0.72, indicating a solid balance between sensitivity and specificity. Compared to its unpruned version, this pruned decision tree generalizes better by avoiding overfitting and improving recall for harmful cases (class 1), which is the most influential for this study. Among the four models, this model proved the best and most reliable for feature interpretation.

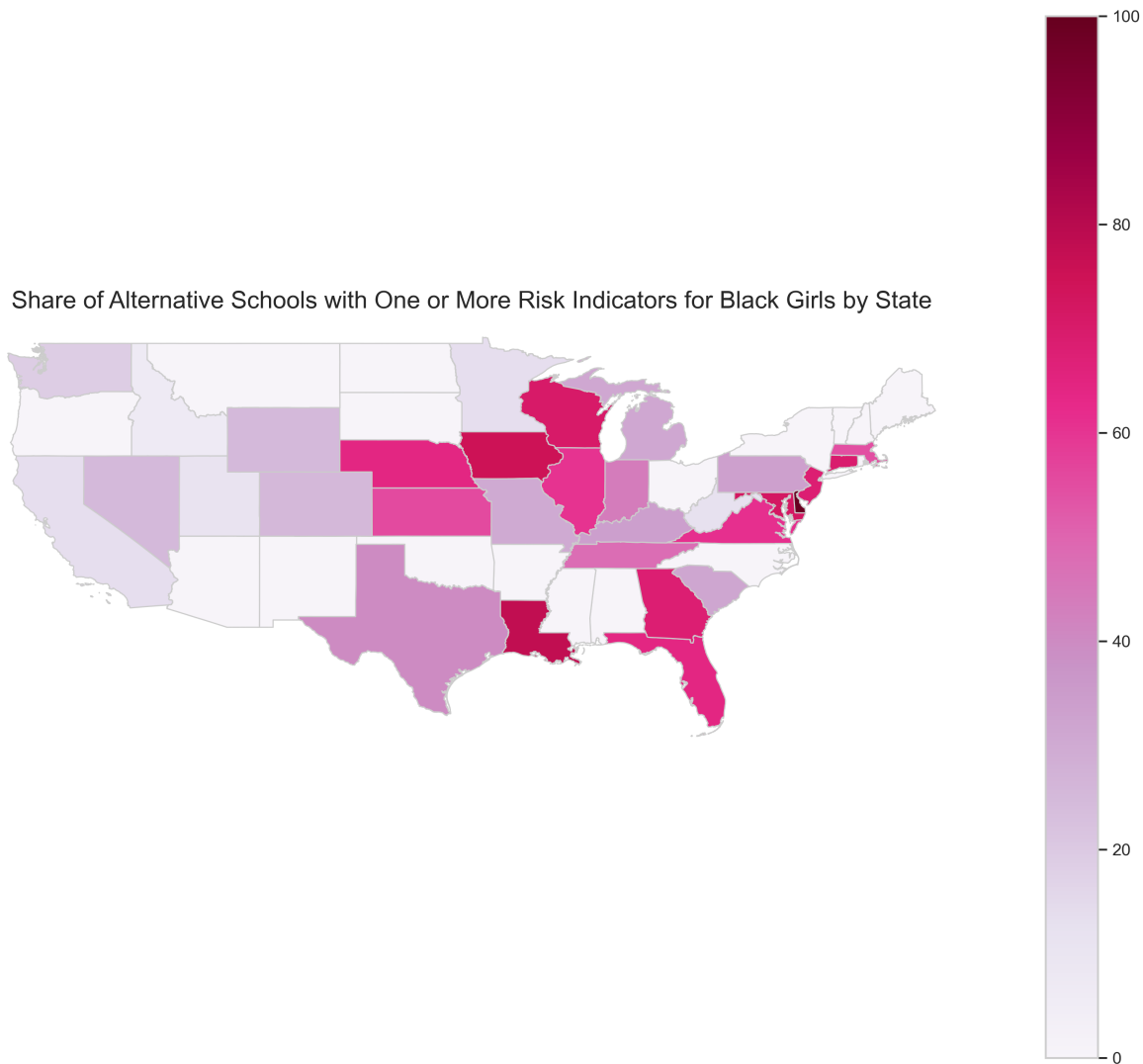


**Figure 7.** Decision Tree SHAP Summary Plot

**4.4.1 Interpretation** The x-axis (SHAP value) indicates how much that feature pushed the prediction toward a harmful (positive SHAP value) or non-harmful (negative SHAP value) classification:

- SCH\_SAL\_SUP\_WFED : Variations in support staff salary levels had the largest influence on whether a school was classified as harmful or not. Super wide SHAP values means that support services salaries had strong and varying impact on school harm.
- SCH\_SATACT\_BL\_F : Higher Black girl participation for the SAT/ACT tend to reduce predicted harm, possibly indicating greater access to college readiness resources and more supportive school climates.
- SCH\_OFFENSE\_ATTWOW : High values of this attempted weapon offense without weapon are associated with higher predicted harm.

## 5 Discussion



**Figure 8.** *Share of Alternative Schools with One or More Risk Indicators for Black Girls by State.* This map visualizes the percentage of alternative schools in each state that were flagged as harmful to Black girls based on composite risk indicators. This map highlights that harm is not evenly distributed across the country, where Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, Illinois, and Maryland stand out for having disproportionately high rates of flagged alternative schools, with over 60–80% of these schools exhibiting one or more systemic harm indicators

The goal in modeling this data is to predict harmful alternative school environments that further hinder the integrity of Black girls' educational attainment. Among the four models evaluated, the pruned Decision Tree model demonstrated the strongest overall performance. With an accuracy of 70%, precision of 0.63, recall of 0.64, and an AUC of 0.72, it offered the most balanced results. Although Logistic Regression achieved the highest recall (0.83), it struggled with precision (0.52), suggesting a tendency to over-classify environments as harmful. Random Forest and XGBoost, while similarly comparable in accuracy and AUC (both 0.76), had lower recall rates, indicating less sensitivity to detecting harmful school conditions.

Certain features consistently emerged as important indicators of systemic risk. Support staff salary per student (SCH\_SAL\_SUP\_WFED) was the most impactful feature in the Decision Tree SHAP analysis, suggesting that environments with lower investment in support staff may be more harmful. Additionally, the participation rate of Black girls in college entrance exams (SCH\_SACT\_BL\_F) appeared as a strong protective factor, correlating with safer environments. Elevated rates of criminal offenses, such as robbery without injury (SCH\_OFFENSE\_ROBOW\_rate), consistently signaled higher risk and were ranked highly in feature importance rankings in all models.

Most importantly, these models should not be viewed as determinative or prescriptive but rather as pattern-detecting tools to flag systemic

risk. The value in these models lie within their ability to identify patterns in educational demographic data that may go unnoticed. The goal is not to definitively label a school as harmful but to highlight potential red flags where deeper investigation, accountability, and intervention can be implemented. These models serve as early warning systems to inform more equitable policy responses and resource allocations for Black girls in alternative education settings.

## 6 Conclusion

To achieve true educational equity, specifically in spaces that may mark a student's final opportunity for educational support, Black girls must be made visible not through metrics of punishment, but through frameworks that recognize opportunity. This research contributes to a broader effort to reimagine alternative schools not as sites of exclusion, but as environments capable of fostering growth, care, and transformation for those most often left behind.

This drift is not just ideological but structural. Currently, at the local, state, and national levels, the demand for alternative schools for students labeled “disruptive or dangerous” far exceeds the available supply—particularly in urban districts where school discipline disproportionately targets Black and Brown youth (NCES, 2010). Moreover, evidence shows that these disciplinary alternative schools are increasingly enrolling younger students, expanding the reach of punitive educational spaces into earlier stages of childhood. On top of the chronic lack of resources in these schools, the increasing institutional “need” for alternative placements further entrenches a culture of stigmatization—one that frames these learning environments as undesirable and inherently inequitable. Redefining and reclaiming what success looks like, and reshaping policy around what is right and just for high-needs students, is essential to challenging the current narrative. As Kokkinakis (2013) argues, instead of “dumping ground” analogies, we must reimagine the environments where success for these students can meaningfully occur to change the perception of alternative education.

This study contributes to that reimagining. By using predictive modeling and the Civil Rights Data Collection, machine-learning can influence educational policy change that can advocate for reframing the narrative and introducing education reform in alternative school settings.

## Acknowledgements

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