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Supportive Discipline is Here to Stay:

Texas High Schools Make Headway Against the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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**Supportive Discipline is Here to Stay:  
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Pipeline**

**by**

**Christopher David DeLosSantos**

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## **Abstract**

### **Supportive Discipline is Here to Stay: Texas High Schools Make Headway Against the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

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**The discipline models employed in U.S. schools tend to swing back and forth like a slow pendulum. Following the tragic shootings at Columbine in 1999, districts around the U.S. began to employ policies now known as zero tolerance.**

**By the middle of the 2000s decade, Texas school districts and state legislators — progressive and conservative alike — realized that zero tolerance no longer worked. Together, lawmakers, regional education service centers and school districts began to roll back zero tolerance.**

**Gradually, educators implemented a variety of supportive discipline methods across the state. By the time of the 2014 Federal letter from the civil rights offices in the Education and Justice Departments, Texas schools had already made great headway in reducing exclusionary discipline while simultaneously improving student behavior.**

**Texas can be a model for other states.**

**This is a 6800 word piece of longform journalism, written to be suitable for publication in a magazine such as *Texas Monthly* or *The New Yorker*.**

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## **Chapter 1: Supportive Discipline is Here to Stay**

Day seven of a new school year, the first red and gold leaves of fall are still over a month away and summer heat will last several more weeks in South Texas. Chrissy Daniels, an assistant principal at Harlingen High School, dashes back into to her office. She just made sure students got to third period class and checked in with her security guards.

A seasoned administrator with over a decade in the class room and over another decade in administration, Daniels' portfolio includes Campus Safety, Emergency Procedures, standardized testing and students with last names from E to Le.

Daniels searches her desk for a moment and finds the printed fire drill procedure. Her Safety Committee marked it up with suggestions for improvement. She'll brief this to faculty and staff at meeting coming up in a few days. First, she wants to update it to incorporate the committee's recommendations. She logs into her computer and opens the document file for the fire drill.

The sound of a timid knock at her door breaks up her train of thought.

Daniels closes her laptop and swivels her chair around. A new student stands in her office doorway.

Daniels had asked the student to come in to discuss course plans and extracurricular activities to consider. This isn't a disciplinary meeting. At least it isn't supposed to be.

The student waits in the door until called in; then barely says, “Hi.” The visitor looks at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, anywhere in the office but Daniels’ eyes.

When she was a high school student, Daniels would have known to look her AP in the eyes upon entering the office, to give a proper greeting, introduce herself and shake hands.

Not looking an administrator in the eyes would have been viewed as disrespect, in the 1970s and 1980s. If she had behaved this way when she was in high school, Daniels might have gotten detention right away.

Daniels recalls that this student may never have been taught to make eye contact, greet an adult or make introductions.

Taking a breath, Daniels also reminds herself to be patient with this student. “Thank you for coming to see me,” Daniels tells her visitor. “Before we discuss your goals, what courses you should take, and what clubs you can join to have a full high school experience, let me teach you to introduce yourself.

“Making introductions is an important social skill for adults who have jobs. We’re going to teach that here in high school as well as math and history. It works like this...” Daniels demonstrates. “Now you try,” she smiles.

Harlingen assistant superintendent Joseph Villarreal explains the situation with the student in the assistant principal’s office. “You and I would think that a student who enters [a principal’s] office and looks at the ground or the walls or out the window is showing disrespect, but that isn’t always the case.” High school discipline falls in Villarreal's portfolio of responsibilities.

“We have actually found that students can’t even look each other in the eyes for more than three seconds at a time, much less adults, far less principals,” says Villarreal.



“It isn’t disrespect. They just don’t know. We realized as a district that we have to teach them.”

“What we have found in the last several years, is that many of our students start high school without really knowing how to comport themselves,” says Villarreal. “In addition to curriculum, we have to teach character.”

“We still have the same small-town Texas values our grandparents grew up with and we know that our students will be successful if they learn those values,” says Villarreal. “Just having the code of conduct posted on the wall in every classroom and having students and parents sign it at the beginning of every school year, doesn’t mean that all students have learned it. We have to teach that, too.”

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No one disputes the mounting national problem with school discipline over the last 20 years. In Texas, school districts and the state legislature identified the overuse and ineffectiveness of suspensions as a disciplinary tool around 2006. Policy advocates, legislators and school districts undertook to overhaul high school discipline, moving from the “zero tolerance” measures that followed the Columbine school shooting in 1999, to a layered combination of supportive discipline models in use today. Texas school districts found improved student comportment, reduced suspensions and increased achievement in the wake of these reforms.

“In the years following the Columbine school shootings, the pendulum swung from ‘whole child’ to zero tolerance,” explains Dr Craig Shapiro. Shapiro now works as Austin ISD assistant superintendent for high schools. On April 20th, 1999, at Columbine

High School in Jefferson County Colorado, two students shot 33 others (13 fatally) and then turned their weapons on each other.

After Columbine, districts and campuses across the country and around Texas clamped down on socially disruptive behavior with detentions, in-school suspensions and off-campus suspensions.

“Cussing, even coming to school without a campus ID card,” according to Deb Ross, “were immediate suspension offenses.” Ross, an educator for decades, currently works as an assistant principal at Lehman High School in Hays County.

By 2006, the pendulum had swung too far. “Texas schools were suspending students for bringing aspirin to campus,” recalls former state representative Jerry Madden, 75, of Richardson. Madden, a conservative Republican, spearheaded efforts to reform criminal justice and school discipline in the Texas Legislature along with state Senator John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat. “Districts were securing misdemeanor convictions in Juvenile Courts against students over violations of district codes of conduct.”

Madden says that by 2006, general education schools were over-referring students to Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) campuses, “students that vice-principals should have taken care of.”

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On such DAEP campus is the Hays Consolidated ISD Impact Center, led by Principal Sylvia Villejo.

Five-and-a-half feet tall in walking shoes, Villejo radiates a quiet confidence. Her campus, in a high growth suburb south of Austin, consists of an array of portable classroom buildings. Four portables configure as offices and a lunch serving station; the rest, as classrooms.

On a blustery day in January, Villejo's students all wear black sweatshirts over white golf shirts with tan khaki pants. Mostly Hispanic boys, with a few girls, African American and Caucasian students, attend Villejo's campus for two weeks to 45 days at a time.

Students move quietly between portables, hands to themselves, in single-file lines.

"We'll use this as a teachable moment." Villejo says to 15 students entering a classroom. "Each of you introduce yourself to the visiting reporter."

These 15 students set their books down on desks and then form a semicircle around the reporter, leaving everyone access to the classroom door. They stand with awkward postures looking at the floor and the walls, stealing glances at each other for half a minute, nearly a full minute.

Then one of the girls steps forward and stands erect, smiles confidently and extends her hand. "Hello," she tells her name. "My favorite subject is history. It's nice to meet you."

Taking turns, the 15 students shake hands, tell names and mention one of their interests. After hand shakes, each one steps back a few feet to allow space for others. Soon, all have introduced themselves.

Villejo praises the students for their confident introductions and firm handshakes and turns them over to their classroom teacher.

“What impresses me most about my students is their resilience,” says Villejo. Villejo gently steers students with patterns of misconduct at their home campuses onto a path to make the best use of the talents and abilities they were born with. “They come from dysfunctional homes, but here [at my school] they work and they learn.”

Every county in Texas has at least one DAEP school. School districts with larger populations will have larger DAEP programs. Schools like the Hays Impact Center provide additional structure for students having repetitive disciplinary issues or patterns of misbehavior.

The most common offenses of students at the Hays Impact Center in 2018-2019 involve fighting and contraband substances, such as marijuana.

At any given time, Villejo’s school has about 130 to 150 total students, from elementary, middle and high school grades. Villejo says the enrollment in her campus swelled with students from all backgrounds in the first years after Columbine. By the 2006-07 school year, the Hays Impact Center served 56 high school students, almost two percent of the high school students in Hays County.

Villejo says she has seen enrollment on any given day shrink since 2012. By 2017-18, and following over ten years of reforms, Villejo’s campus served just over one percent of high students.

Villejo estimates that nearly 80 percent of students who attend her campus go on to earn a high school diploma and become productive citizens. In the time of zero tolerance, many of these students might have found their way into the juvenile justice system; many of them might have dropped out of school to work low paying unskilled jobs in cleaning and janitorial services or in food service.

Villejo did not set out to be a principal, she says, but has run the Hays Impact Center since 2003. Villejo set out to be a social welfare therapist. But she got a job teaching high school math in 1998 and found that she really connected with the so-called “difficult” students. “In my heart,” Villejo says, “I see the young men and women they could grow up to be — responsible, resilient and self-reliant — if they were simply shown a better path.”

Showing a better path is what the Impact Center is all about under Villejo. Uniforms emphasize that the students are all equal regardless of skin color or socio-economic background or gang affiliation. Her students are there to learn — math, English, science and history, yes — but also coping skills to encourage students to solve problems with words, not fists.

“Here at the Impact Center,” says Villejo, “we give students structure and rules: Come to school, go to class, respect teachers and each other, do the work and learn. We show them that following the rules, showing respect and doing the work pays off.”

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School administrators across Texas saw the problem of zero tolerance. In Hays County, Villejo and Ross explain that they began to see suspensions fail as a disciplinary tool in the mid-2000s.

In the Harlingen district, Villarreal also saw suspensions fail as a tool. “Whether it was parents not backing up the school administrators or students just arriving at high school without knowing how to behave, we saw that suspensions no longer corrected student behavior to the extent that the District saw in prior decades.”

At Harlingen High, Daniels explains: “In prior decades, administrators would suspend a student for a day or two and while the student was at home, the parents or other family members would support the school’s decision. They would also help the student find constructive ways of dealing with whatever behavior — usually fighting — had led to the suspension. While away from campus the student had help learning to control his emotions.”

In Hays by 2006, Ross says, “We began to see students repeatedly suspended for the same behaviors and we knew needed a new approach. We were teaching differently, why not try new discipline methods as well?”

A former New York City high school teacher and principal who interviewed in several districts around Texas before arriving at Crockett H. S. in Austin in 2008, Shapiro has unique insight. He explains, “A number of factors came together to move schools toward discipline reform.”

Shapiro says, “Brain science discovered the part of a person’s brain that understands outcomes of actions does not develop until the mid-20s. Parental involvement changed and parents were no longer helping suspended students change behavior at home. Social justice advocates spoke out.”

Among the social justice advocates speaking out, Texas Appleseed published its School-to-Prison Pipeline report in October 2007. Appleseed, a left-leaning, social justice advocacy organization in Austin, draws a causal link between suspensions and incarceration in School-to-Prison Pipeline. According to the report, suspensions lead to dropping out and over 80 percent of Texas prison population are dropouts.

Madden disagrees with the causal link, but agrees that suspensions were significantly overused and that school districts had no business enforcing their codes of

conduct in Texas Juvenile Courts. A law Madden and Whitmire authored narrowed school districts' ability to secure convictions in Juvenile Courts to the policies aligned directly with state law.

In the 2005-2006 school year according to Appleseed's School-to-Prison Pipeline report, Hispanic students made up 45 percent of student body across Texas and 45 - 49 percent of exclusionary discipline referrals. In that same year, African-American students made up 15 percent of the student body but accounted for 24 - 36 percent of exclusionary discipline referrals. Exclusionary discipline referrals include in-school suspensions, off-campus suspensions and temporary student reassignments to Discipline Alternative Education Program campuses.

“Striking disparities between [DAEP referral rates and] suspension rates for students of color — particularly African-American and Hispanic boys — and white students,” still greatly concern the lead author of Texas Appleseed's 2007 School to Prison Pipeline report, Deborah Fowler. In January 2019, Fowler worked as Texas Appleseed's Executive Director.

The 2007 School-to-Prison Pipeline report specifically cites “African American students—and to a lesser extent Hispanic students—are significantly over-represented in schools' discretionary disciplinary decisions (suspensions and DAEP referrals) compared to their percentage in the overall student population.”

Fowler also asserts that students of color do not misbehave any more often than white students. An American Psychological Association nationwide study cited in her 2007 School to Prison Pipeline report supports this assertion, though the report acknowledges that at that time no long-term study in Texas had confirmed it. Additionally, Fowler could not say whether or not students of South Asian and East Asian

origin were included in the statistic that students of color misbehave at the same rate as white students.

The Appleseed 2007 School-to-Prison Pipeline report studied school discipline based on Texas Education Agency internal reporting. At the time, Texas Education Agency did not track students of South Asian and East Asian origin or descent as a separate category.

Fowler attributes the disparate impact of suspension policies on African-American and Hispanic students to racism. Fowler also expressed concern that “with suspensions tracked and subject to Federal investigations,” school districts would turn to “ticketing, probation and juvenile justice on a wider basis to control student behavior.”

Madden disagrees with the racist assertion. Shapiro partially agrees, citing many reasons for Zero Tolerance and the overuse of suspensions including both administrator attitudes and student behaviors. “In the years following [the] Columbine [school shootings], principals and superintendents had a range of discretionary discipline choices, but they consistently gave the harshest consequences and the longest suspensions because they didn’t want to appear ‘soft on crime.’”

Other reasons for overuse of suspensions Shapiro cites include “lack of social and emotional skills on the part of students who solve problems with fists instead of words, undiagnosed and under-treated mental health issues among students, bias among teachers and administrators who may see African-American students as more dangerous,” and lack of constructive parental involvement.

On a national level, the debate came to a head in January 2014 and again in December 2018. In January 2014, the civil rights offices of the U.S. Department of Education and the Justice Department issued a “Dear Colleagues” letter” (DCL)



regarding exclusionary discipline to all school districts around the country. According to Politico, “The 2014 Obama directive sought to combat a systemic problem: that low-income students, minority students ... are disciplined, suspended out of school or expelled more often than their white, more affluent peers.”

The DCL also included the disparate impact standard for Federal investigations — even if rules on their face are simply about behavior, if certain racial or ethnic groups receive more impact than others, then those affected have grounds for a Federal complaint.

By the time of the 2014 DCL, positive behavior interventions and supports, together with social and emotional learning and tiered system of behavioral supports had been in place in Texas for several years. Restorative discipline would come after, but Texans had already identified that zero tolerance wasn't working any longer. “The pendulum had swung to overly strong discipline policies [by the 2007 legislative session],” said Madden. “We had to swing it back. We had to be smart on school discipline, results oriented and solutions oriented.”

In December 2018, current Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, together with the Justice Department revoked the Jan 2014 DCL on discipline. All Federal civil rights statutes in the United States Code remain in place and discrimination based on race is still illegal. However, revoking the 2014 DCL removes the disparate impact standard for Federal complaints against school districts over discipline policies.

Many on the left view the 2014 Federal DCL as the necessary policy instrument standing between minority students and racist school districts who want to push them out without an education. According to Daniel Losen, director of the Center for Civil Rights

Remedies at UCLA's Civil Rights Project, in July 2018, "a repeal of Obama's guidelines could ... be a harbinger of worse things to come."

In Texas, the truth differs from Losen's assertion. Texans, both conservatives and progressives, had already identified overuse of suspensions and exclusionary discipline as a problem. Texans of all political leanings also began developing supportive discipline models as solutions years before the 2014 Federal DCL (as will be shown below).

One of the primary arguments supporting the 2014 DCL was that suspensions led children into the justice system, not the behavior that prompted the suspensions. The 2014 DCL also encouraged a variety of supportive discipline models over zero tolerance.

Texas Appleseed had explained the pipeline concept very well in the 2007 School to Prison Pipeline report — "...the precursor for many young people's involvement in the juvenile justice system is disciplinary referrals in school—referrals to in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), and to Disciplinary Alternative Education Centers (DAEPs)... The last segment of the "pipeline" is adult prison." Appleseed's School to Prison Pipeline report argues that suspending minority students leads them to drop out of school and eventually on to adult prison.

Even the conservative leaning Texas Public Policy Foundation published a paper on curbing Zero Tolerance in 2012. The paper called for a tiered discipline model to replace Zero Tolerance for most offenses.

Tiered discipline would require at least two prior interventions before a suspension or Disciplinary Alternative Education Program referral. The first tier would be a warning or detention depending on the severity of the offense. The second tier would be a parent and student attended Conflict Diversion Program. Both tiers would

need to be attempted by teachers and administrators before a suspension or Disciplinary Alternative Education referral.

“At the time [around 2011 -12], the more libertarian-ish wing of the Republican party” Joel Simmons cites the Cato Institute “were turning up research that rehabilitation and reintegration into society was a whole lot more effective than highly punitive sentencing (effective being defined as reducing crime overall and, more importantly, reducing recidivism).” Simmons, UT-Austin law school alum who has worked for the Texas Senate, coauthored the Texas Public Policy Foundation 2012 paper “Expelling Zero Tolerance.”

Simmons says the Texas Public Policy Foundation encouraged similar principles in reforming school discipline: Teach students how to behave properly rather than simply punishing undesirable behaviors.

Fowler acknowledges the wide variety of supportive discipline reforms undertaken across Texas — beginning directly after her first report — that have significantly reduced overall suspensions. “These evidence-based alternatives focused on improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all students.”

During the 2006-07 school year, Texas Education Agency spending reports show less than one percent, 0.71 percent in fact, of a \$26.8 billion operating budget spent on DAEP schools. After a decade of reforms, during the 2017-18 school year, DAEP schools still consumed less than one percent of a \$39.1 billion operating budget, but a relatively significant smaller percentage, 0.64 percent.

To say that the DAEP cost to taxpayers was the only reason Conservatives supported school discipline reform and the human cost had nothing to do with it would

not be accurate., “Funding was not the primary issue,” according to Madden. “Doing right by students, school districts, and parents” were the primary concerns.

Neither Madden nor Simmons recalls anyone arguing against the supportive and restorative discipline reforms undertaken by school districts across Texas.

Fowler also expresses concern that even with across the board reductions in suspensions across all racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, African-American and Hispanic boys are still suspended at a higher rate than white students.

While African-American students are still overrepresented in the percentage of exclusionary discipline referrals, such referrals have fallen significantly across the state for all student demographics. In other words, teachers and principals across the state are referring far fewer students to in-school suspension, off-campus suspensions and DAEP schools, but of this much smaller portion of exclusionary referrals, African-American students are still over-represented.

For example, in Hays county, in the 2006-07 school year, Villejo’s DAEP campus saw nearly two percent of all high school students. By 2017-18, after ten years of reforms, the percentage of all high school students passing through Villejo’s school dropped to just over one percent. In 2017-18 school year, Hispanic high school students made up about 50 percent of statewide student body and about 50 percent of exclusionary discipline referrals. That same year, African-American high school students made up 13 percent of statewide student body, but accounted for 23 - 32 percent of exclusionary discipline referrals.

Across the country the results of the 2014 DCL have been mixed. Even in progressive states like Minnesota and California teachers and school districts experience problems after removing suspensions as a disciplinary tool.

As reported in Education Week in December 2017, testimony at hearings on whether to continue or revoke the 2014 DCL included statements by Minnesota teachers and statements about Los Angeles Unified School district.

Minnesota teachers stated at the hearings that misbehaving students felt “emboldened to act out” following district moves to reduce suspensions of African-American students.

Max Eden, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a noted critic of the 2014 Federal guidelines, pointed out that districts setting out to overly limit the use of suspensions without parallel implementation of alternative discipline models allowed chaotic environments to develop in schools. Eden cited 2015 complaints by Los Angeles Unified School District teachers that suspension policies changed districtwide, before two-thirds of schools had trained in restorative practices.

Most Texas school districts have navigated revisions in discipline models without losing control of classrooms.

Fowler asserts the 2014 DCL “did not draw a response in Texas,” acknowledging that statewide, school districts had “already implemented supportive discipline initiatives.”

In Texas as early as the 2007 Legislative session, both conservatives and progressives identified excessive use of exclusionary discipline as problematic. Progressives, like Fowler seemed primarily concerned that African-American students were suspended more than white counterparts, seeing little need to look for deeper solutions than just not suspending African-American students. As cited above in Minnesota, this kind of race based approach led to a loss of control in classrooms.

In Texas, the realization was that across the board, for all socio-economic groups and across the state districts overused exclusionary discipline. Districts in Texas have implemented restorative and supportive discipline practices and character education for all students resulting widespread reductions in suspensions and improvement in student behavior.

Furthermore, senior staffers in both the House and Senate education committees in the Texas Legislature confirm that no bills to diminish or dilute the effects of the 2014 DCL passed in 2015 or 2017 Legislative Sessions both of which were dominated by Republicans. Nor have any such bills been filed for debate before the start of the 2019 Legislative session.

The debate among conservatives and progressives over high school discipline started over a decade ago. In Texas, conservatives and progressives agree that Texas school districts suspended far too many students, overused DAEP schools to deal with students who should have been retrained by vice-principals, and put young people into the Juvenile Justice system over violations of local school board policies. They disagreed over the extent to which racism was the cause of these overly harsh consequences. But they came together as Texans to transform discipline in Texas schools — moving from the Zero Tolerance policies of the post-Columbine era to the supportive discipline models used across the state today.

Texas school districts and education service centers developed and adopted a variety of supportive discipline initiatives to improve student behavior, reduce the use exclusionary discipline and improve student achievement. These initiatives include mental health providers in schools, social and emotional learning, tiered behavioral supports, positive behavior interventions and supports and restorative discipline. Albert

Felts, who joined Region 13 Education Support Center in 2000 to develop Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, agrees with Shapiro and Villarreal on the need to integrate and layer these tools together. Region 13 is one of 20 Education Service Centers authorized by the Texas Legislature in 1965. Felts and Shapiro echo each other, “No single system will take care of all the behavioral issues students exhibit in schools.

“Texas school suspension data is available as a public information request,” says Villarreal. “As Administrators, as a District, we couldn’t target minorities without being exposed. If we were doing that, it would be known and we would all lose our jobs.”

Currently in Texas “the State Education Code gives only one mandatory suspension offense — possession of firearm.” says DeEtta Culbertson, spokesperson for the Texas Education Agency, “The rest are discretionary — handled district by district.”

“In Texas,” as Madden said, “we looked for better, smarter solutions for all students, for all parents and for all districts.”

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While many Texas districts and schools navigated the transformation of discipline models without losing control, Crockett high school in Austin teetered on the balance in 2010.

“We had three students die in various incidents at the beginning of the 2010 school year,” Shapiro says of Crockett High School, where he worked as principal at the time. Crockett is a what Texas calls a 6A school, with about 2000 students and Austin is an urban school district. By 2014, Shapiro’s sixth year as principal at Crockett,

graduation rates had improved by 14 percent, attendance improved from 87 percent to 93 percent, and the school had made state accountability standards each year since 2008.

Late summer of 2010, Shapiro began his third year as principal of Crockett high school in Austin ISD. Shapiro and his family had moved from Bronx, New York, where he had previously taught English as a second language, worked as an assistant principal and a principal, to Austin in summer of 2008.

Crockett High had been a school in crisis when Shapiro took over as Principal in July 2008. It had missed state accountability standards. Students struggled with state exams in math and English. Shapiro says that 5 percent to 10 percent of his students had undiagnosed and/or underrated mental health issuers including bi-polar, PTSD and other conditions, “Tier One, I call them.”

The crisis came to a head the last week of September when students died. One current student died crossing railroad tracks near the school. A recent Crockett graduate shot others, then himself at UT-Austin.

“That week I went to the Superintendent and got grant money to bring mental health professionals into Crockett,” says Shapiro. It started with grief counseling and they stayed to help Tier One students.

Before that, Shapiro and his administrators devoted a great deal of effort to stopping fights and other disruptive behavior driven by Tier One students. After that, professionals provided daily assistance the Tier One students and the administrators could work with the 20 percent of students dealing with bereavement, anxiety and the kind of issues that a weekly touch can manage — Tier Two.

Before the last week of Sept 2010, principals at Crockett handed out suspensions to remove students in crisis and prevent them from disrupting the school. But without the



mental health professionals, the students in crisis did not improve during suspensions. “In fact they may have gotten worse, during a suspension,” says Shapiro, “because of dysfunctional homelife, or other outside pressures.”

After mental health professionals began working with the students needing daily assistance, the entire mood of the school lightened. “It was like everyone stopped holding their breath,” recalls Shapiro. Then, “teachers and principals could effectively engage with Social Emotional Learning to teach Tier Two students how to manage their feelings and act appropriately in school. They could also bring positive reinforcement to bear effectively. They could return to teaching effectively in the classrooms and raise student achievement.”

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The Texas Education Code has one mandatory suspension offense: student possession of firearm on campus. Rural school districts, such as Hamilton ISD, have a unique perspective on firearms.

Hamilton superintendent Clay Tarpley holds a master’s degree in education from Texas Tech and served as a rural high school principal in another district before Hamilton hired him as superintendent. Hamilton’s school buildings including gyms, performing arts, district offices, and classrooms from kindergarten through high school fit in a few blocks on one street. Tarpley’s entire school system student body is comparable in size to a single high school in Austin.

After a hunting season weekend, when he as a high school principal, Tarpley found rifles and shotguns in the rifle racks of some students’ trucks.

The administrators of the school and the district knew all of these students and their families personally. One of them was the son of the County Sheriff. “We knew these students were not of a mindset to engage in an incident like Columbine, or the more recent one in Santa Fe, Texas,” says Tarpley.

“We knew they were all stable students who would achieve in school and in life. But we also knew the state code was clear. People make all the decisions regarding discipline in our schools, not district codes of conduct, or policies. We knew these students didn’t pose a threat, nevertheless we had to make an example and send a message.

“I moved those boys to in school suspension on a stage in the cafeteria for a week. The message was multi-layered: First, we won’t have knee-jerk prosecution where everyone knows there was no criminal intent. Second, just because one of the students was the son of the Sheriff, doesn’t mean this gets swept under the rug.

“Now, in a school where administrators don’t know all the students personally, if one of those unknown students, or a student who is known to have aggressive tendencies, brings a firearm to school, then they need to act to secure their campus by whatever means. But every district should be able to take the actions best for the student, the offense and the whole situation.”

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Referring to the layered approach, Felts begins with positive behavior intervention and supports. “We have to teach what we want and reinforce what we want, not just give consequences for what we don’t,” says Felts. He works as Senior

Coordinator for Student Support Services at Region 13 Education Service Center in Austin..

Prior to joining Region 13 in 2000, Felts worked with behaviorally challenged children and adults with severe cognitive and/or mental health deficits in both acute hospital and residential settings. He has an extensive background in mental health, and leadership development.

Felts explains that many districts within Region 13 implement a token economy within the school where teachers who catch students “doing the right thing” hand out a reward writ that provides credit at the school store to buy supplies and school spirit items. Positive reinforcement takes the form of individual conversations and district-wide programs.

“Sometimes when we see a student doing something good, even as small as picking up papers off the floor in the hallway or outside the buildings, we tell them they’re doing the right thing and thank them,” says Ross in Hays.

Tonya Kallfelz agrees, “That may be the only reinforcement they get for doing the right thing.” Kallfelz works as lead assistant principal at Hays High School in Hays CISD.

In Harlingen, Villarreal also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and encouraging good behavior. “In school announcements, we have a daily character challenge and a regular recognitions of students doing the right thing.”

Ross tells of reinforcing good behavior in a student asking for a cooling off period, “Recently, when I saw a student in the hallway looking anxious, one that I used let sit in my office while I did paperwork and he could talk if he wanted to,” says Ross.

The student walked up to Ross, “Miss, can I have the the stress ball.”

Ross told him, “This is progress! I used to pull you aside for a cooling off period, now you’ve recognized your own need and asked me for a stress ball. Good for you.”

Districts have school-wide reinforcement of good behavior as well, according to Jesus Gomez. Gomez works as a District administrator in Hays ISD. Like Villarreal in Harlingen, discipline lies within Gomez’s portfolio of responsibilities. “In Hays ISD, high schools have at least one 45-minute period each week set aside for assemblies, enrichment, extracurriculars and additional instruction.” Students behaving well and performing well academically get rewarded with enrichment and extracurriculars.

At the Hays Impact Center, Villejo says, “We give the students outside play on Fridays as a reward for good behavior,” says Villejo. Her campus isn’t really resourced for a physical education program. “My students really look forward to some outside play time.”

Kallfelz summarizes, “Sometimes we have several extracurricular periods in a single week, when students are performing and behaving really well.”

Another supportive method employed in many districts is to set norms at the beginning of school and show what right looks like.

“A mismatch of behavior expectations and understanding of rules and norms by faculty and students isn’t helpful,” says Felts. High schools in many districts avoid a mismatch with teachers and students developing classroom norms together during the first few days of school.

“Soliciting input works at all levels says” Felts continues. “When someone sees their ideas reflected in a product, they feel ownership and commitment.”

During the first days of school each year, many high school teachers employ Socratic method to guide students to a few basic norms. Norms include paying attention to the person who is speaking, putting phones up at the front of the room when the phones aren't being used for instruction, raising hands to answer questions or speak. Feeling ownership, the students agree to the norms.

The teachers in Harlingen model for the students. Teachers will put phones up along with the students, if phones aren't being used for instruction. Teachers will also model giving full attention to students when called upon to speak.

Likewise, in Hays ISD the first assemblies of the fall during each school year begin with explaining the behavior expectations for assemblies, "During the first couple of high school assemblies, principals are there to say, "come in quickly, move to the center of rows quietly and find your seats."

In Harlingen, principal Imelda Munivez says, "during the first assembly, the entering class takes cues from the seniors, as well." Munivez says she and her faculty have worked with the seniors developing character and desired behaviors during their prior years at Harlingen High.

In Hays, Ross elaborates on teaching behaviors. She says administrators and teachers have to train students in behaviors as basic as lunch room procedures. "We announce a few times during lunch, 'Find your seats quickly, eat your food, and throw away your own trash.' Not every student knows not to leave a mess on the cafeteria table."

After setting expectations and norms, when students do break the rules, many districts and campuses follow restorative practices.

In Harlingen, Villarreal explains: “When a student insults another student or throws a paper ball, the teacher can take the one student outside the classroom for a minute.

“The teacher gives the student an opportunity to explain what he/she did wrong. Or if the student really doesn’t know, the teacher explains it. We bring the other student outside as well, and let them talk it out, let the student apologize — sometimes it’s both students apologizing to each other.

“Then we take the students back into the classroom, to speak briefly about the classroom disruption, their part in it and what they’ll do differently in the future.”

The restorative component comes from allowing the students talk it out and restore their relationships with each other and with their classmates, according to Villarreal.

Practicing the restorative component extends all the way to the DAEP campus in Harlingen. “Each time a student joins my campus, I have him or her write about the behavior that brought them, who was harmed, how they can make things right, and constructive ways they can act next time,” DAEP principal Daniel Araiza says. Araiza taught math and computers in Harlingen from 1986 to 1997 and worked as principal at elementary and middle grade levels, culminating in his present position as principal of the secondary DAEP campus.

Rather than simply looking for ways to punish, administrators look for ways to help.

In Hays, Ross says, “When we dig into attendance and find students who periodically arrive late or consistently cut last class period, we ask what’s going on,” Ross says.

“Sometimes we find students who cut the last class to care for younger siblings.” Kallfelz agrees.

“Other times,” Ross continues, “we find students show up late because they drive a sick family member to the doctor’s office for treatment. In many of those cases, we can refer the family to county agencies to find a supportive solution for the student and the family.”

“When we have students who are consistently tardy to class, we ask them if they would go into work late,” says Kallfelz. “We try to get the students to think about regulating their own behavior for what they’re going to do in the real world, after the controlled environment of high school.”

Regarding pushing students into the juvenile justice system and letting school resource officers or parole officers deal with problems that would have been suspensions before, school administrators around Texas agree, “Absolutely not.”

“We don’t put a student into juvenile justice until we have gone through several rounds of restorative training, in and out of school suspensions and referrals out to Sylvia at the Impact Center,” explains Ross with Kallfelz nodding in agreement.

On rare occasions Hallfelz says, “We have a parent who is done with the child, too, who will say to us, “Call the probation officer.””

“Other times,” Ross explains, “we will find out in the course of meetings with the corrected student, the student’s parent(s) and teachers, that the student has a probation officer. In cases like that, we will reach out to the probation officer to be a part of a larger solution. But we are not pushing students in the justice system to solve our problems, without exhausting everything we can do ourselves.”

Texas school districts currently implement various combinations of supportive discipline approaches including Mental Health in Schools, Positive Behavior Reinforcement Initiatives, Restorative Discipline, Tiered Behavioral Supports, setting norms and teaching what right looks like and other supportive discipline models. Across Texas these models give teachers and Administrators the tools they need to improve student conduct and build healthy relationships between students and faculty. These supportive discipline models began to be implemented years before the 2014 DCL and have track records approaching a decade. Administrators and teachers find the new discipline models work to improve student behavior and keep them in the classrooms where they can learn.

Texans identified the problem of overusing exclusionary discipline and began to develop and implement the new models years before the Federal DCL. The new methods have taken hold quite apart from the those Federal efforts and have evidence to show the models reduce suspensions, and improve comportment across all socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups. Removing the threat of a Federal disparate impact investigation will not lead most Texas school districts to return to the ways of the zero tolerance post-Columbine years.

The newest initiative is mental health in schools. As Dr Shapiro observed, without mental health providers in schools, larger urban and even suburban campuses may well find the administrators overwhelmed dealing with undiagnosed and under treated mental health conditions. In such an environment, the rest of the initiatives cannot even take hold.

From the border to big cities and from rural areas to suburbs, Texas school administrators agree on supportive discipline. A layered and integrated approach tailored



to the needs of the student body and abilities of the faculty leads to improved student comportment and achievement. No single method alone will address all needs on all campuses exclusive of the others.

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