



## **Moving Away from Zero Tolerance Policies: Examination of Illinois Educator Preparedness in Addressing Student Behavior**

**Gerardo Moreno<sup>a</sup> and Michael Scaletta<sup>b</sup>**

*<sup>a</sup> Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, USA*

*<sup>b</sup> University of Illinois Chicago, USA*

In August 2016, Illinois Senate Bill 100 (SB 100) restricted the use of zero tolerance disciplinary practices within public schools when addressing student behavior. In efforts to make school discipline less exclusionary and more effective, SB 100 mandated educators exhaust all means of interventions prior to suspending or expelling a student. Additionally, SB 100 recommended faculty professional development on effective classroom management, which is critical considering the majority of exclusionary discipline cases resulted from referrals by classroom educators for subjective department concerns and not from student possession of contraband. Using an online survey instrument, a sample of licensed educators in northeastern Illinois were asked to self-rate their preparedness in classroom management and indicate their awareness of zero tolerance policies. Results demonstrated significant difference of self-rated preparedness between general and special educators when addressing classroom department behaviors, while there was no difference in more intense behaviors (e.g., verbal threats, possession of contraband). Discussion on results and suggestions for future research are offered.

**Keywords:** zero tolerance; behavioral interventions; school-to-prison pipeline; teacher preparation, student support.

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, zero tolerance policies (ZTP) have become ubiquitous disciplinary practice across the majority of schools in the United States (U.S.) in an effort to stem incidents of campus-based violence. ZTP collectively refers to school policies that mandate immediate delivery of exclusionary discipline (i.e., removal from campus through suspension, change of placement, or expulsion) to any student possessing contraband

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email address: gmoreno1@neiu.edu

(e.g., firearms, illegal drugs), regardless of circumstances. While initially focused on student possession of contraband, ZTP gradually expanded to include subjective department concerns (e.g., disrespect of authority, defiance, inappropriate attire) and were often handled in the same manner as actual contraband possession (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Larson, 2016; Mallett, 2016). Unfortunately, this expansion unfairly targeted students of color and students with disabilities, all of which resulted in their disproportionate representation in rates of suspension and expulsion over the decades (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012; Teske, 2011; Thompson, 2016).

In August 2015, Governor Bruce Rauner signed Senate Bill 100 (SB 100; Illinois General Assembly, 2017) which significantly altered ZTP in Illinois public schools through a combination of explicit restrictions, stipulations and recommendations on professional development. Effective August 2016, school administrators are required to exhaust all means of interventions prior to expelling or suspending a student for three or more days for chronic challenging behaviors. SB 100 also prohibits fines and fees for misbehavior levied upon the student or their parents. Upon their return, school administrators are required to offer students opportunities to make up missed school work and students suspended four or more days will be offered a re-entry plan with appropriate support services (e.g., individual counseling, mental health services).

Finally, SB 100 recommends Illinois public schools provide ongoing professional development to faculty on effective classroom management. This professional development is critical considering the majority of exclusionary discipline cases result from referrals by classroom educators for department concerns and not from possession of contraband (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Mallett, 2016; Teske, 2011). Aside from the small number of schools employing positive-based classroom management practices (Illinois Statewide Technical Assistance Collaborative, 2017), the majority of Illinois schools continue to employ such referral-based disciplinary practices.

This legislation was significant and necessary for Illinois. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), Illinois has one of the greatest disparities in the nation between disciplined Black students and their White classmates. For example, during the 2012-13 academic year, Chicago Public Schools removed 32 of every 100 Black students, compared to just five of every 100 White students. Additionally, Black students were delivered harsher disciplinary actions for lesser offenses when compared to White students. While this phenomenon is alarming, it is hardly unique to Illinois as the majority of states in the nation demonstrate some levels of disproportional representation in school discipline thus contributing to the *school-to-prison pipeline*.

While ZTP have placated stakeholders by conveying a *get-tough* message on school violence, the effectiveness of such practices has never been established. Several researchers (e.g., American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Castillo, 2014; Lorenz, 2010; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba, 2014) concluded ZTP are generally ineffective and have only cultivated reactive and exclusionary practices against transgressing students, particularly those individuals of color. Fortunately, the passage of SB 100 was a critical first step in the movement away from ZTP. While procedural restrictions on ZTP constitutes most of the legislative content in SB 100, recommendations on professional development offers the genuine

opportunity to better support educators in the classroom and ensure more judicious disciplinary practices for students.

Considering the majority of student removal cases are the result of disciplinary referrals for department and not contraband possession, it is critical to understand current educator preparedness in order to design future training on positive-based classroom management (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015; Clement, 2010; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Rosas & West, 2009; Silvestri, 2001; Simonsen et al., 2017). In this paper, we will offer a brief overview of ZTP and then discuss the investigation of Illinois educators' self-rated preparedness in classroom management. While the movement away from ZTP is a recent development in Illinois, it is the hope of the authors the information gleaned from this investigation will contribute to a growing knowledge base on the value of professional training in classroom management in lieu of reactive school discipline, all of which increases the quality of behavioral assistance for all students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds.

### *Overview of Zero Tolerance*

The issue of school safety has been a persistent and deserved discussion amongst educators and communities for several decades. While the end result of a safe school campus has never been in dispute, the various approaches to accomplish this goal have been widely contested. Whether violence has been the result of current students or trespassers on campus, school safety has become a politicized issue particularly in the wake of high-profile school violence, such as Columbine High School in 1999 and most recently, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018. However, zero tolerance policies (ZTP) preceded the vast majority of these events by several years originating in the Gun Free School Act (GFSA) of 1994. As the years passed, the premise of GFSA has grown from legislative language to arbitrary philosophical stance and yielded inconclusive results, at best (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Castillo, 2014; Lorenz, 2010; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba, 2014).

### *Origins in the GFSA of 1994*

In the early 1990s, the United States (U.S.) federal government sought to develop a comprehensive, uniformed approach to address school-based gang activity and reduce student possession of firearms (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In 1994, GFSA was signed into law cultivating a series of *get-tough* (i.e., zero tolerance) policies that removed the offending student from campus in the name of school safety. Focused on the simple infraction of possession, weapons were the targeted offense and seen as the root of school violence. Any student in possession of a weapon was automatically removed from campus for one calendar year without investigation (Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Skiba, 2013). To ensure nationwide compliance, all primary and secondary schools in the U.S. were mandated to adopt ZTP in order to continue receiving federal education funding (Curtis, 2014; Lorenz, 2010; Mongan & Walker, 2012). As a result, by the 1996-1997 school year, 94 percent of public schools had imposed ZTP on weapons (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

On a higher level, GFSA was a symbolic attempt to take back schools and re-assert the discerned loss of social control. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the public held the inaccurate perception many schools

were under siege from persistent violence and teenage perpetrators (Castillo, 2014; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2014; Thompson, 2016). As a response, GFSA was founded on a philosophy similar to the *broken windows* theory, specifically, communities should react quickly to the smallest acts of disruptions with strong punitive force to communicate the social message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated (Lorenz, 2010). Skiba (2013) explained this philosophy allowed stakeholders to embrace the notion that greater authority with force is necessary to keep schools safe, particularly in the age of educational accountability. As such, ZTP resulting from GFSA provided schools the necessary authority to police campuses and swiftly remove offending students. These policies were justified by two central tenets: pre-determined consequences will deter future offenders and any weapons in schools present a risk to every student, even if possession of the weapon is unknown (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Mongan & Walker, 2012).

However, there was clear incongruence between public perception and hard data on school violence. In actuality, levels of school violence had remained stable for 30 years while the perception of schools collapsing under violence were proliferated in the media (Skiba, 2014; Thompson 2016). While the initial focus of ZTP targeted weapon possession, by 1999 many schools expanded their policies to include subjective offenses such as swearing, truancy, insubordination, disrespect, and dress-code violation in their policies to stem other problem behaviors from occurring (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Due in part to the latitude provided to schools by ZTP, implementation became varied, inconsistent, and in some cases, discriminatory (Castillo, 2014; Curtis, 2014; Hoffman, 2014; Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Skiba, Michael, Carroll Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

#### *Detrimental Effects on Students from Diverse Backgrounds*

In the years following the wide spread adoption of ZTP, various analyses of school disciplinary practices identified inconsistent and unfair application of such policies by school administrators. As several researchers (e.g., Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, 2013; Skiba, Michael, Carroll Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Thompson, 2016) concluded students of color (e.g., Black, Latinx), particularly Black males, became significantly overrepresented as recipients of exclusionary discipline when compared to their White peers. While Black male students have historically experienced disparity in disciplinary actions for decades, the adoption of ZTP exacerbated this phenomenon (Bowditch, 1993; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Mendez & Knoff, 2003).

As schools expanded ZTP to include deportment offenses, this expansion provided school administrators open latitude to remove students from campus as both incapacitation and general deterrence (Mahon-Reynolds & Parker, 2016; Mongan & Walker, 2012). Students caught and punished for the demonstration of deportment concerns were often handled in the same manner as actual weapon possession (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). This movement away from the discernible offense of contraband possession to subjective offenses contributed to unusually high and disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates based on student race, gender, and disability (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011; Thompson, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). Across multitudes of cases, ZTP unfairly targeted students of color and students with disabilities (Teske, 2011)

Students with disabilities, particularly those with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) were the most affected groups from ZTP. Students with EBD often demonstrate hallmark traits (e.g., inept social skills, tendencies toward aggressive or violent behavior) which are consistent with the nature of the disability. However, such problematic behavior unfairly predisposed many students with EBD as recipients of stringent disciplinary actions, including removal from campus (Adams & Meiners, 2014; Moreno, 2010). In 1997, amid growing concern with the unfair removal of students with EBD from campus, special education advocates encouraged one of the major revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2018) to include behavioral interventions and ensure more judicious applications of discipline involving students with disabilities.

### *Feeding the School-to-Prison Pipeline*

While mandating specific actions to counterbalance stringent disciplinary practices benefited students with disabilities, those individuals without such federal protection have not fared as well. Over the decades, ZTP became embedded within public schools, particularly those in low socioeconomic areas with high enrollment of Black and Latinx students (Teske, 2011). Additionally, many districts funded high-incident schools with a school resource officer (SRO) to support zero tolerance implementation (Kupchik, 2016). Unfortunately, those concerted efforts exponentially increased arrest rates of Black students by establishing a direct connection between school and the juvenile justice system (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Mallett, 2016; Mahon-Reynolds & Parker, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003).

With Black students already overrepresented as recipients of strict disciplinary practices, ZTP coupled with the increased reliance on SROs further exposed this group to the phenomenon ubiquitously termed, *school-to-prison pipeline* (Mahon-Reynolds & Parker, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). Adams and Erevelles (2016) described the school-to-prison pipeline as a complex network of relations that naturalize the movement of students of color from schools into the juvenile justice system through short-term detention and ending with possible long-term incarceration. While not all punished students experienced incarceration, several researchers (e.g., Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2015; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Guckenbug, 2010; Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996) noted the effects of automatic school discipline are varied, detrimental, and long lasting (e.g., loss of academic opportunities, higher dropout rates, increased contact with justice system).

### *Understanding the Role of Student Disciplinary Referrals*

While cases of contraband clearly invoke ZTP with immediate removal of the student from campus, the vast majority of disciplinary offenses occur within the classroom (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Teske, 2011). Educators and their classroom management skills play a significant role in the likelihood of removing a student from campus. By their nature, classrooms are heterogenous social spaces with various participants contributing naturally occurring interactions. However, when any behavior deleteriously alters this flow of interactions, the educator must rely on their own classroom management training and professional judgment to brand the behavior as disruptive, particularly if the behavior does not involve contraband. Unfortunately,

the majority of these disruptive behaviors are department concerns and pose no serious risks to the class nor campus (Mallett, 2016). Educators with limited classroom management skills often become uncomfortable or frustrated in addressing disruptive behavior and quickly refer the student to school administration, which frequently results in the student removal from campus (Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

As several researchers (e.g., Gay, 2000; Hoover, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Quinn et al., 2001) discussed, the quality of professional training in classroom management skills and experience in working with diverse student populations are critical factors in the educator's ability to address disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Often, educators with limited knowledge of positive-based behavioral approaches rely on suppressive punishment (e.g., scolding, confrontation, response-cost) to address disruptive behaviors, which may only escalate tension between student and educator (Walker, Cheney, Stage, Blum, & Horner, 2005; Wheeler & Richey, 2010). This escalation can easily exceed educator comfort and perceptions of safety within the classroom, thus making a referral to school administration nearly certain (Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

### *Investigation of Educator Experiences in Post-Zero Tolerance Illinois*

Despite the extensive literature on the lack of effectiveness of ZTP, nearly all fifty states have some version of zero tolerance integrated as educational policy. As previously mentioned, Illinois stands as one of the most recent states to significantly restrict the employment of ZTP across all public schools. Considering student disciplinary referrals for department concerns comprise the majority of removals from campus under ZTP, understanding the current state of Illinois educator preparedness is critical to moving beyond suppressive school discipline and stemming the *school-to-prison pipeline*.

The current study purported to survey a representative sample of licensed educators in northeastern Illinois PK-12 schools to determine their judgment of scenarios involving disruptive behaviors based on the impact of four different demographic variables (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, years of professional experience, general/special educator preparation). With this in mind, the research questions were:

1. What effect does professional background (i.e., license) have on educator self-rated preparedness in addressing student behavior?
2. What effect do demographic factors (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) have on educator self-preparedness in addressing student behavior?
3. What is the level of educator understanding on ZTP and SB 100 with its professional implications since its passage?
4. What type (if any) of professional training have educators received on classroom management since the passage of SB 100?

For this study, it is important to frame the parameters affecting sample size and participation of educators within the state of Illinois, particularly individuals with direct experience in addressing behavioral concerns in the classroom. Illinois is significantly skewed in terms of resident population between the northeastern region and remainder of the state as Chicago metropolitan area (i.e., Chicagoland) comprises approximately nine million of the 13 million state residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). With this population

distribution in mind, the present study targeted currently employed PK-12 education professionals (e.g., general and special educators, interventionists, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) based in Chicagoland. Participants were invited to complete an online survey ascertaining their preparedness in addressing students demonstrating various levels of disruptive behaviors within the classroom. Additionally, the quantitative data collected were supplemented with qualitative data ascertained from follow-up interviews with participants.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Various education personnel across northeastern Illinois (i.e., Chicagoland) who attended one of three professional conferences focused on educational programming and behavioral supports participated in this study. The target population included education personnel (e.g., classroom educators, administrators) and ancillary personnel (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, school-based social workers) who have worked with students demonstrating various levels of disruptive behaviors in the classroom within the last five years, September 2012 – October 2017. Participants were classified as either general or special educator based on their initial professional preparation and resulting license.

A total of 186 participants (158 females, 28 males) completed the survey representing general educator background (N=72, 39%), special educator background (N=114, 61%). Over 67% of the participants indicated they worked in an urban setting (i.e., schools located in the city of Chicago), followed by 33% of participants working in suburban settings (i.e., schools located in a city or village other than Chicago), and no participants (0%) indicated they worked in a rural setting (i.e., agriculturally-based village outside of Chicagoland metro area). At the conclusion of the survey, two volunteer participants were interviewed for additional insight on their professional experiences with school discipline within their school organizations.

**Table I: Participant Demographics and Educator Preparation Background**

| <b>Gender</b>                           | <b><i>n</i></b> | <b>%</b> |
|---|-----------------|----------|
| Female                                  | 158             | 85       |
| Male                                    | 28              | 15       |
| <b>Racial/Ethnic Identity</b>           |                 |          |
| White                                   | 129             | 69       |
| Black or African American               | 31              | 17       |
| American Indian or Alaska Native        | 1               | ≤1       |
| Hispanic or Latino                      | 22              | 12       |
| Asian or Pacific Islander               | 2               | ≤1       |
| Other                                   | 1               | ≤1       |
| <b>Initial License</b>                  |                 |          |
| General education                       | 72              | 39       |
| Special education                       | 114             | 61       |
| <b>School Setting</b>                   |                 |          |
| Urban                                   | 125             | 67       |
| Suburban                                | 61              | 33       |
| <b>Type of School</b>                   |                 |          |
| Illinois public school                  | 149             | 80       |
| Private school                          | 37              | 20       |
| <b>Years of Professional Experience</b> |                 |          |
| Less than 3 years                       | 74              | 40       |
| 3 to 9 years                            | 102             | 55       |
| 10 to 20 years                          | 9               | 5        |
| Over 20 years                           | 1               | ≤1       |

*Instrument*

An online survey was developed to examine various aspects of educator preparedness when addressing disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Educator preparedness was operationalized as a composite of professional knowledge in positive-based behavior management, personal comfort in fictional scenarios, and awareness of ZTP in Illinois public schools. The instrument was divided into three sections comprised of 25 Likert-based (six-point scale) content items, 5 dichotomous items on ZTP and SB 100 awareness, and 10 participant demographic items. Additionally, one dichotomous item eliciting participant volunteers in a confidential follow-up interview concluded the instrument.



Content items presented participants with fictional classroom scenarios of student behavior in varying degrees of severity (i.e., *challenging*, *threatening*, and *immediate response*) and the resulting educator disciplinary action. As primer to each scenario, levels of behavior were operationally defined and accompanied with examples to ensure participant comprehension. Using the six-point scale, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on the disciplinary actions employed in the scenario as well as their level of personal comfort in addressing similar behaviors.

The second section of the instrument presented participants with a series of dichotomous-response items examining their awareness of ZTP and SB 100. Items inquired participant awareness of ZTP as grounds for student removal from campus (e.g., weapon possession) as well as their experience (if any) regarding professional development on classroom management strategies within the current academic year. Finally, the third section requested demographic information focused on participant background, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, professional license, current employment setting, and number of years in the field. Upon survey closure, results across sections were examined by (a) participant level of agreement in the scenarios, (b) participant level of comfort in addressing similar student behaviors, (c) the extent of professional development received in the immediate year after passage of SB 100, and (d) participant demographics.

### *Qualitative Interview*

At conclusion of the survey, all participants were offered the opportunity to identify themselves as a person of interest for a follow-up interview to elaborate upon their responses. Seven individuals volunteered to participate in the interview. Of the seven participants, only two indicated an awareness of SB 100 and its limitations on zero tolerance practices in Illinois. Two participants (i.e., *Interviewees A, B*) who volunteered were selected based on their licensed educator training, awareness of ZTP/SB 100, and availability. Upon agreement to participate, each interview was conducted through video conference (e.g., FaceTime) using a standard script with the identification of the investigator, purpose of the study, confidentiality clause, and three questions examining their experience in addressing student behavior. Both interviewees were asked to respond to the following prompts:

1. Please describe the types of professional training you have received related to school safety, school climate, and/or working with students demonstrating challenging behavior.
2. Are you aware of ZTP? If so, in what ways do you believe a ZTP is or is not an effective strategy for shaping student success?
3. In August 2016, Illinois Senate Bill 100 (SB 100) strongly limited how school districts respond to dangerous student behavior. Please describe any trainings have you received focused on addressing student behavior beginning with the 2016-2017 academic year.

### **Results**

The study purported to investigate Illinois educators' self-rated preparedness in addressing varying levels of student behavior based on background of initial teacher preparation (i.e., general education, special

education), participant demographics (i.e., gender, race, years of teaching experience), and awareness of ZTP and SB 100 in Illinois.

*Self-Rating on Preparedness of Addressing Student Behavior and Initial Teacher Preparation*

An independent *t* test was conducted to determine if a difference existed between the mean self-rate of professional preparedness addressing students across various levels of behaviors between participants with initial general or special education licensure. In the level of *challenging* behaviors, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean self-rate scores of participants with initial general education license ( $n=53, M=3.09, SD=1.58$ ) and initial special educators license ( $n=120, M=3.63, SD=1.55$ ), conditions;  $t(171) = -2.094, p=.038$ .

Results indicated no significant differences across the two remaining behavior levels (i.e., *threatening, immediate response*) in the two participant groups (i.e., initial general education license, initial special education license). Additionally, results demonstrated no significant differences across gender, race/ethnicity, employment setting, or years of licensed teaching experience.

**Table II. Comparison between Participant Initial License Groups**

| Variable                |    | General Education<br>(n=53) | Special Education<br>(n=120) | <i>t</i> -value | prob. |
|-------------------------|----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Challenging<br>behavior | M  | 3.09                        | 3.63                         | -2.09           | 0.038 |
|                         | SD | 1.58                        | 1.55                         |                 |       |
| Threatening<br>behavior | M  | 2.85                        | 3.16                         | -1.29           | 0.197 |
|                         | SD | 1.26                        | 1.52                         |                 |       |
| Immediate<br>response   | M  | 3.69                        | 3.53                         | 0.643           | 0.521 |
|                         | SD | 1.71                        | 1.60                         |                 |       |

*Awareness of ZTP and Professional Development on SB 100*

Among the dichotomous items in section two of the survey, participants were directly inquired on their awareness of ZTP and practices in Illinois. Majority of the participants (i.e., 89%) indicated general awareness of ZTP within their school organization as well as 96% of participants indicating procedural knowledge of disciplinary referrals for classroom department concerns. Regarding SB 100, 67% of participants indicated awareness of SB 100 while 33% of participants did not indicate awareness of the new legislation. Additionally, 16% of participants indicated receiving some type of professional development while 84% indicated not receiving any professional development.

**Table III. Participant Awareness of ZTP and Professional Training on SB 100**

| <b>ZTP Awareness</b>                                       | <b><i>n</i></b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|-----------------|----------|
| Knowledge/Awareness  | 166             | 89       |
| No Knowledge/Awareness                                     | 20              | 11       |
| <b>Knowledge of School Disciplinary Referral Procedure</b> | <b><i>n</i></b> | <b>%</b> |
| Knowledge/Awareness  | 179             | 96       |
| No Knowledge/Awareness                                     | 7               | 4        |
| <b>Illinois Senate Bill 100</b>                            | <b><i>n</i></b> | <b>%</b> |
| Knowledge/Awareness  | 125             | 67       |
| No Knowledge/Awareness                                     | 61              | 33       |
| <b>Professional Development</b>                            |                 |          |
| Received Training on SB 100                                | 30              | 16       |
| Did Not Receive Training                                   | 156             | 84       |

*Participant Interviews*

In general, both interviewees offered the similar responses to the aforementioned prompts. Interviewees indicated professional comfort in addressing student behavior from their preparation program, agreed to the need for ZTP in shaping behavioral expectations and did not receive any professional training focused on student behavior since the passage of SB 100. However, both of the interviewees offered unique narratives of how zero tolerance practices had affected their professional experiences with students.

*Interviewee A*

Interviewee A was a female high school chemistry educator in a Chicagoland suburban district averaging 35 students each class period over the last seven years. Prior to teaching in her current district, Interviewee B had taught in a more diverse school district and noted stark differences between the learning/behavioral needs between both settings. She shared:

Students in my old district came with a lot more baggage than I see here. Many of them had already been suspended several times by the time they reached high school and didn't think of it as a big deal. And bringing anything that could be considered a weapon was not a big deal either. It was just confiscated, and they were suspended. Back in class a day or two later...like nothing happened.

*Interviewee B*

Interviewee B was male elementary general educator recently hired as an elementary school assistant principal in a suburban Chicagoland district with a diverse student population (i.e., approximately 65% non-White student enrollment). Interviewee C noted specific challenges he encountered during his first year in school administration. He began:

...it seems like a mismatch. There are some teachers, not all, but some that have very unrealistic expectations for their students. I'm not sure because these are (mostly) White teachers working with Black students, Hispanic students, who feel easily disrespected when kids don't follow. They seem to take any misbehavior as a form of disrespect and feel that's ground for suspension.

When asked for possible actions to address these concerns, Interviewee C responded, "PD (i.e., professional development). District-wide PD on classroom management. We spend so much time on instruction and teaching standards, there's never time for training on behavior."

## **Discussion**

Safe environments cultivate genuine learning experiences and establish a higher quality of life for all students. Unfortunately, there has been little consensus on accomplishing general school safety, particularly as initial teacher preparation programs increasingly prioritize academic content knowledge over fundamental classroom management skills. With this in consideration, it was not surprising to see the disparity in self-ratings between general and special educators when it came to address *challenging behaviors*, the first level of severity in student behavior. As mentioned earlier, the demonstration of subjective challenging behaviors within the classroom often act as catalyst to invoking disciplinary referrals based on ZTP more often than actual threats or immediate response behaviors.

In Illinois, general educator initial licensing requirements follow similar pathways as other states regarding courses focused on content knowledge and pedagogy. However, special educator initial licensing requirements differ by the combination of courses focused on academics and behavior support programming. This difference in licensing requirements is notable as special educator responses demonstrated a significant difference of professional skills and comfort when addressing student behavior than general educator responses, possibly due to this inclusion of courses focused on behavior support.

It is postulated special educators often address student behavior needs in tandem with academic needs, particularly for individuals with disability conditions where challenging behaviors are a hallmark characteristic (e.g., EBD, autism, intellectual disability). In such instances, special educators may demonstrate higher levels of professional preparedness and comfort when addressing behaviors within their own classroom before resorting to disciplinary referrals. Conversely, general educators lacking professional preparation in behavior management often resort to disciplinary referrals for department concerns more quickly than their special educator colleagues, thus increasing the likelihood of invoking student removal from campus based on ZTP. This disparity illustrates the critical missing component from school-wide

disciplinary practices based on zero tolerance and related suppressive techniques, namely student-focused positive classroom management.

These results sequence into the second goal of this study, the examination of educator awareness on SB 100 and any associated professional development on school disciplinary practices. Among the many restrictions and stipulated actions of SB 100, educator professional training on “the adverse consequences of school exclusion and justice-system involvement, effective classroom management strategies, culturally responsive discipline, and developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods that promote positive and healthy school climates to suppressive punishment” is only *recommended* (SB 100; Illinois General Assembly, 2017). Considering 67% of participants indicated no awareness of SB 100 more than a calendar year after becoming state law, this situation presents an ironic obstacle in the movement away from zero tolerance practices.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

School disciplinary practices based on the principles of zero tolerance have demonstrated detrimental effects on students from diverse backgrounds and yielded no conclusive evidence in creating safe schools. Data from this study provided additional evidence on the importance of professional training amongst educators and their resulting levels of preparedness in addressing student behavior. These findings are critical considering Illinois initiated a systemic movement away from disciplinary practices that have become the bedrock foundation of school disciplinary practices since the early 1990s.

Nonetheless, this current study presented several clear limitations. In conjunction with the geographic limitation of this study (i.e., northeastern Illinois), future research that includes larger sample populations across other parts of the state (e.g., central and southern Illinois) will increase the generalizability of the results. Secondly, future implementations of the study would benefit from additional examination on the quality and type of professional development on behavior management amongst general and special educators. Such an examination could confirm the significance of professional training on positive-based classroom management and its place within initial educator licensure programs, regardless of general or special education focus.

Finally, findings from this study offered a small glimpse into educator perceptions in addressing student behavior. As noted in the literature review, educator perceptions on behavior are critical when working with students from diverse backgrounds, particularly Black male and Latinx students. Both recommendations and limitations from this study should alert researchers and practitioners that critical work must continue so as to ensure educational practices expand to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

The premise of *safety* serves as necessary bedrock to all other subsequent needs within a learning environment. However, as decades of evidence have demonstrated, ZTP do not improve school safety and have exacerbated the phenomenon known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*. Additionally, multiple

investigations have demonstrated educators with limited classroom management are more likely to refer a transgressing student for subjective department concerns citing ZTP. While the establishment of ZTP were under the best of intentions, such practices have only succeeded in placating politicians at the expense of some of the most vulnerable populations, particularly students of color.

The passage of SB 100 in Illinois was a critical first step in the movement away from zero tolerance practices, which can serve as example to other states hoping to reform their own school systems. Although restrictions on traditional disciplinary practices constituted most of the content in SB 100, the recommendations on professional development for educators is equally significant as it represents opportunities. Considering the majority of student removal cases are the result of disciplinary referrals for department, it is critical to understand current educator preparedness in order to design targeted training on positive-based classroom management. This understanding will ensure educators are appropriately supported in the classroom and deliver more judicious disciplinary practices that cultivate a safer campus for all individuals.

Sweeping broad policies, such as ZTP, are more a reflection of reactive, emotional perspective than thoughtful professional analyses. Such policies have only cultivated school climates filled with apprehension and fear, particularly in diverse communities where *law and order* has come at the expense of students of color. Although the state of U.S. public education remains in flux as the result of divisive political agendas, it is the hope of the authors the information gleaned from this investigation will contribute to the conclusive knowledge base on the value of quality educator training in classroom management.

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