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EXAMINING EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES: UTILIZING  
RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION FOR BEHAVIOR AS  
AN INNOVATION FOR CHANGE IN ATTENDANCE AND SUSPENSION  
RATES WITHIN THREE RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN  
TENNESSEE

by

Lauren Tate

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Leadership and Policy Studies

The University of Memphis

May 2019

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## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to take a moment to sing praises to my God for the blessing He has given me in being able to receive a doctorate degree in education. May I use this blessing to expand my mission to serve Him through serving others.

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## Abstract

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Exclusionary Discipline: Program on the Discipline and Attendance Rates of Three Rural Tennessee Elementary Schools. Major Professor: Mary K. Boudreaux, Ed.D.

Widespread school discipline problems came to forefront in the educational arena in the 1990s (Öğülmüş & Vuran, 2016). Exclusionary practices (e.g., in- or out-of-school suspension, strict rules, or punishment [Skiba & Peterson, 2000]), also known as traditional school discipline practices (TSDP) (Scheuermann & Hall, 2011) have become common behavioral practices across the American public education landscape (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These practices remove students from instruction, often resulting in detrimental impacts to student performance (Edward & Brea, 2016), and have neither positive effects on student behavior (Ogulmus & Vuran, 2016) nor positive longevity effects (Costenbader & Markson, 1998).

In support of federal legislation aimed at retention of students in the school environment (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011), Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) (used interchangeably with School Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support [SWPBIS]), focuses on improving the school climate. The PBIS-tiered behavior system in Tennessee, Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B), was created to increase prosocial behaviors and decrease problem behaviors. Although PBIS has been well studied throughout the literature, there has been a paucity of formal research conducted on this tiered behavior system.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program created statistically significant differences in attendance and suspension rates of students by grade and race at three rural Tennessee elementary schools, using archived student

data from a small rural school district in western Tennessee. A paired samples  $t$  test was conducted to compare suspension rates before and after program implementation, and another paired samples  $t$  test was used to analyze school-wide attendance patterns before and after program implementation. Bivariate analysis was used to examine post-intervention suspension differences by race. The relationships between pre- and post-intervention attendance data by year, pre- and post-suspension data by grade across years, and post-intervention differences in race were also analyzed.

*Keywords:* suspension rates, attendance, discipline, race, RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, PBIS

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Study

Skiba and Peterson (2000) acclaim: “The shocking and tragic violence that has played out in our nation’s schools in the last 2 years has elevated the status of school discipline from an issue of perennial concern to one of national urgency” (p. 335). Education stakeholders have transcribed behavioral issues since the one-room classroom (Morris & Howard, 2003). Oftentimes, schools have resorted to punishment-based discipline practices, including verbal reprimands, revocation of privileges, office discipline referrals, both in school and out of school suspensions, and expulsions (Association for Positive Behavior Support, 2014), to address these issues. However, when students are removed from their classrooms, they are not engaged in the same prime learning opportunities as their peers (Mahoney, 2015). Losen and Gillespie (2012) state:

Well over three million children, K-12, are estimated to have lost instructional “seat time” in 2009-2010 because they were suspended from school, often with no guarantee of adult supervision outside the school. That’s about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, combined. (p. 1)

A report by the Children’s Defense Fund (1975) detailed that African American students were suspended at a rate double that of any other subgroup. Raffaele Mendez and Knoff (2003) confirm that African American students continue to be expelled or suspended twice as many times as their white counterparts. Research over the last 44 years has reinforced these statistics that substantiate racial disparities in exclusionary

discipline procedures (Utley, Kozleski, Smith, & Draper, 2002). Other researchers note that since the 1970s, the gap in out-of-school suspensions between Black and White students in America has almost quadrupled (Bottiani, 2018). This epidemic is worse for those in urban schools where Black students are 3 to 22 times more likely to be expelled or suspended from school (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). In fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2010) indicated that at least once per school year, approximately 28.3% of Black males were suspended compared to their White counterparts at approximately 10% per year.

The first study to relate racial inequities in discipline with achievement gaps and academics is *The Punishment Gap: School Suspension and Racial Disparities in Achievement* (Edward & Brea, 2016). This analysis—the first of its kind—reveals that school suspensions account for approximately 1/5 of Black and White differences in school performance. These findings (Edward & Brea, 2016) also suggested that exclusionary school punishment deters academic growth and contributes to racial disproportions in student achievement.

Aimed at improving student success and decreasing student disciplinary office referrals and out-of-school suspension (Houchens, Zhang, Davis, Niu, Chon, & Miller, 2017), schools across the nation have begun to implement Positive Behavior Support (PBS) within schools called the school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS). As a systems-level framework, PBIS as a school wide approach is aimed at reducing exclusionary discipline practices (Sugai & Horner, 2009). According to Hanover Research (2013), “PBIS is not designed specifically to mitigate the racial disparity in school discipline and, indeed, does not address race overtly. Instead, PBIS is

designed to create equitable discipline practices based on a system of positive reinforcement” (p. 7). To this point, PBIS is focused on building and maintaining a positive school climate that decreases problem behaviors and increases desired behaviors (Ogulmus & Vuran, 2016; Sugai, Horner, Dunlap, Hieneman, Lewis..., Ruef, 2000).

The most recent research (PBIS, 2018) indicates that approximately 26,000 schools in 49 states have implemented PBIS. Gagnon, Barber, and Soy Turk (2018) indicate that several studies “have documented the significant negative relations between fidelity of PBIS implementation and students’ disciplinary outcomes (ODRs, suspensions), suggesting that adequate implementation of critical features is strongly related to improvement in student outcomes” (p. 4) (see Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2016; Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Freeman et al., 2016). Houchens et al. (2017) provide evidence that the use of PBIS has reduced out-of-school suspension rates (see Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Fienberg, 2005; Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, Myatt, & Bullara, 1993; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Sadler & Sugai, 2009; Scott & Barrett, 2004; Turnbull, Edmonson, Griggs, Wickman, Sailor, Freeman,... Warren, 2002). Fidelity occurs when a program or initiative is implemented exactly as it was recommended for use by researchers and/or developers (Harn, Paris, & Stoolmiller, 2013)

### **Background of the Study**

Throughout the years, discipline in educational institutions has been focused on responding to individual student behavior by using punishment-based practices, including verbal reprimands, revocation of privileges, office discipline referrals, both in-school and

out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions (Association for Positive Behavior Support, 2014). However, the use of punishment, when used inconsistently and without any positive reinforcement, is unsuccessful and can even lead to greater incidences of problem behaviors (Association for Positive Behavior Support, 2014).

When examining historical underpinnings, educational scholars contend that it was during the 1980s and 1990s that student discipline in schools became progressively punitive (Justice, 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCEA) (1998) reported in the late 1990s that roughly 90% of schools in America, at that time, had some form of a zero-tolerance policy in place to manage student misbehavior. Zero-tolerance policies outline that school officials must abide by harsh punitive punishments, such as suspensions or expulsions, for offenses like physical altercations, weapons, alcohol, threats, insubordination, and/or drugs (Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine, 2010). Unfortunately, these students were removed from their classroom learning environments, leading to lower rates of academic achievement (Gottfried, 2010).

In addition to overall high suspension and expulsion counts in the United States, various reports (Bottiani, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018) have also provided evidence of race-related discipline inequities. Jacobson, Pace, and Ramirez (2019) indicate that students of color at the elementary level are disproportionately suspended and expelled. The same study also examined how these exclusionary discipline practices, primarily towards Black children, are primarily a result of the school environment and not an increased affinity for these students to misbehave.

Student attendance has become a major national concern. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) (2016) published a document indicating that over 7 million students

nationwide were considered chronically absent in the 2015–2016 school year. Just one year prior to this, in 2014–2015, the U.S. DOE (2018) reported that 2.7 million students were suspended from school. Based on evidence provided by the U.S. DOE, suspension, an exclusionary discipline practice, is contributing to the percentage of chronically absent students. Studies show that chronic absenteeism can prevent students from reaching early milestones in learning, influence school dropouts, and hinder positive adult life outcomes (US DOE, 2016).

Roby (2004) found moderate to strong statistical significance between student attendance and achievement test scores in Ohio, concluding that attendance is crucial to student learning. Roby suggested that school districts with low attendance rates find ways to improve these statistics due to the large academic achievement impact that was evident in the study findings.

In Philadelphia, Gottfried (2010) sought to find if there was a positive relationship between high attendance and higher student achievement scores in elementary and middle school students. According to Gottfried, student attendance is a “robust” indicator of student achievement that impacts reading skills, math skills, and overall student grade point average (GPA). Further, it was concluded that attendance is important both early and throughout a child’s schooling (Gottfried, 2010).

To address the well documented issues surrounding the effects of punitive discipline practices on student learning, many school systems are employing different types of preventative and restorative methods. Recently, the term “restorative justice” has become a buzzword in education. Many school systems purport positive impacts on student attendance and school climate using this method (Fronius, Persson, Guckenbun-

Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016). Schools using restorative justice methods, as described McCluskey et al. (2008), encourage positive relationships, positive school climate, conflict resolution, and incident prevention. Armour (2013) states that restorative justice has been associated with reduction in exclusionary discipline and increases in student achievement.

School districts are also using PBIS to assist with discipline. This refers to a tiered model of behavior prevention that emphasizes the systematic training of students in expected behavior and then rewards students for exhibiting positive behaviors that were taught (Spencer, 2015). Horner et al. (2009) found that elementary schools that had implemented PBIS showed statistically significant differences in the safety of their learning environments as compared to schools not using the program. The study also showed evidence that schools using PBIS had higher achievement scores in third-grade reading and lower levels of behavior incidences (Horner et al., 2009).

There are many acronyms in education and many proactive initiatives/approaches to address academic problems and provide safe, supportive environments for America's diverse student populations. One renowned approach, called Response to Intervention (RtI), is the practice of offering high-grade instruction and interventions that is aligned to student need, all while keeping track of progress and data in order to make sound decisions (Batsche, Elliott, Graden..., 2005). With a focus on special education students' outcomes (Prasse, n.d.), RtI began as a three-tiered problem-solving system aimed at providing early interventions to individual students in general education in need of academic support. The goal is to prevent students from "being misidentified as having learning disabilities because their instructional needs simply weren't being met" (Aldrich,



2018, para. 4). Based on this national RtI model, states adopted their own models of RtI, called RTI<sup>2</sup>, which involves effective instruction and high expectations for all students through a collaborative effort between both general education and special population professionals (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Some states, districts, and schools have opted to enact their own versions of preventative and/or restorative discipline (Steinburg & Lacoë, 2017). Tennessee is one of these states. According to Cohen (2016), 23 of the 100 largest school districts in America have recently established policies that limit exclusionary discipline practices and encourage other nonpunitive methods. States such as Tennessee, in an innovative process, have created a proactive hybrid positive behavior program called Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) that aims to improve student behaviors through multitiered interventions that support socially and culturally diverse student populations (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Sugai et al., 2000). Utley et al. (2002) encourage that models based on PBS, such as PBIS (SWPBIS) and RTI<sup>2</sup>, include multicultural perspectives that are "...integrated in multicultural educational principles and approaches" (p. 201). As an integrative approach, RTI<sup>2</sup>-B is a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) that is three-tiered to focus on students' behavioral and social needs across the school system (Tier 1), with options of both small group (Tier 2) and individualized instruction and interventions (Tier 3) (Vanderbilt University, 2019).

In light of the high suspension and expulsion rates in American schools, there is a need to understand the impact of programs like RTI<sup>2</sup>-B on the attendance and suspension rates in rural elementary schools in the United States. To date, there are no studies that provide information regarding changes to attendance or suspension rates based on the

RTI<sup>2</sup>B model. However, such research has the potential to contribute to the literature on punitive disciplinary practices, utilizing a newly implemented, prosocial PBIS model aimed at improving the school culture and climate. While RTI<sup>2</sup>-B is not directly focused on reducing or alleviating racial disparities within schools, there are implications that the use of such system-wide PBIS models, along with a sound equity-based framework, reduces the disciplinary gaps between Black and White students.

### **Demographics of the Study School District**

The school district in this study is located in rural western Tennessee and includes 9 different schools with 3,488 students (TN DOE, 2019). There are 283 classroom teachers in the district and 25 administrators. According to the school's report for the 2017–2018 school year (TN DOE, 2019), the school system is 52.9% Black, 44.3% White, and 1.7% Hispanic/Latin American.

The *success rate* refers to the percent of students scoring at an on-track or mastery level according to yearly state achievement testing. According to statewide achievement testing, the school district has success rates that are well below the state's average (24.9% vs. 39.1%, respectively) (TN DOE, 2019). District-wide Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVASS) growth scores are also below average. On a TVASS growth scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the worst), the district has an overall growth score indicator of 1, a score of 1 English/Language Arts, a score of 1 in mathematics, a score of 2 in science, and a score of 1 in social studies (TN DOE, 2019).

Other district success indicators include district percentage rates of in-school suspension (18.5% vs. a 6.7% state average), out-of-school suspension (9.2% vs. a 5.4% state average), and expulsion (0.1% vs. a 0.2% state average). When compared to

statewide numbers, this district has exclusionary discipline rates above the norm. In-school suspension numbers for the district are further disaggregated by race, as rates provided were 24.5% for Black students, 12.3% for Hispanic/Latin American students, 12.3% for White students, and 3.1% for Asian students (TN DOE, 2019).

Three elementary schools from the district were selected using convenience sampling due to their participation in the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program. School A has an enrollment of 707 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 5, has 58 classroom teachers, and has 2 school administrators (TN DOE, 2019). The student body is 74% Black, 1.4% Hispanic/Latin American, 0.6% Asian, and 23.9% White. The success rate, as previously defined, for this school is 18.6% overall as compared to a district success rate of 24.9% and a state success rate of 39.1%. Additionally, School A growth scores are 1 in the overall category, 5 in English/Language Arts, 1 in mathematics, 1 in science, and 2 in social studies. According to the “chronically out-of-school” indicator on the school’s report card, 7.7% of students received in-school suspension and 1% received out-of-school suspension (TN DOE, 2019)

School B serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through 6 and has an enrollment of 134 students (TN DOE, 2019). There are 13 classroom teachers, and there is 1 school administrator. The student body is 93.3% Black, 6% White, and 0.7% Hispanic/Latin American. The overall success rate for School B is 22%, which is below the district and state success rates. In contrast, several of School B’s growth scores are above the district-wide average: 3 in the overall category, 3 in English/Language Arts, 2 in mathematics, 4 in science, and 2 in social studies. Additionally, discipline statistics for

this school include an in-school suspension rate of 9.9% and an out-of-school rate of 11.2% (TN DOE, 2019).

The third school, School C, has an enrollment of 223 students, has 21 teachers, and has 2 administrators (TN DOE, 2019). The student body is 81.2% Black, 18.4% White, and 0.4% Hispanic/Latin American. The success rate for School C is 13.6%, making it the lowest scoring school in this study and well below the state and district scores. Growth scores were 2 in the overall category, 3 in English/Language Arts, 3 in mathematics, 1 in science, and 1 in social studies (TN DOE, 2019). The “chronically out-of-school” indicators were not publicly available at the time of the study.

### **Problem Statement**

Although statistics across decades of education prove that America’s punitive disciplinary practices are harming student learning and livelihood, many school districts continue to use these methods as their primary form of behavior control (Mahoney, 2015). The U.S. DOE (2018) reported that 2.7 million students were suspended from school during the academic year 2014–2015. Additionally, data has shown that students of color are impacted most by these exclusionary discipline practices even though researchers (Young, Young, & Butler, 2018) have found that these students are not more likely to display disruptive behaviors.

Black students particularly are disproportionately impacted. In Tennessee, data from the 2015–2016 school year shows that Black students are 24% of the state’s student population, yet they are over 60% of those suspended or expelled (State Collaborative on Reforming Education [SCORE], 2017, p. 24). Of high school freshmen in the state, SCORE reported that Black students were suspended or expelled at a rate six times

higher than all other freshman. Additionally, SCORE (2017) noted that one of five freshman students experienced either a suspension or an expulsion. The TN DOE (2018) confirms that Black students were suspended at double the rate of their peers in any other subgroup in the school 2016–2017 school year. Bottiani, Bradshaw, Gregory, & Reschly (2018) described that the excessive exclusion of Black children stands as one of the most pertinent indicators of inequality in the opportunities for students in our educational system.

Educational leaders—from the national level to the local level—have begun to examine other options for student behavior management, such as preventative or restorative methods. According to The Florida Center for Inclusive Communities (2018), over 26,000 schools in America now use PBIS as their primary discipline program. Tennessee has initiated their own form of this program, called Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B). Funded by the DOE, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program has been recommended for implementation in Tennessee schools based on data supporting PBIS (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, 2017). Data examining positive approaches to behavior management, such as Tennessee’s RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, will help guide local school districts and policymakers in the implementation and continuation of such programs and methods. Therefore, the problem to be addressed in this study is the lack of research regarding preventative and restorative programs that may impact disproportionality rates in exclusionary school discipline practices.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To examine whether or not disciplinary changes have occurred in schools and if school districts try to rectify the barriers that marginalize specific ethnic and/or racial

populations, the purpose of this study was to determine the differences in suspension and attendance percentages among elementary-aged students in a rural school district in western Tennessee. The determination is based on the implementation (pre- and post-) of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program in three Tennessee elementary schools. The extent of the impact was established by analyzing five years of suspension and attendance rates—two before program implementation and three after program implementation.

Additionally, it was to be determined whether or not there is a post-intervention difference between White and Black students in rates of suspension and attendance by analyzing data from two school years, 2016–2017 and 2017–2018. Results of this study may be used to positively impact local, state, and national policy decisions regarding exclusionary discipline practices and the effects of implementation of positive and preventative programs, such as RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, with regards to marginalized populations.

### **Research Questions**

Considering the lack of research on the assessment of improvements in school discipline and attendance in elementary schools while using the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, the following research questions guided this study: (1) Is there a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, and if so, is this pattern similar across White and African-American students? and (2) Research Question 2: Is there a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program?

The following hypotheses were formulated to determine if there was statistically significant difference in the suspension percentages and attendance rates for students

after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program across White and African-American students.

H<sub>A</sub>1: There is a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>0</sub>1: There is no statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>A</sub>2: There is a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>0</sub>2: There is no statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Gorski and Swalwell (2015) argued for the use of the equity literacy framework. This framework, as they described, is “the cultivation of the skills and consciousness that enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to educational and other opportunities enjoyed by their peers” (Gorski, 2014, p. 1). Equity literacy builds upon the framework of multicultural education that began in the 1970s and is still being used today (Banks, 1993). Multicultural education aims to improve equity for all students by pushing teachers to consider diverse cultures throughout their teaching methods and examine their own personal belief systems regarding diversity (Gay, 2011).

Equity literacy, as developed by Gorski and Swalwell (2015), expands the underpinnings of multicultural education into a greater emphasis on the subtle ways that opportunity is unequally distributed across subgroups. Gorski (2017) explains:

By recognizing and deeply understanding these conditions, we are prepared to respond to inequity in transformational ways in the immediate term. We also strengthen our ability to foster longer-term change by redressing the bigger institutional and societal conditions that produce the everyday manifestations of inequity. (p. 1)

Furthermore, educators who value equity should emphasize not only cultural knowledge, but also knowledge of ways to promote and ensure fairness for all. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) encourage education stakeholders to use their knowledge and understanding of Literacy Equity as a proactive response to the abundant bias, blatant discrimination, and harsh inequities at work in our schools.

Literacy equity framework, outlined by a call to proactively respond to inequity, aligns with the response of local and state educational agencies developing behavioral programs that reduce or eliminate exclusionary discipline practices. Tennessee, specifically, has recommended the use of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program to prevent student misbehavior and thus reduce the need for suspension or expulsion (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project Memphis [TBSP], 2019). Further discussion of this theory is presented in Chapter 2.

### **Research Design**

The problem addressed in this study is the lack of research regarding preventative and restorative programs that may have a statistically significant impact on the disproportionality rates that are present in exclusionary discipline practices. In addition, the purpose of this research was to identify differences in suspension rates and attendance percentages from pre-implementation to post-implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program at



three Tennessee elementary schools. Data were collected from student enrollment by grade, suspension rates by grade, and school-wide attendance across years both before and after program implementation. Independent variables in the study include the expanse of school years, with the dependent variable being suspension rate and attendance percentages.

Data for this study were obtained via the Tennessee State Department of Education website and from the school district in the study. Before moving on to the main study analyses to address the primary research questions, a series of bivariate analyses determined (1) whether or not suspension rates are significantly different by grade and by race, and (2) whether or not attendance rates are significantly different by school year. Attendance rates separated by race were not available, so bivariate analysis was not possible. To examine whether or not rates differed by grade, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted as are appropriate when comparing values between more than two groups. A paired samples *t* test was conducted to compare suspension rates before and after program implementation, and another paired samples *t* test was used to analyze school-wide attendance patterns before and after program implementation.

### **Definition and Indicators of Key Terms**

The following terms and definitions will be used throughout the study:

*Attendance:* According to guidance issued by the TN DOE in 2018, all public school students from grades pre-kindergarten through 12 are required by law to be marked present or not present daily, beginning on the first day of school each year.

*Chronic absenteeism:* Chronic absenteeism, as defined by the U.S DOE (2016), occurs when a student misses 15 or more days in a single school year.

*Expulsion:* The U.S. DOE (2018), in the *Tennessee Compilation of School Discipline Laws and Regulations*, explains an expulsion as a student being removed from their regular education program where the violation took place or when a student is completely expelled from school attendance. Expulsions are typically no less than one calendar year.

*PBIS:* Positive behavior intervention and support is a tiered model for behavior prevention that emphasizes the systematic training of students in expected behavior followed by rewarding students for exhibiting positive behaviors that were taught (Spencer, 2015).

*RTI<sup>2</sup>-B:* Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior is a tiered system of preventative behavior management built from pro- PBIS research and used in Tennessee schools (TBSP, 2017).

*Suspension:* May occur as “in-school” or “out-of-school.” In-school suspensions take place when a student is removed from their regular education program, but still comes to school to be placed in a different setting. Out-of-school suspension is when a student is not allowed to attend school for a period not to exceed ten days (U.S. DOE, 2018).

*Tiered intervention:* Tiered intervention programs usually consist of three tiers. The first tier involves universal best practices and identification procedures; tiers two and three offer increasing levels of intervention and support using research-based best practices (Shapiro, 2019).

*Zero tolerance:* Policies outlining that school officials must abide by harsh punitive punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, for offenses like physical altercations, weapons, alcohol, threats, insubordination, and/or drugs (Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine, 2010).

*Exclusionary discipline:* Refers to a student being removed from the general education classroom setting for the purposes of discipline. Primary examples of this include in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion (Young, Young, & Butler, 2018).

*Restorative justice programs:* Programs aimed at encouraging inclusiveness, positive relationships, and conflict resolution (TN DOE, 2018).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* The over-diversion of students from secondary education into the justice system due to school disciplinary practices (Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine, 2010)

### **Significance of the Study**

In the 1990s, around 90% of the schools in America had incorporated zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that promote exclusionary discipline as the first and only response to certain misbehaviors (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). The use of zero-tolerance policies stemmed from the rise of firearm use in schools, but these policies were later extended to other violations of school rules (Hanover Research, 2013). The goal of zero tolerance is to set a rigid policy that would encourage students to abide by school rules rather than endure the harsh penalties associated with the rule (Hanover Research, 2013).

However, many educational institutions have discovered that these practices resulted in far too many students being excluded from the general education setting as a means of punishment, with the ripple effect of such measures negatively impacting attendance, drop-out rates, and academic success (Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine, 2010). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (as cited in Hanover Research, 2013) indicated that zero-tolerance policies have had several negative impacts on students, some of which include racial disproportionalities, special problems for students with disabilities, a national increase in suspension and expulsion rates, increased length of expulsion, and higher drop-out rates.

Zero-tolerance policies have created staggering exclusionary discipline statistics. For example, the U.S. DOE (2018) reported that 2.7 million students were suspended from school during the 2014–2015 academic year. Additionally, data has shown that students of color are most heavily impacted by these exclusionary discipline practices, being suspended at rates two to three times higher than their White peers (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Young, Young, & Butler, 2018).

In Tennessee, the statistics are no different. According to SCORE (2017), 63,000 students missed school in 2015 due to exclusionary discipline practices. Possibly one of the most troubling statistics cited in the report (SCORE, 2017) was that only 24% of Tennessee’s students are Black, but Black students were over 60% of those suspended during the 2015–2016 school year. Reports like this may be the reason that the TN DOE funded the creation of the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, in efforts to train local education agencies in the use of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B framework (TBSP, 2017). Tennessee’s

version of a PBIS model is RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, with PBIS being heavily supported through years of research (Gill, 2017).

Although the PBIS program has been studied in various settings and via various research methods, Tennessee's copycat program, RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, has not. Research on RTI<sup>2</sup>-B will help guide local and state policymakers' decisions regarding the implementation and continuation of this program as a means of behavior management. In addition to policymakers, educators and parents can also gain insight from this research as they are, oftentimes, the grassroots advocates for innovative school discipline measures.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is that disciplinary data could only be obtained from two years prior to the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program and three years after program implementation. Additionally, only three schools are included in this study due to the small number of schools implementing the program so far and an even smaller number of schools tracking discipline data for the years prior to RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. Additionally, different grade levels comprised the three schools: pre-kindergarten to Grade 4, pre-kindergarten to grade 6, and pre-kindergarten to grade 8.. Therefore, only the data up to grade 5 was used to allow a between-schools comparison. Finally, this study is limited because its findings are restricted to the participating schools within a school district in western Tennessee.

### **Organization of the Study**

This quantitative research study is organized into five different chapters, and each chapter contains information describing various aspects of the study. The first chapter provides background information regarding historical perspectives of school discipline,

the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, and the theoretical framework supporting the research. This chapter also includes research questions, definitions of terms, limitations of the research, and the manner that this study is organized.

The second chapter provides a review of the literature related to (1) historical perspectives of school discipline, (2) understanding PBIS and RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, (3) program implementation, (4) program fidelity, (5) school attendance, and (6) school discipline. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used in this study, which includes research design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures used to examine the impact of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program at the three Tennessee elementary schools. In Chapter 4, study findings are presented with an emphasis on data analysis, quantitative findings, and solutions to the presented research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study results, implications for future practice, and conclusions.

### **Summary**

Traditionally, many schools have followed models of exclusionary discipline to manage student misconduct (Cohen, 2016; Cotter Stalker, 2018; SCORE, 2017, TN DOE, 2019). This chapter summarized how researchers have sounded the alarm, highlighting that these practices are negatively impacting students outcomes (Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). State and local education agencies have started to consider the use of preventative or restorative disciplinary measures to counter these practices, for example, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B system used in Tennessee. Both attendance and suspension data from three rural elementary schools using this program will be analyzed in this study. Through an equity literacy framework, changes in suspension and attendance rates will be examined.

## Chapter 2

### The Literature Review

The literature related to school discipline is consistent in its declaration of inequity in exclusionary punishment practices. In the 1980s, zero-tolerance disciplinary policies were developed as a method to manage school violence and discipline (Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984). The loose interpretation of this initiative by individual states then led to the overuse of suspension and expulsion in the name of zero-tolerance discipline laws (Furgus, 2015).

Young et al. (2018) noted that Black students continue to be disciplined at rates higher and more severe than their peers despite detailed findings confirming they are not more likely to display disruptive behaviors. Unfortunately, students removed from school due to zero-tolerance policies have been shown to have more negative student outcomes, higher truancy rates, and higher drop-out rates (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017). Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine (2010) declare that research correlates punitive policies with children having higher drop-out risks and higher risks of entering into the school-to-prison pipeline. This type of literature has motivated national, state, and local policymakers to turn to preventative and restorative programs to reduce discipline disproportionality and exclusionary discipline percentages.

In Tennessee, a program is being implemented at 26 schools across the state known as Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) (TN DOE, 2018, p. 178). This program is based on research-based tenets of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) program. Although PBIS effectiveness has been well grounded in the literature, Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, a tiered intervention program, has not.

The current study, which delves the effectiveness of the program in one Tennessee school district, may shed light into recursive programs that dismantle exclusionary discipline practices and disproportionality in schools.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

It is essential that all education stakeholders understand practices within schools that have led to the disproportional rates of Black students that are suspended or placed in in-school suspension. According to Gorski and Swalwell (2015), the various ways people conceptualize issues of equity directly drive their potential to create solutions to the problem. Such perceptions are based upon an ideology. At the core of ideology that enforces “social conditioning and compliance enforcement” is a deficit ideology (Gorski, 2010). In such, there lies a counter ideology and discourse on race, class, and poverty. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) suggest the implementation of the equity literacy framework. Equity literacy, defined by Gorski (2017), is “More than cultural competence or diversity awareness, equity literacy prepares us to see even subtle ways in which access and opportunity are distributed unfairly across race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, language, and other factors” (p. 1).

Gorski (2016) argues that educators often place too much focus on multicultural education, which often expands through pedagogies, teachings, proficiencies, and competences. Gorski (2016) explains that culture-centric practices are oftentimes executed in ways that further marginalize children and disguise forms of institutional injustice that nurse gaps in educational outcomes. Furthermore, multicultural education may often be overused for the exact reason that they actually pose no real threat to the reduction of inequities in our schools (Gorski, 2017). This is why the most basic tenets of



equity literacy urge a commitment to consistently keep equity at the center of conversations surrounding the vast injustices for students of color in education (Gorski, 2017). Gorski (2017) offers eight guiding principles for maximizing the impact of equity literacy in education.

Table 1

*Equity Literacy Principles and Key Components*

Equity Literacy Principles	Key Components
1. Honest Confrontation	Confront bias and discrimination with honesty
2. Cultural Poverty	Solutions towards poverty and privilege
3. Equity Ideology	Deep understanding and commitment to change lens
4. Prioritizing	Focus on institutionalized practices
5. Rearranging	Restructuring of access and opportunities
6. Fixing Injustices Instead of Children	Remedying situations and not people
7. One Size Does Not Fit All	Valuing individual equity frameworks of learning
8. Research-Based Evidence	Utilizing what works and the lived experiences of marginalized groups

According to the *principle of honest confrontation*, there is no way to combat inequity without confronting it in an honest, direct fashion. There is not a solution to racial inequity that will not require confrontation with personal and institutional racism. Approaches that fail to confront bias and discrimination play a substantial part in withstanding inequities. According to the *principle of “cultural poverty,”* inequities are chiefly power and privilege issues, not cultural issues. Equity necessitates solutions to both power and privilege instead of simple cultural competence. Structures that define

diversity in ambiguous cultural terminologies, such as “culture of poverty,” are no menace to inequity.

According to the *principle of “equity ideology,”* equity cannot be remedied through a list of strategies. It is a commitment to change the lens through which a person sees inequity. Without deepening our understanding of the ideologies of equity, educators cannot develop practical solutions. The *principle of prioritizing* refers to both institutional policies and practices must be looked at through the lens of, "How might this affect the marginalized stakeholders throughout our schools?" Equity can only happen when their interests are prioritized.

The *principle of rearranging* indicates that obtaining equity will mean active redistribution of “material, cultural, and social access and opportunity.” If equity initiatives do not restructure access or opportunities, they should not be considered solutions.

The *principle of fixing injustices instead of children* refers to disparities in student educational outcomes not being the result of the inability of the communities that have been marginalized. Solutions to inequity should be focused on remedying the conditions that marginalized people face, not on fixing the people. According to *the principle of one size does not fit all*, no single marginalized group has the same mindsets, values, communication techniques, or avenues to learning. Grouping people into a specific “learning style” is usually based on simplistic stereotypes, not individual equity frameworks. Finally, the *principle of research-based evidence* indicates that equity programs and solutions should be implemented only if grounded in research-based evidence of what works over trendy new initiatives. Research-based can mean academic

research, but it should also include the experiences of the disenfranchised stakeholders throughout education.

With many statistics pointing to the abundance of inequities throughout education institutions, specifically regarding school discipline, many systems are employing research-based solutions to decrease overrepresentation and increase equity. Through the use of the guiding principles outlined in the equity literacy framework, school systems can begin to make decisions that proactively fight against unequally distributed access to opportunity for students.

### **History of the School Discipline Gap**

As Gorski (2017) outlines in reference to the equity literacy framework, there is no way to combat education inequities without confronting them in an honest and direct fashion. This is why it is important to understand the present-day gaps in discipline and their historical underpinnings. It was not until 1975, when a Children's Defense Fund report highlighted data on discipline in the American education system, that the racial inequities of school discipline came to light. Alarming, the Children's Defense Fund stated that in the 1972–1973 school year alone, over a million children were suspended from their general education programs, math that totals a loss of four million days of school in this single academic school year.

Additionally, the report concluded that Black pupils were suspended at a rate twice as high as those from other racial subgroups (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Even worse was that most of the infractions were found to be nonviolent in nature with offenses such as tardiness, smoking, truancy, and disrespect (Nielson, 1979). The Children's Defense Fund (1975) concluded that suspensions should be abolished except

for instances of physical violence. It seemed that this study was just one in an influx of research, legislation, and conversation surrounding school discipline and student rights throughout the 1970s.

In 1975, The Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency was commissioned to study violence and vandalism in schools, what was considered by many at the time to be one of the most costly problems in the nation (Bayh, 1975). In the report's conclusion, there were only recommendations for further research into alternative approaches to remedy the purported violence problems in schools. Also, they concluded that states should incorporate legislative policies to address specific issues (Bayh, 1975).

Shortly after the Bayh report (1975), The Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was troubled when research showed that children from minority subgroups were being disciplined at disproportionately high rates, so they began to require that local schools keep track of any disciplinary action that was imposed on a minority student (Duke & Jones, 1983). In summary, the 1970s were full of advances in legislation, research, and reports concerning school discipline. Considerably, the discipline gap was first identified in the 1970s (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). However, a question regarding the improvement in disproportionality statistics over the next four decades remained.

The 1970s may have been the decade to recognize bias in student discipline throughout the American education landscape (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Duke & Jones, 1983). It was the 1980s, however, that gave rise to a series of events that would eventually open the door for the creation of the zero-tolerance policies that are still active

in our education system today. In the Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public School (Gallup, 1983, 1984), it was reported in the early 1980s that school discipline was a primary education-related concern of the American people. The 1983 poll concluded that factors perceived to contribute to school discipline were (1) no discipline in the home, (2) no respect for law or authority, and (3) the inability to suspend misbehaving students from school (Gallup, 1983). In a *New York Times* editorial, Pear (1984) reported that Ronald Reagan, the president at that time, had announced the introduction of a new program to help with violence in schools, including putting limits on the legal rights of students that had been suspended.

In March 1984, The National School Safety Center was established by the Reagan administration (Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984). President Reagan was of the mindset that misbehavior in schools could be remedied by returning to "old-fashioned discipline" (Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984). This was evidenced in the well-known Bauer Report, a 1984 brief by the president's Working Group on School Violence/Discipline (Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984). The report detailed that school violence would not improve until schools took a harder stance on discipline ("Disorder in our public schools," 1984).

The Bauer Report is particularly of importance as it, along with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, set the stage for zero-tolerance discipline policies to become widely accepted as a method of reducing the discipline burden on teachers and administrators (Hyman & D'Alessandro, 1984; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Cohen (2016) alarmingly proclaims that the percentage of high school children met with exclusionary discipline due to zero-tolerance policies increased by 40% between 1972 and 2009 all while gaps in racial discipline numbers widened as well.

## **Zero Tolerance**

Events surrounding drug control in the 1980s and tragic school shootings in the 1990s (e.g., Columbine) eventually gave rise to the creation of the Gun-Free Schools act of 1994 (Jones, 2013). The focus of the Gun-Free Schools Act was to prevent weapons being brought into schools and to protect children from threats of violence and gun-related deaths (Mongan & Walker 2012). The statute incentivized firearm prohibitions by providing federal funding to states that implemented zero-tolerance restrictions for gun offenses and even threatened the withdrawal of federal funding for noncompliance (Jones, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Nationally, zero-tolerance legislation outlines that students caught with ammunition should be immediately expelled, the only exception being cases where the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act protected the student from long-term removal (Mongan & Walker, 2012). The true issue with zero tolerance arose when states took the law and expanded it to other areas (Jones, 2013).

At the state level, zero tolerance was often expanded to include other indiscretions, such as drugs, disruption, or other less severe offenses (Allman & Slate, 2011). The National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) reported (as cited in Potts & Njie, 2003) that in the late 1990s, 94% of the nation's schools had zero-tolerance policies for guns, 91% used this policy for weapons other than guns, and 97% used this policy for alcohol-related issues. According to Mallet (2015):

In the school systems, and particularly those that are overburdened and underfinanced, many students have been increasingly suspended and expelled due to criminalizing both typical adolescent developmental behaviors as well as low-

level type misdemeanors: acting out in class, truancy, fighting, and other similar offenses. (p. 1)

What is more disturbing is that school administrators who claim to be abiding by zero-tolerance law easily misinterpret the word “weapons”. Some examples include a 5-year-old in California that was expelled from school after giving his teacher a razor blade that he found in his backpack and a 12-year-old from Ohio who was suspended for bringing a toy gun to school (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Furgus (2015) explains that these methods of using zero tolerance toward minor infractions is surprisingly more evident at the primary level, where students who exhibit defiant or disrespectful behaviors are susceptible to removal-based punishment under the name of zero tolerance.

However, many principals feel as if they cannot use their own judgment to determine the severity or context of offenses when policy guidelines require strict adherence (Furgus, 2015). It is for this reason that many students are punished using removal-based methods, such as in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions, without consideration of the individual situation (Furgus, 2015). Most alarmingly, there has been no published, peer-reviewed evidence that zero-tolerance policies have had any positive impact on student learning or achievement (Rausch & Skiba, 2005). Zero tolerance is a prime example of what Gorski (2017) references in the equity literacy framework when stating, “Inequities are primarily power and privilege problems, not primarily cultural problems” (p. 1). The development and continuation of zero-tolerance policies that are not evidence-based is the perfect example of “power and privilege” at work against the students in our educational system.

Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are defined as removal-based punishments either within or outside of the school setting (Allman & Slate, 2011). Since students are being removed from their classrooms, they are not engaging in the same learning opportunities as their peers (Mahoney, 2015). Losen and Gillespie (2012) state:

Well over three million children, K-12, are estimated to have lost instructional “seat time” in 2009-2010 because they were suspended from school, often with no guarantee of adult supervision outside the school. That’s about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, combined. (p. 1)

Roby (2004) found moderate to strong statistical significance between student attendance and achievement test scores for students at every grade level (i.e., Grades 4, 6, 9, 12) in an Ohio-based study, concluding that attendance is crucial to student learning.

Additionally, a longitudinal study of elementary and middle school students in Philadelphia (Gottfried, 2010) found that student attendance is a “robust” indicator of student achievement, further concluding that attendance is important both early and throughout a child’s schooling.

While the previous figures looked at daily absences, the Oregon Department of Education (2016) found that examining the impact of chronic absenteeism on individual students is also important. A student is considered *chronically absent* when he or she missed 10 or more days in a single school year. These researchers found that rates of chronic absenteeism in elementary schools were the highest in the earliest grades, such as in kindergarten and that these rates became more level as out students got older (Oregon Department of Education, 2016). Additionally, these same researchers conducted a Part II



of their study, finding that 5th graders who were chronically absent had lower test scores and lower graduation rates (Oregon Department of Education, 2016). They also concluded that 5th-grade students who were both economically disadvantaged and chronically absent had graduation rates that were 50% less than those of their peers that were not in either category (Oregon Department of Education, 2016). A SCORE report (2017) described that students suffering from chronic absenteeism were less likely to be reading by 3rd grade and were likely to have lower achievement scores.

A Healthy Schools Campaign (2017) campaign entitled “State ESSA Plans to Support Student Health and Wellness: A Framework for Action” states that one key cause of chronic absenteeism is the use of overly punitive discipline policies. “The AASA’s 2014 survey found that 92 percent of superintendents believe that out-of-school suspensions are associated with negative student outcomes, including lost instructional time and increased disengagement, truancy, and dropout rates” (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p. 49). Students that are continuously absent, whether for discipline or other reasons, are at greater risks of school failure, leading to a ricochet of consequences for the students, their families, and even society (Mahoney, 2015). Astoundingly, an American Psychological Association task force (via Cohen, 2016) found that “not only do such practices fail to make schools safer or improve student behavior, but they also actually increase the likelihood that students will act out in the future” (p. 87).

Exclusionary discipline practices in Tennessee, as described by SCORE (State Collaborative on Reforming Education) (2017), may be contributing to high rates of chronic absenteeism; SCORE further noted that 1 of out of every 10 Tennessee students in 9th-grade missed an entire week of school due to disciplinary action in a single school

year. Reasons such as these are why the Tennessee Department of Education (TN DOE) began monitoring chronic absenteeism in the 2017–2018 school year and factoring chronic absenteeism as part into school and district accountability measures (TN DOE, 2019). The new gauge will be known as the Chronically Out-of-School Indicator (TN DOE, 2019).

This measure will be used to monitor *chronic absenteeism*, described as a student being absent from school 10% or more of the school year (TN DOE, 2019). These absences can be excused, unexcused, or due to suspensions or expulsions. The TN DOE (2019) expresses that students who are not in school are missing instructional time and that schools should carefully examine attendance data during the school year to increase opportunities for success for all students. It should be noted that the TN DOE (2018) has acknowledged that exclusionary discipline is part of the attendance problem and is taking measures to both monitor and intervene.

### **Exclusionary Discipline Policies**

Unfortunately, student removal from the classroom in the name of exclusionary discipline can take many different forms. In Tennessee, the primary methods of removal-based discipline practices include in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and student placement into an alternative learning center (TN DOE, 2018). Individual education agencies have their own policies governing disciplinary offenses and consequences. However, the gist of each one is similar across states and districts.

The Florida Department of Education (2019) provides codes on their website for student discipline data-tracking, which includes corporal punishment, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, suspension-extended (pending a hearing),

expulsion with continuing services, expulsion without continuing services, alternative setting, and restraint. The New York City Department of Education (2018) provides similar alternatives for exclusionary student discipline, but only after using supports, interventions, and restorative practices as their first response.

Out-of-school suspension (OSS) and expulsion both involve removal of the student from the school. As referenced by the Florida Department of Education (2019), OSS is when a student is removed from school for a period no longer than 10 school days whereas expulsion is for periods longer than 10 days. Expulsion can either be without continuing education services provided by the local education agency, or it could be with services, but in an alternative setting (Florida Department of Education, 2019). The Florida Department of Education calls such alternative settings “second-chance” schools or placement in the juvenile justice system. As referenced by Allman and Slate (2011), many students that get OSS already have low academic achievement, so once lost class time and missed assignments are added, there is a whirlwind of detrimental effects. As Cholewa, Hull, Babcock, and Smith (2018) state, “OSS is associated with negative outcomes at both school and student levels, including lower achievement scores, higher rates of grade repetition, and higher dropout rates” (p. 191). Expulsion and OSS are the two most common methods of exclusionary discipline used in schools (Cotter Stalker, 2018).

In-school suspension (ISS) is often used in lieu of out-of-school punishments as a compromise to critics of full disciplinary removal (Allman & Slate, 2011). Most ISS programs require that students still attend school, but are educated in an alternate classroom from their peers (Allman & Slate, 2011). Cholewa et al. (2018) sought to

bridge a gap in the ISS literature by investigating its impact on various factors related to student success. They found that there were similar patterns of disproportionality, negative academic outcomes, and adversely influenced student dropout rates when students were given ISS. Morris and Howard (2003) contend that ISS programs can be either punitive, therapeutic, or academic. A punitive model is defined by strict rules and task completion (Morris & Howard, 2003). Therapeutic programs are focused on counseling and behavior analysis, and academic programs zero in on skill deficits and structure programming accordingly (Morris & Howard, 2003). Based on various practices, ISS may look different at each school across the country, but researchers (Allman & Slate, 2011; Chowela, et. al, 2018) contend its negative influence on student wellness and academic success.

The Association for Positive Behavior Support (2014) acknowledge that “Research has shown that the implementation of punishment, especially when it is used inconsistently and in the absence of other positive strategies, is ineffective and can lead to increases in problem behaviors such as vandalism” (para. 1). However, even with concrete findings indicating adverse student impact, each state has policies in place that still guide students into these programs year after year.

### **Disciplinary Policy in Tennessee**

There are 147 districts in Tennessee that serve a total of about 998,000 students (TN DOE, 2019). The TN DOE (2019) cites that students in the state fall below the national average in academics and that there are significant performance gaps by both race and income. However, Tennessee has made significant progress in recent years. As reported by SCORE (2017), Tennessee now ranks in the top 20 states in science and top

25 in grades 4 and 8 in mathematics. The SCORE report (2017) also touts that the state has begun to narrow achievement gaps for students with exceptionalities and for English language learners.

According to SCORE, one glaring area concern in Tennessee is chronic absenteeism, which may be tied to the continuing presence of exclusionary discipline practices across the state. A massive 63,000 students missed school in 2015 due to exclusionary discipline (SCORE, 2017). Possibly one of the most troubling statistics cited in the report (SCORE, 2017) is that “In 2015-16, 24 percent of Tennessee students identified as African American. Statewide, 60 percent of all suspensions and 64 percent of all expulsions were experienced by African American students” (p. 24).

Another TN DOE report (2018) was focused exclusively on discipline in early grades. The report (TN DOE, 2018) shows discipline numbers for kindergarten students in the state at 1,669 students involved in 3,178 behavior incidents that resulted in exclusionary discipline action. Further, 75% of the incidents that resulted in suspension or expulsion were classified as a “school rule violation” (TN DOE, 2018, p. 4). The TN DOE report (2019) continues:

Of those students involved in exclusionary discipline incidents, 81 percent were male and, while African American students make up one quarter of kindergartners, they constitute 54 percent of those suspended, reassigned, or expelled. Data further shows that schools that assign exclusionary discipline to more than 10 percent of their kindergarten students have a much higher median percent of African American students than those that assign exclusionary discipline to less than one percent of their students. (p. 4)

These statistics point out the need to take a closer look at disciplinary policies and practices across the state.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) officially went into effect during the 2017–2018 academic year for schools across the country (Klein & Ujjifusa, 2017). The ESSA requires that states submit plans to the U.S. DOE for accountability and growth measures. Due to concerns regarding the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, part of Tennessee’s plan is to increase district accountability regarding use of student suspensions. As part of this accountability, districts in Tennessee now receive grades of A through F, with student exclusionary discipline being one indicator on which they are graded (Klein & Ujjifusa, 2017). District report card ratings are publically displayed on the Tennessee Report Card website, with exclusionary discipline data disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged (TN DOE, 2019).

Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-6-3401 (via TN DOE, 2018) identifies exclusionary discipline as the suspension or expulsion of a pupil from school attendance. Additionally, T.C.A. § 49-6-3401 (via TN DOE) identifies zero-tolerance offenses, to include firearm possession, aggravated assault against school personnel, and/or drug possession. Further, Tennessee policy provides authority to school-level administrators, such as principals or assistant principals, to discipline students using suspension or expulsion under these terms (TN DOE, 2018).

Since the T.C.A. outlines that individual exclusionary discipline decisions are made at the local level, it is important to look at local policies regarding school discipline as well. As previously mentioned, there are 147 school districts in Tennessee (TN DOE,

2019), and each of these districts has their own set of guidelines regarding discipline, most often found in their board policy manuals. Shelby County Schools, a large urban district in western Tennessee, has board policy #6022, which deals with student conduct (Shelby County Board of Education, 2018). The policy outlines that each school in the district will have a school-wide behavior plan that is focused on both prevention and intervention (Shelby County Board of Education, 2018). Furthermore, when these preventive strategies fail, the policy outlines procedures for zero tolerance and other offenses, which are classified from major to minor by the level of offense (Shelby County Board of Education, 2018, p. 11-15). It is important to note that in this board policy, even category E offenses, the most minor offenses, are met with exclusionary punishment at the school administrator's discretion (Shelby County Board of Education, 2018).

The Lawrence County Board of Education, a district in rural middle Tennessee, has a similar behavior policy that outlines levels of offenses with seemingly appropriate punishments (Lawrence County Board of Education, 2018). Their policy on student conduct also lists student suspension as an option for low-level offenses, such as cheating, lying, classroom disturbance, tardiness, failure to follow directions, failure to complete assignments, and dress code violations (Lawrence County Board of Education, 2018).

Even though some districts in Tennessee are moving toward restorative or preventive discipline policies and practices, there is still work to do to bridge the discipline gap for students across the state. According to the TN DOE (2018), Black students were suspended at double the rate of their peers in any other subgroup in the 2016–2017 academic year. Current policy and data from the state of Tennessee has

shown evidence of disproportionality in the exclusionary discipline practices across the state (SCORE, 2017; TN DOE, 2018; Tennessee Leaders for Equity, 2018). However, Tennessee is not alone in reflecting the sad disparities in student discipline practices across the nation. The literature makes evident the amassment of this critical issue, particularly in reference to the impact on racial minorities.

### **Disproportionality**

Some figures cite nationwide progress in discipline-related areas. Steinburh and Lacoé (2017) described that the percentage of exclusionary discipline instances had dropped by 20% between the years 2012 and 2014. Steinberg and Lacoé (2017) also claim that many districts are beginning to adopt alternative disciplinary policies and procedures that may keep students in the classroom. Anderson and Ritter (2017) cite that in 2014, California became the first state to place limits on the number of times a student can be suspended for minor behaviors. Additionally, the Miami-Dade school district has completely eliminated OSS, and a school board in Seattle has put a one-year halt to suspension of elementary students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). However, even with all of these advances in research and practice, there is yet to be solid evidence that the discipline gap has improved for some subgroups. In fact, much research points to the contrary (Bottiani, 2018; Fabelo et al., 2011; Young et al., 2018).

To date, 44 years have passed since The Children's Defense Fund (1975) first identified discipline gaps on a national scale. In analyzing this discipline gap, several reports (such as Young, Young, & Butler, 2018) have provided evidence of Black students being disciplined at more frequently and more severely rate than their peers. This is despite research revealing that they are not more likely to show disruptive



behavior as compared to other students (Young et al., 2018). Further, Rudd (2014) adds that Black students as young as 5 years of age are regularly suspended or expelled for minor violations like talking back to educators or drawing on their classroom desks. In a study of almost one million Texas students, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that upward of 94% of Black students with an exclusionary disciplinary infraction got it due to offenses that were not “zero tolerance” in nature.

In Tennessee, the statistics indicating disproportionality in discipline are no different. A SCORE report (2017) describes that one in five freshman experience either a suspension or an expulsion. Even at this high rate that includes all students, the report cites that Black freshmen students were suspended or expelled at a rate six times higher than all other freshman (SCORE, 2017). The TN DOE report card from the 2015–2016 school year shows that Black students were 24% of the student population in the state, yet upwards of 60 percent of all suspensions and expulsions (via SCORE, 2017). According to Tennessee Leaders for Equity (2018), Black students were suspended at double the rate of their peers in any other subgroup in the 2016–2017 school year. Bottiani, Bradshaw, Gregory, & Reschly (2018) stated that “Schools’ excessive exclusion of African American students in particular stands among the most glaring indicators of opportunity inequality in our education system” (p. xxx).

In 2019, the TN DOE identified 25 school districts in the state that displayed disproportionality toward students with disabilities, students of color, or both (Pignolet, 2019). Schools on the list that continue to have disproportionality in their discipline practices will have to redirect 15% of their special education funding to help rectify the issue (Pignolet, 2019).

Just as has been identified in several Tennessee school districts, African American students are not the only ones that seem to be disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline policies. In the literature, there is evidence that male students, students with disabilities, and students from poverty are also suspended at higher rates than other students (Morgan et al., 2019). Researchers have argued that some of the differences in suspension rates by socioeconomic status may be more due to an overemphasis on zero-tolerance responses in schools that low-income students often attend than due to differential treatment towards this subgroup (Kinsler, 2011).

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2018) cited that students with disabilities are disproportionately suspended 13.2 percentage points higher than the norm. The rates of suspension for students with disabilities have increased over the years, perhaps due to more emphasis on inclusion in the general education classroom and a lack of general education teacher training in special education (Morgan et al., 2019).

The GAO (2018) report also cited that male students accounted for 51% of all students, but made up 70% of those suspended. One study found that racial and gender differences existed in exclusionary discipline data and that these differences were more profound than socioeconomic status (Skiba et al., 2002). Further, Skiba et al. (2002) found evidence that while males do display disruptive behavior more frequently than females, there is no evidence of similar findings when accounting for race. “Rather, there appeared to be a differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, wherein African-American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective in interpretation” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 1).

Bottiani et al. (2018) implore that more researchers begin to focus on the impact of exclusionary discipline instead of merely documenting its existence. In a landmark study conducted in Texas, Fabelo et al. (2011) examined exclusionary discipline rates for one million students in grades 7 through 12. The same students were followed six years, and Fabelo et al. (2011) found that 60% of these students were suspended or expelled, which significantly increased the likelihood of grade retention, school drop-out, and/or entrance into the justice system. In particular, Fabelo et al. (2011) found:

More than one in seven students were in contact with the juvenile justice system between seventh and twelfth grade. Students who were suspended or expelled had a greater likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system in their middle or high school years, particularly when they were disciplined multiple times. (p. 61)

Cotter Stalker (2018) described that a student's involvement with the juvenile justice system can lead to disadvantages that can impact his or her entire livelihood via issues such as the label and stigma attached to justice-system involvement.

Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, & Aseltine (2010) correlate punitive policies with children being at higher risks of dropping out of school and higher risks of entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Even former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is aware of the realities of the school to prison pipeline, as she stated that we are "diverting too many African-American kids into the criminal justice system" in a speech given in Harlem, New York (White, 2016). One of the most immediate repercussions of exclusionary discipline, however, is the missed instructional time that leads to students' lower achievement levels, lower reading ability levels, higher rates of school drop-out, and more (Gottfried, 2011; Mahoney, 2015; SCORE, 2017; Young et al., 2018). Since

research has inarguably shown racially disproportionate discipline rates along with the significant reverberating impact, the continuing statistics indicate a civil rights issue that must be addressed (Skiba et al., 2011).

### **Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline**

With such strong research-based evidence of the repercussions of exclusionary discipline policies, many educational entities are beginning to look at alternative approaches to lower the numbers of suspensions and expulsions, thus improving student outcomes (Steinburg & Lacoë, 2017). In 2011, then education secretary, Arne Duncan, and then attorney general, Eric Holder, publicized the introduction of a collaborative project between the U.S. DOE and the U.S. Department of Justice, known as the Supportive School Discipline Initiative (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). This initiative was aimed at supporting the implementation of school discipline practices and policies (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

Cohen (2016) reported that by 2016, 23 of the 100 biggest districts in America had enacted policy changes limiting the use of exclusionary responses to discipline. State-level legislatures, such as that in Colorado, have passed statutes to mandate the eradication of zero tolerance and addition of restorative or preventative discipline systems (Rosa, Keelan, & Kruegar, 2015). The Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence (as cited in Potts & Njie, 2003) outlines the following:

Because suspension and expulsion remove students from constructive learning environments, they are not ideal disciplinary actions. The necessity for using these disciplinary measures should be decreased by reducing behaviors that

invoke them. Evidence of programs that are effective in preventing suspension and expulsion is growing. (p. 6)

Huang and Cornell (2018) found in their study that improvements in school climate led to reduced rates of OSS, and the benefits were the same across various student race/ethnicities. The U.S. DOE Office of Civil Rights (2018) defines school climate as the aspects of the character of a school, along with the interrelated quality of school life. In another study (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), it was found that Black students with Black teachers had lower rates of exclusionary discipline and showed more improvement in their reading achievement scores. Lindsay and Hart (2017) contend that educational institutions should strive to hire teachers of color for students of color in efforts to reduce suspension rates and improve academic success. Cohen (2018) contends that both school leadership and teaching practices play an important part in the reduction of removal-based discipline practices, stating that teachers and leaders are having to learn new and better methods of behavior management. Other practices that have become increasingly supported by research include restorative justice, social-emotional learning and character education programs, and PBIS, among other systems created at the local or state levels.

### **Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice is rising in popularity among school districts seeking solutions to exclusionary discipline practices. This method is described as a formal practice that is facilitated by mediators who are trained in restorative justice (Rosa et al., 2015). The process allows students to recognize the negative consequences of their actions, who was impacted, and how to begin to repair the situation (Rosa et al., 2015). McCluskey et al.

(2008) offered a glimpse into a school utilizing restorative practices, presented in Table 2.

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Table 2

*Restorative Practices*

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For School-wide practice

- Positive relationships
- Constructive school climate
- Prevention of incidences

For incidences

- Conflict resolution
- Learn from incidences
- Reestablish relationships

For serious incidences

- Discipline supported with processes for learning and reconciliation
  - Harm reparations
  - Relationships either reestablished or ended in a positive way
- 

Fronius et al. (2016) explored restorative justice, finding that the program may have a positive impact across multiple outcomes, such as discipline, graduation, school attendance, school climate, and academics. Another study (High, 2017) cited that restorative practices have positive impacts on teachers and students alike. Preliminary research (Armour, 2013) found that restorative justice programs have a significant positive impact on lowering the numbers of students entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, Armour (2013) found decreases in expulsion and in general misbehavior as well as improvements in school engagement, student achievement, and educator turnover.

## **Social-Emotional Learning and Character Education**

Social-emotional learning and character education programs place emphasis on the importance of students regulating their own behaviors and interactions with those around them (Rosa, Keelan, Kruegar, 2015). Social-emotional learning is defined as the ways in which children learn to recognize and manage their emotions, set improvement goals, show compassion for others, build positive relationships, and improve decision-making (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2019). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2019) also reported social-emotional learning programs improve school climate, increase attendance, advance student academic achievement, and reduce the instances of office discipline referrals. These methods not only aid individual students, but they have also been shown to assist in the improvement of school climate (Skiba, 2014).

The California Department of Education (CDOE) (2018) emphasizes the use of character education in its school systems, being of the mindset that one of the responsibilities of education agencies is to engrain morals and values into students that will help them thrive socially and emotionally. Effective character education programs in schools should be embedded throughout both the curriculum and the culture of the school (CDOE, 2018). The U.S. DOE (2005) published a brochure outlining ways that schools can successfully implement character education:

- Schools should proactively bring together educators, parents, and children to recognize and define the specific character traits they want to highlight;
- Schools should provide professional development to teach educators how to incorporate character education into all facets of the school;

- Schools should work to form partnerships with both parents and stakeholders in the community for students to receive consistent messages regarding the character aspects that have been deemed essential for success; and
- Schools should give opportunities for leaders, educators, families and community stakeholders to model exemplary social skills and character traits.

According to the CDOE (2018), the use of character education programs in their schools has led to increased attendance, decreased suspension, and improved school climate. Both social-emotional learning and character education programs can be implemented at the school-wide or student-specific level (Rosa et al., 2015). There are also various programs to choose from that fit underneath the umbrellas of social-emotional learning and/or character education to improve student outcomes (Rosa et al., 2015).

### **Classroom Management**

One essential preventative disciplinary measure that cannot be ignored is educator classroom management. Teachers that are proficient in classroom management proactively reinforce expected behaviors rather than punitively react to student misbehaviors (Long, Miller, & Upright, 2019). Doing so typically involves various strategies that include a structured and predictable classroom environment with well-defined expectations and procedures (Long et al., 2019). Further, Gage et al. (2018) argued that effective classroom management includes (a) actively teaching and supervising students, (b) providing ample opportunities for students to engage and respond, and (c) providing students with timely feedback. Such effective classroom



management skills are shown to reduce amounts of office discipline referrals and lower exclusionary discipline percentages (Skiba, 2014).

Additionally, educators who have been insufficiently trained with classroom management skills may contribute to discipline disparities (Skiba, 2014). “When educators lack the knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy to prevent and address perceived problem behavior, there is an increased likelihood that they will rely more on exclusionary discipline to address problem behavior” (Cook et al., 2018, p. 136).

Oftentimes, these teachers resort to sending students to the office for discipline responses from a school administrator (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). These referrals are often driven by minor misbehaviors, such as defiance and disrespect (Anyon et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Anyon et al. (2014) showed that much like the data related to suspensions and expulsions, Black students are two or more times more likely to get sent to the office than White students. This is the reason that so many preventative and restorative programs for discipline often include classroom management skills as a component (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2016). Some of these programs, such as PBIS, even track percentages of office discipline referrals in efforts to focus classroom management coaching with teachers that are struggling (Missouri School-Wide Positive Behavior Support, 2016).

### **Positive Behavior Interventions and Support**

Positive behavior interventions and supports, commonly called PBIS, is a positive approach to school discipline practices that has been proven through research to reduce the number of office discipline referrals and thus the number of suspensions and expulsions in schools (Brown, 2015). The PBIS system focuses on the active teaching of

positive behaviors in multiple venues of the educational setting (e.g., bathroom, classroom, hallway, lunch) instead of the oft-used reactive method to misbehavior (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2016). The PBIS approach is known as a positive, multitiered system of behavior management in each facet of a child’s school environment (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2016).

According to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs website (2017), school systems begin PBIS implementation with the creation of a team of individuals that will attend formal trainings to learn how to begin and continue PBIS with fidelity. This team decides on three to five overarching, school-wide behavioral expectations (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017). For example, schools may use expectations such as “be safe, be responsible, be respectful.” After the team attends trainings and creates their expectations, they take the information back to the faculty for school-wide training and buy-in. The PBIS website (2017) suggests that 80% of staff agree to the system and expectations to ensure school-wide consistency. Once staff have opted in and have been trained, team members placed behavioral expectations into a matrix that identifies positive behaviors for different areas of the school (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017). A brief example of such a matrix is presented in Table 3 (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017).

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Table 3

*Positive Behavior Matrix*

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Respect Property	
Bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Keep feet and hands where they belong.</li><li>• Throw unwanted items in the wastebasket.</li></ul>
Cafeteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Keep food and drinks in backpack.</li><li>• Place tray on kitchen window shelf after scraping leftovers into wastebasket.</li><li>• Wipe table with sponge provided.</li><li>• Clean food spills off floor.</li></ul>
Restroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Flush toilet after use.</li><li>• Use two squirts of soap to wash hands.</li><li>• Throw paper towels in wastebasket.</li></ul>

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As seen in Table 3, under the broad expectation, “respect property,” the team listed specific positive behaviors for various areas. The same theme will be repeated for all broad categories and for all areas of the school (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017). Next, the team works with teachers to create positive behavior matrixes for individual classrooms. Lesson plans are written to guide the ways teachers roll-out classroom expectations, making sure students completely understand each one. Finally, PBIS rewards students for displaying the positive behaviors they have learned instead of focusing on punishing students for misbehavior.

Many schools use tickets or point systems that can be cashed in for tangible or intangible rewards. Also to ensure success, schools must track and analyze student behavior throughout the building (Spencer, 2015). For example, a school may notice that a high number of misbehaviors are occurring in the halls during transition times. The school will then reteach the expected behaviors for that area and reward students for displaying them, which reinforces their drive to exhibit correct conduct (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017).

The PBIS approach emerged in the 1980s when a need for better intervention techniques for students with behavioral issues arose (Sugai & Simonson, 2012). The University of Oregon initiated research to locate a solution, finding that more focus should be on prevention, data-based responses, school-wide expectations, direct teaching of social skills, and team-oriented decision-making (Sugai & Simonson, 2012). In the 1990s, the Individuals with Disabilities Act was reauthorized, providing assistance to schools in the area of behavior through the creation of a nation-wide PBIS center (Sugai & Simonson, 2012).

The National Technical Assistance (TA) Center on PBIS is currently in Year 14 (third 5-year grant cycle), and has assisted in shaping the PBIS framework (also referenced as “school-wide positive behavior supports”), and providing direct PBIS Revisited 2 professional development and technical assistance to more than 16,000 schools. (Sugai & Simonson, 2012 p. 1-2).

Further, in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act was put in place, requiring the creation of behavior-intervention plans for states (Spencer, 2015).

Horner et al. (2009) found that elementary schools using PBIS showed a statistically significant difference in the safety of the learning environment as compared to schools that not using PBIS. The authors also found preliminary evidence of schools using PBIS having higher achievement scores in 3rd-grade reading and fewer behavior incidences (Horner et al., 2009). Childs, Kincaid, George, and Gage (2016) also found statistical evidence of lower levels school discipline referrals after implementation of PBIS. Childs et al. (2016) were sure to account for fidelity of implementation as a key factor in the analysis.

Gage, Leite, Childs, and Kincaid (2017) examined the effect of PBIS implementation on student achievement in Florida schools that had fully implemented the program. Their data showed a significant effect between PBIS implementation and academic achievement in both reading and math (Gage et al., 2017). These findings suggest that PBIS has been thoroughly researched and effective at reducing exclusionary discipline rates and increasing academic achievement in schools using PBIS with fidelity (Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2016; Gage et al., 2017; Horner et al., 2009).

### **Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior**

Tennessee has put its own twist on the research-based PBIS program, calling it Response to Intervention Squared for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, 2017). According to the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project (2017), this tiered system of behavior management is effective at reducing suspension rates and office discipline referrals, all while improving student achievement. Much like PBIS, Tennessee's system is known as a multitiered system of support (MTSS). These MTSSs are used for both academic and behavioral instruction and intervention (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2019).

Tennessee began mandating MTSS for academics known as RTI<sup>2</sup> in the Spring 2016 (TN DOE, 2019). The RTI<sup>2</sup> framework for academics consists of three tiers of increasing levels support for both reading and math. It is also used as a referral source for students in need of special education support after other tiers of support have not been effective (TN DOE, 2019). In alignment with the existing RTI<sup>2</sup> framework for academics, RTI<sup>2</sup>-B was developed to make sure students are explicitly taught behavior expectations

and supports are provided in meeting those expectations (TN DOE, 2018). As referenced by the TN DOE (2018, p. 4):

The MTSS framework encompasses RTI<sup>2</sup> in addition to Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) and other models of support. Working in concert, these programs complement each other and can better address the needs of the whole student. Neither academic nor non-academic concerns should be considered in isolation as the two often interact to contribute to a student's strengths and needs (p.4).

As the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project at Vanderbilt University (2015) described, RTI<sup>2</sup>-B is tiered across three levels, providing increasingly intensive interventions at each stage.

Tier I emphasizes the behavioral needs of all children in the school. About 80% of students usually respond to this level of intervention. In the first tier, school teams develop a series of school-wide expectations to support student safety and learning. These expectations are then explicitly taught and modeled throughout all areas of the school. Then, a formal system of acknowledgment is used to reinforce when students display positive expectations that had been taught. These acknowledgment systems are usually based on tickets or points that can be exchanged for a reward.

Tier II involves use of a more specific intervention for around 10-15% of the children that typically do not respond to Tier I intervention. Students getting Tier II intervention are still included in the Tier I system; however, interventions in the second tier are more systematic and usually provided to small groups of students at a time. Some

examples of these interventions include social skills instruction and behavior contracts alongside a check-in/check-out system.

Tier III is the most intensive tier, which includes individualized support for the 3-5% of children who have not responded to the first two tiers of support. Students at this level are still involved in the support provided by the first two tiers, but they also go through more intensive one-on-one interventions, like counseling or functional-behavior support.

As reported by the Tennessee Department of Education (2018), 26 districts across the state participate in the program. The state budget has created funds for the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, the entity that provides training and support for RTI<sup>2</sup>-B across the state (TN DOE, 2018). Schools opt to receive free training from one of three state offices for the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project. Then, they are supported during training, implementation, and continuation (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project at Vanderbilt University, 2015). Fairbanks (as cited in Steiburg & Laco, 2017) found that RTI models for discipline were shown to reduce the number of office referrals for student misbehavior. However, the impact of Tennessee's tiered behavior program remains to be proven in the literature.

### **Summary**

Student misbehavior is a normal part of working in education (Morris & Howard, 2003). Oftentimes, schools turn to punishment-based discipline practices to address these issues, including verbal reprimands, revocation of privileges, office discipline referrals, both ISS and OSS, and expulsion (Association for Positive Behavior Support, 2014). The rise and continuation of exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., ISS, OSS) is often

attributed to zero-tolerance laws at the national and state levels (Allman & Slate, 2011). Zero-tolerance policies are described as removal-based punishments either within or outside the school setting (Allman & Slate, 2011).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1998) reported that roughly 90% of America's schools (at the time) had some form of zero-tolerance policy in place to manage student misbehavior. More recently, the NCES (2018) stated that 2,635,743 students had been given OSS in the 2013–2014 school year, revealing that the exclusionary discipline problem is relevant and pressing. Educational leaders, from the national to the local level, have begun to examine other options for student behavior management, such as preventative or restorative methods.

According to The Florida Center for Inclusive Communities (2018), over 26,000 schools in America now use PBIS as their primary discipline program. Tennessee has initiated their own form of the PBIS system, called RTI<sup>2</sup>-B. Funded by the DOE, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program has been recommended for implementation in Tennessee schools based on the research supporting PBIS (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, 2017). Conclusive research examining positive approaches to behavior management, such as Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, will help guide local school districts and policymakers in the implementation and continuation of such programs and methods. However, Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, already being used at 26 schools across the state, has not been examined for effectiveness (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project, 2017). As recommended by the equity literacy framework, equity programs and solutions should be implemented only if based on solid evidence of the effectiveness of these sometimes trendy new initiatives.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study was to determine whether implementation of a version of the PBIS (Positive Behaviors Intervention and Supports) multitiered model of behavior intervention, Response to Intervention Squared for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B), reduces suspension rates and increases attendance rates among elementary school students in Tennessee. Further, it is considered, in this study, whether or not behavior intervention impacts children equally, regardless of race. The following research questions guided the current study: (1) Is there a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, and if so, is this pattern similar across White and Black students? (2) Is there a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A quantitative methodology and a quasi-experimental design were used in the current study. The intervention, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, was assessed for its effectiveness in reducing student suspension rates and increasing student attendance rates compared to the rates in the pre-intervention years. The following hypotheses were formulated to determine if there was statistically significant difference in the suspension and attendance rates for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program across White and Black students.

H<sub>A</sub>1: There is a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>0</sub>1: There is no statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>A</sub>2: There is a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

H<sub>0</sub>2: There is no statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program.

### **Study Participants**

The participants in this study were students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 5 at 3 elementary schools in a rural school district in western Tennessee during the 2013–2014, 2014–2015, 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018 school years (*N* = 1063).

### **Instrumentation**

The data used in the current study were accessed from the school district and the Tennessee Department of Education (TN DOE) website. School- and grade-level data were obtained for total student enrollment, enrollment by grade level, and number of students suspended for the 2013–2014, 2014–2015, 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018 school years. Data on student expulsion rates, in-school suspension (ISS) rates, and out-of-school suspension (OSS) rates, disaggregated by student race, were obtained for the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. Data on average daily student attendance was obtained for the 2013–2014, 2014–2015, 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018 school years.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted, the Tennessee school district granted the researcher permission to handle, store, and analyze data, including attendance rates, suspension rates, and student race, from the school's records. Data were deidentified by school personnel before being shared with the researcher in a password-protected Microsoft Excel file.

In preparation for analysis, data were imported from Microsoft Excel to IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 25. Preliminary analyses included calculating the descriptive statistics for all of the quantitative study variables, including frequency counts and percentages for the nominal variables as well as ranges, means, medians, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for all continuous variables. These descriptive statistics provided information to ensure that all data fell within the expected ranges. The data were then checked for outliers. Variables that fell more than three standard deviations away from the mean were winsorized, that is, replaced with the nearest value that falls within the acceptable range.

Next, preliminary analyses included a series of assessments to identify whether or not the assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were violated in the dataset. Linearity was visually assessed using two scatterplots: (1) observed versus predicted values, and (2) residuals versus predicted values.

Normality was assessed via analysis of the measures of central tendency—the mean, skewness, and kurtosis values that were calculated as a part of the descriptive statistics. Data that are in a perfect normal distribution would have skewness and kurtosis values of 0, but for large datasets such as the one that used in this study, skewness values

that fall within the range of -3 to 3 and kurtosis values that fall within the range of -8 to 8 are considered to be approximately normally distributed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989).

The assumption of homoscedasticity refers to the amount of error variance around different values for an independent variable—when the error differs across values, this can distort the results of an analysis because it means that the values with larger error variances disproportionately impact the results compared to the values with smaller error variances. To check that this assumption had not been violated, the scatterplot of the residuals for each variable was visually assessed.

Multicollinearity refers to the extent to which variables in a study are correlated. It is assumed that the correlations between variables will not be too high, as this is an indication that the variables are not distinct enough (i.e., they are likely measuring the same thing). To test the assumption of multicollinearity, Pearson's correlation coefficients were first calculated with the expectation that they would all be less than .70. Then, variance inflation factors (VIF) were computed; these were ideally below 10.00 to indicate lack of multicollinearity.

For variables that violated any of these assumptions, a series of transformations exist that typically improve the quality of the data. The first transformation that was tested was the computation of the natural log of each value of any variable that violated any of these assumptions. Then, the assumptions were rechecked to ensure that they were no longer violated. If that did not work, then each value for that variable was to be squared, which often results in data improvements.

Before moving on to the main study analyses to address the primary research questions, a series of bivariate analyses determined (1) whether suspension rates were

significantly different by grade and by race, and (2) whether attendance rates were significantly different by school year. Attendance rates separated by race were not available, so bivariate analysis for this factor was not possible. To examine whether rates differed by grade, a one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, as is appropriate when comparing values between more than two groups. A series of paired samples *t* tests were used to examine postintervention differences in both suspension and attendance.

The primary research questions addressed (1) whether or not there was a significant change in suspension and attendance rates among students in grades kindergarten through 5 after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B and (2) whether or not there is a postintervention difference between White and Black students in suspension rates. The introduction of an intervention, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, to the project necessitates the accounting of time in subsequent analyses. Thus, a series of repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted separately by grade for suspension rates. In this type of analysis, the independent variable must be categorical—in this case, the first independent variable will be school year. The dependent variable must be continuous—in this case, the first dependent variable was suspension rate. Each year is a level of the independent variable (e.g., 2013–2014 was one level; 2014–2015 was another level). It was hypothesized that these analyses would indicate that suspension rates would be significantly lower *after* the intervention compared to *before*.

### **Ethical Procedures**

To ensure that participants' rights were protected and that the data remained confidential, a series of ethical procedures were followed. To preserve students'

confidentiality, the data were deidentified. Particularly, all names and other identifiers were removed from the file, and each student was randomly assigned an identification (ID) number unrelated to the student's school ID number, social security number, or any other number that could make the data identifiable. Next, data were shared with the researcher in a password-protected file. These data were not shared via electronic mail to eliminate the possibility for the data to be electronically stolen. Since this study relies on data that are part of the school's archival records and the researcher did not interact with the study participants, no additional procedures regarding participant contact were necessary. Upon completion of the study, all associated computer files were returned to the school, and the researcher removed all files containing participant information from her personal computer.

### **Assumptions**

There are several factors inherent to multiyear school datasets that restrict the implementation of a truly controlled project. It was assumed, in this study, that the primary potential influence on suspension and attendance rates during the 2013–2018 school years would be the implementation of specific behavior models alone. The researcher assumed that other potential confounding factors (e.g., new or retiring teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators), would not affect suspension/attendance rates enough to skew or influence the effect of behavior models. The researcher also assumed that the normal influx of transferring and incoming students each year would not have an effect large enough to influence suspension/attendance comparisons during repeated measures analyses.

Additionally, the researcher assumed that the three-school sample size in the dataset was representative of the larger primary school population across Tennessee. This assumption would allow recommendations to be made, in the current study, for not only a single school district, but to the larger primary school population. Measurements of kurtosis and skewness were expected to allow verification of this assumption, to some degree.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the research questions and research design guiding the collection, storage, and analysis of the data were covered. In this quantitative, quasi-experimental study, the effectiveness of a school-wide intervention, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program that was implemented at three Tennessee schools, as an attempt to reduce behavior problems that, according to prior research, leads to long-lasting, detrimental academic effects. Archival records provided by three schools comprised the data used in this study, including student-level race, suspension rates, and attendance rates. Additionally, data were obtained from the TN DOE website. All data were deidentified before use, and students were anonymous to the researcher.

## Chapter 4

### Results

In this quasi-experimental quantitative study, school administrative data were used to explore whether or not implementation of a version of the PBIS (Positive Behaviors Intervention and Supports) multitiered model of behavior intervention, Response to Intervention Squared for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B), reduced suspension rates and increased attendance rates among primary school students in Tennessee. Further, this study considers whether the behavioral intervention impacted children equally, regardless of gender or race. The following research questions were addressed: (1) Is there a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, and if so, is this pattern similar across White and Black students? (2) Is there a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program?

It was hypothesized that suspension rates would decrease and attendance rates would increase for all children, and that the gap in suspension rates between White and Black students would be narrowed. In this chapter, preliminary analyses will provide descriptive statistics of the students attending the three participating schools as well as descriptive statistics for the main study measures (i.e., suspension and attendance). Main study analyses will then be used to examine group differences in suspension and attendance rates for Black versus White students both before and after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program. Finally, repeated measures analyses will be used to compare suspension and attendance rates before and after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation for the full sample, for Black students, and for the White students to determine whether or not the



subgroup differences were reduced with intervention. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings.

### Descriptive Statistics

Although enrollment at the three participating primary schools remained relatively constant across the five years for which administrative data were made available, there were, unsurprisingly, some minor fluctuations. Enrollment rates by school and grade are presented in Table 3. School A was significantly larger than School B and School C. Suspension rates were similarly calculated, by school and grade, as presented in Table 4. As shown, suspension rates fluctuated widely by school and grade level.

Table 4

<i>Student Enrollment Rates by School and Grade Level</i>							
School	Grade	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	Mean
A	K	153	144	116	116	116	129.0
	1	147	143	130	130	130	136.0
	2	140	140	145	145	145	143.0
	3	128	141	127	127	127	130.0
	4	138	129	130	130	130	131.4
	5	133	140	126	126	126	130.2
B	K	32	27	22	28	22	26.2
	1	23	27	20	20	18	21.6
	2	28	22	23	19	19	22.2
	3	36	30	22	28	24	28.0
	4	29	32	23	19	23	25.2
	5	33	24	28	25	22	26.4
C	K	38	35	28	35	15	30.2
	1	45	42	27	27	30	34.2
	2	35	44	38	25	18	32.0
	3	27	32	40	41	29	33.8
	4	29	28	30	36	38	32.2
	5	36	30	24	29	31	30.0

Table 5

*Suspension Rates by School and Grade Level*

School	Grade	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	Mean
A	K	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.0	7.8	4.0
	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.6	5.3	2.2
	2	0.0	0.0	5.5	13.8	4.3	4.7
	3	2.3	0.0	2.4	21.3	13.5	7.9
	4	2.9	0.0	3.9	17.5	6.7	6.2
	5	6.8	1.4	4.0	7.0	10.0	5.8
B	K	15.6	11.1	9.1	7.1	4.5	9.5
	1	0.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	11.1	12.2
	2	3.6	0.0	21.7	10.5	5.3	8.2
	3	19.4	0.0	18.2	25.0	12.5	15.0
	4	3.4	37.5	30.4	15.8	26.1	22.6
	5	18.2	0.0	9.1	32.0	32.0	18.3
C	K	0.0	0.0	3.6	5.3	0.0	1.8
	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.4	3.3	2.1
	2	51.4	6.8	31.6	0.0	5.6	19.1
	3	22.2	50.0	34.2	7.3	17.2	26.2
	4	6.9	28.6	40.0	5.6	44.7	25.2
	5	1.4	46.7	41.7	10.7	35.5	27.2

Scatterplots of these suspension rates for each school are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, highlighting the differences in suspension rates by grade level and in the increases and decreases across time in suspension rates. The earlier school years are shown as the lightest color, and lines getting progressively darker for later years. A visual examination of these scatterplots indicates that there was wide variability in suspension rates not only across grades, but within grades. In School A, there seems to be a discernable pattern—suspension rates increase in the later years as compared to the earlier years. However, in Schools B and C, no visible pattern emerges according to year or grade level although in School C there appears to be a discernable pattern of students

in higher grades being suspended more often than students in lower grades, particularly in the last three years of data (i.e., 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018).

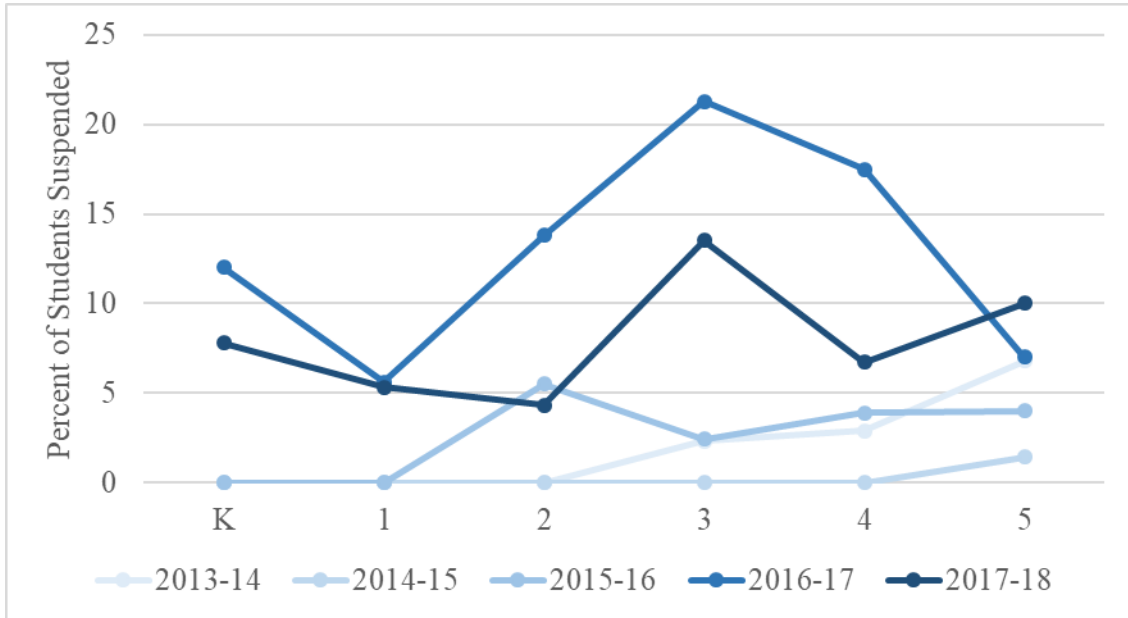


Figure 1. School A suspension rates by grade.

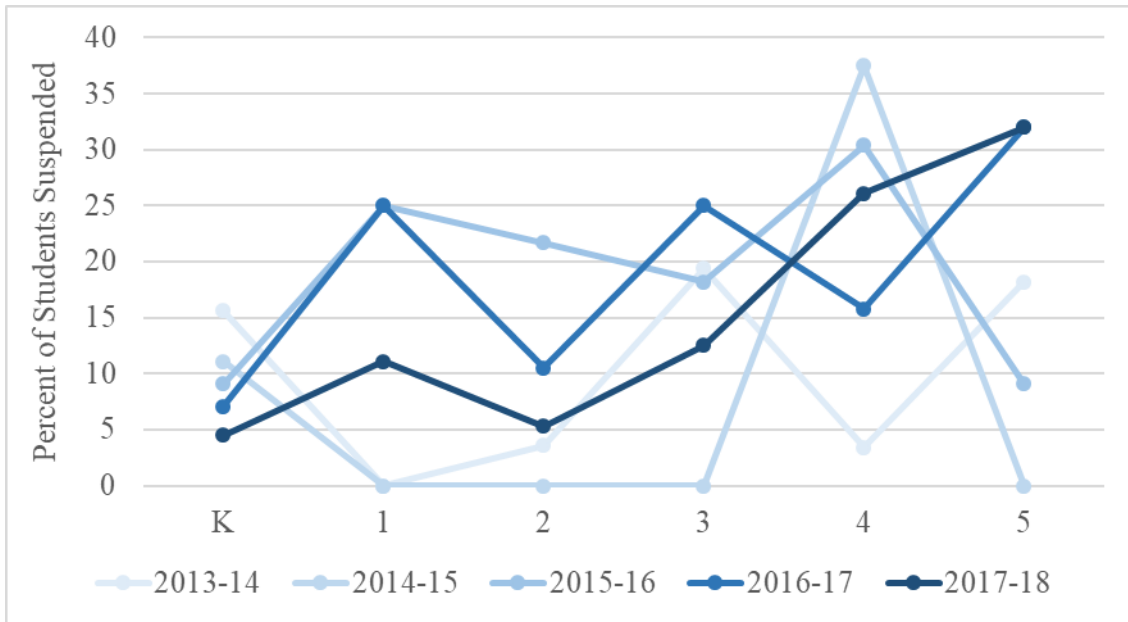


Figure 2. School B suspension rates by grade.

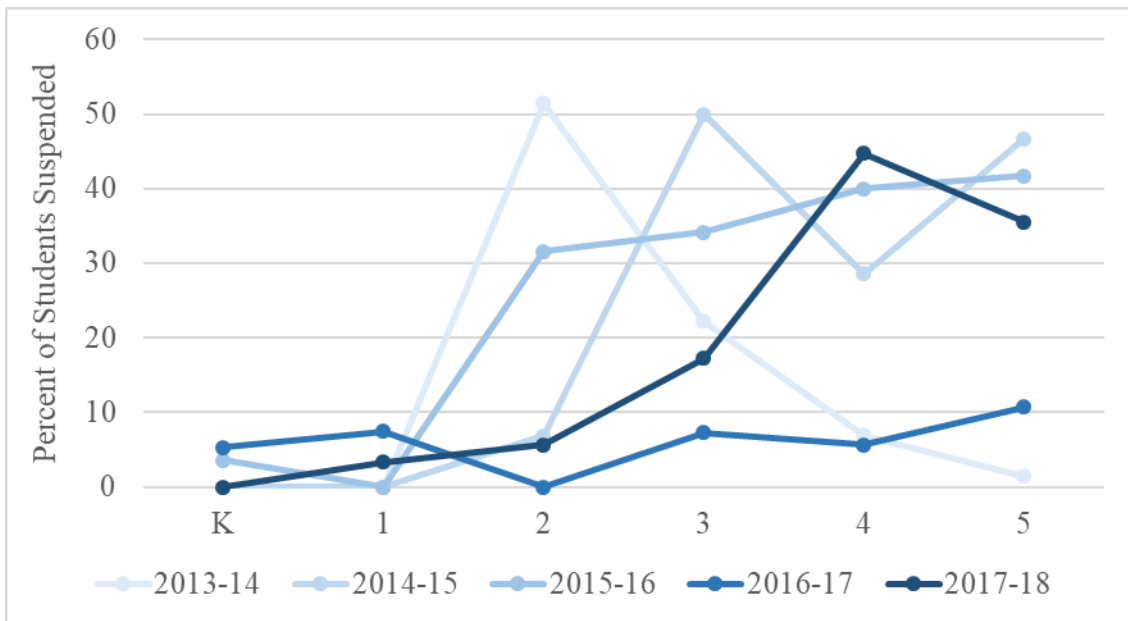


Figure 3. School C suspension rates by grade.

Average suspension rates from pre- and post- intervention application are presented in Table 6 by school and grade level. A visual examination of this table suggests that for many grades in Schools A and B, the average rates of suspensions seem

to increase after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. In School C, suspension rates decreased for all grade levels aside from kindergarten, where there was an increase, and fourth grade, where the average suspension rate stayed the same. This was statistically tested later on in the study using repeated measures analysis.

Table 6

*Mean Suspension Rates for the Pre- and Postintervention Years*

School	Grade	Pre-Intervention Suspension Rate (%)	Post-Intervention Suspension Rate (%)
A	K	0.0	9.9
	1	0.0	5.5
	2	1.8	9.1
	3	1.6	17.4
	4	2.2	12.1
	5	4.1	8.5
B	K	11.9	5.8
	1	8.3	18.1
	2	8.4	7.9
	3	12.5	18.8
	4	23.8	21.0
	5	9.1	32.0
C	K	1.2	2.7
	1	0.0	5.4
	2	29.9	2.8
	3	35.5	12.3
	4	25.2	25.2
	5	29.9	23.1

Attendance rates were calculated by school and are shown in Table 7. As shown, attendance was generally high across the three schools. A visual analysis suggests that over time, attendance rates decreased slightly at each school across the five-year span.

Table 7

<i>Attendance Rates by School</i>						
School	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	Mean
A	97.0	97.0	95.65	95.8	95.0	96.1
B	95.2	95.2	94.74	93.4	94.3	94.6
C	96.0	96.0	95.18	94.4	93.9	95.1

### Main Study Analyses

To address the first research question about whether or not there is a statistically significant difference in suspension rates for students after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation, a paired samples *t* tests was conducted. The average suspension rate across grades and schools for the first 3 years of study data (2013–2014, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016) was entered as the independent variable, and the average suspension rate across grades and schools for the last 2 years of study data (2016–2017 and 2017–2018) was the dependent variable. This analysis compared the preintervention suspension rate to the postintervention suspension rate. The mean suspension rate during the preintervention period was 11.42 (*SD* = 12.01), and the mean suspension rate during the postintervention period was 13.18 (*SD* = 8.41). The results of the paired samples *t*-test analysis indicated that although the suspension rate unexpectedly increased, this difference was not a statistically significant difference in average suspension rates with the whole sample of students ( $t = 0.61, p = .55$ ).

This analysis was repeated separately for each school, and these results are shown in Table 8. For School A, there was a significant difference in suspension rates, but in the opposite direction from the hypothesis, so that suspension rates significantly increased after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation ( $t = 5.23, p < .001$ ). For Schools B and C, there was not a significant difference in suspension rates before and after the intervention.

Table 8

*Differences in Pre- and Postintervention Suspension Rates Separately by School*

	Preintervention <i>M (SD)</i>	Postintervention <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
School A	1.62 (1.53)	10.40 (4.05)	5.23	< .001
School B	12.35 (5.88)	17.24 (9.51)	1.13	.31
School C	20.28 (15.60)	11.88 (10.12)	1.51	.19

This analysis was repeated again, this time separately by grade level (combined across schools); results are presented in Table 9. There was not a significant difference in suspension rates for students in kindergarten or in Grades 2 through 5. For students in first grade, the suspension rate was significantly higher during the postintervention period compared to the preintervention period ( $t = 4.75, p < .05$ ).

Table 9

*Difference in Pre- and Postintervention Suspension Rates Separately by Grade Level*

	Preintervention <i>M (SD)</i>	Postintervention <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Kindergarten	4.38 (6.57)	6.12 (3.64)	0.38	.74
Grade 1	2.78 (4.81)	9.62 (7.30)	4.75	.04
Grade 2	13.40 (14.69)	6.58 (3.33)	0.66	.58
Grade 3	16.52 (17.30)	16.13 (3.43)	0.03	.98
Grade 4	17.06 (12.96)	19.40 (6.66)	0.61	.60
Grade 5	14.37 (13.71)	21.20 (11.86)	0.79	.51

Students who attended kindergarten and first grade during the first year for which data were collected (2013–2014) also attended fourth and fifth grade during the last year of data collection (2017–2018). This allowed for a comparison with this specific subset of students to determine whether or not suspension rates for these children significantly

changed after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. To examine this, repeated measures analysis was conducted, which considered suspension rates for this cohort of students across all years of the study. The suspension rates for this subset of children at each school are shown in Table 10. These students are presented in the table as two groups—one that was in kindergarten in the first year of the data and the other in first grade in the first year of the data. The results of the repeated measures ANOVA suggested that there was a significant change over time in suspension rates ( $t = 3.52, p = .02$ ), but that this change was in the unexpected direction, with suspension rates increasing over time rather than decreasing as predicted.

Table 10

<i>Suspension Rates Across the Years for a Specific Cohort of Students</i>					
	2013–2014	2014–2015	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018
School A					
Kindergarten	0.0	0.0	5.5	21.3	6.7
1st grade	0.0	0.0	2.4	17.5	10.0
School B					
Kindergarten	15.6	0.0	21.7	25.0	26.1
1st grade	0.0	0.0	18.2	15.8	32.0
School C					
Kindergarten	0.0	0.0	31.6	7.3	44.7
1st grade	0.0	7.0	34.2	5.6	35.5

The first research question also addressed whether or not suspension rates were significantly different for students of different races. Suspension rates by race (Black vs. White) were only available for the postintervention administrative data (2016–2017 and 2017–2018), so it was not possible to compare disparities in suspension rates between Black and White students before and after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. In addition, since data were only aggregated data available, it was not possible to statistically compare



suspension rates by race. Instead, descriptive analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis that after the intervention, there would be no significant difference in suspension rates by race.

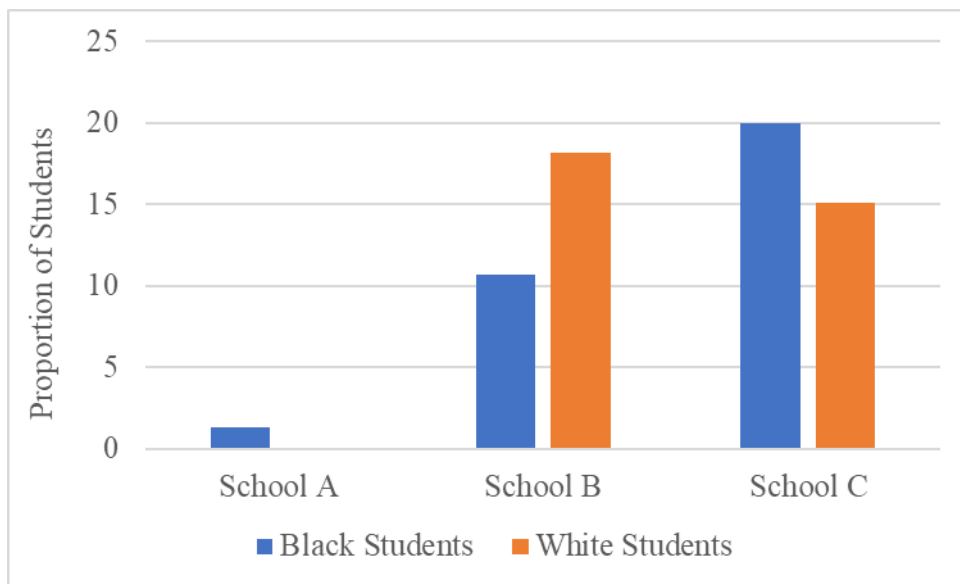
Table 11 presents suspension rates by race for each school. As shown, across all three schools, none of the White students were suspended during the first postintervention year (2016–2017). In contrast, during this same year, Black students were suspended at relatively high rates in Schools B and C, with a smaller proportion of Black students suspended in School A. Data showing no suspension of White students and high suspension numbers for Black students provides clear evidence of disproportionality. Gorski (2017) recommends that once inequities such as this are recognized, education stakeholders embracing an equity literacy framework must respond. One manner is to begin to focus on unlearning a deficit ideology. According to Gorski (2010), a deficit ideology is an “ideology which shapes individual assumptions and dispositions in order to encourage compliance with an oppressive educational and social order” (p. 3).

Table 11

School	% Black Students		% White Students	
	2016–17	2017–18	2016–17	2017–18
A	2.8	1.3	0.0	0.0
B	12.5	10.7	0.0	18.2
C	11.4	20.0	0.0	15.1

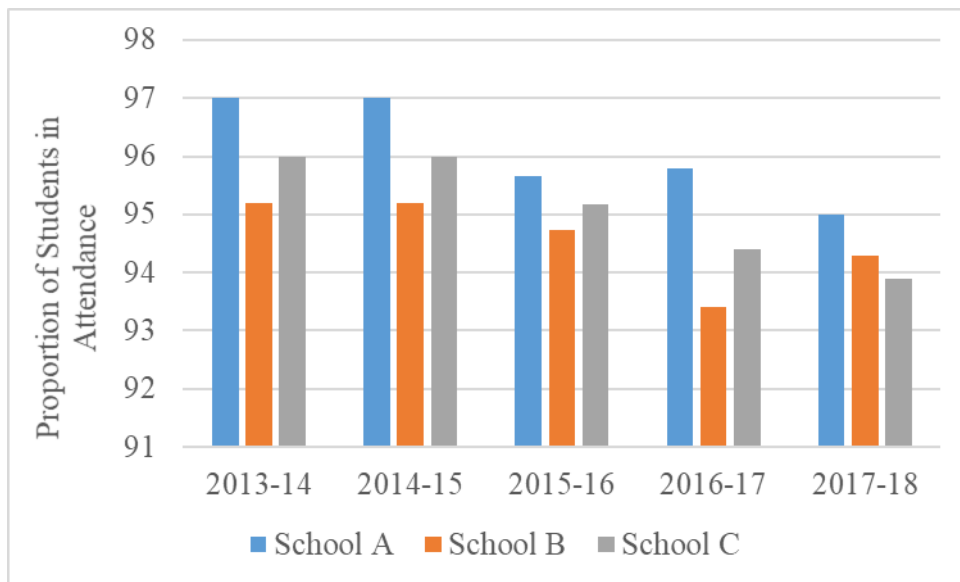
In the second post-intervention year (2017–2018), again, none of the White students in School A were suspended, but a small proportion of the Black students were

suspended (less than 2%). In contrast, in School B, a higher proportion of White students were suspended than Black students (18.2% vs. 10.7%) in the second postintervention year. In School C, relatively high proportions of both Black and White students were suspended in the second postintervention year. Although gaps in suspension rates between Black and White students were narrowed, rates increased overall. If the narrowing of discipline gaps at these three schools continues across further years of implementation, it would provide evidence that the intervention used to respond to inequities in discipline at these three schools could be seen as effective. However, concern does remain for the overall increases in student suspension rates during these years. These results are also displayed in Figure 4, showing the difference in suspension rates for White and Black students for the 2017–2018 academic year.



*Figure 4.* Suspension rates by race and school for the 2017–2018 year.

The second research question addressed whether or not there was a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation; ideally, another paired samples *t*-test analysis would have been conducted. However, similar to the issue with the suspension data by race, since only aggregated data were available, it was not possible to statistically compare suspension rates by race. Instead, the descriptive analysis conducted above was the only way to examine whether or not the hypothesis that attendance rates would increase after the implementation of the behavioral intervention. The attendance rates for each school by year are shown in Figure 5.



*Figure 5.* Attendance rates by school and academic year.

When averaged across years, the mean preintervention attendance rate across all three schools ( $M = 95.77$ ) was higher than the mean post-intervention attendance rate across all three schools ( $M = 94.47$ ). This suggests that attendance actually decreased after

implementation of the behavioral intervention. However, when schools were examined separately, results indicated that for School A, the rates of attendance increased between the first and second postintervention years. This suggested that over time, there could be a positive result from the intervention where attendance rates continue to increase over time.

### **Summary**

Administrative data from three different schools was used to explore whether or not the implementation of a version of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, a multitiered PBIS model of behavior intervention, reduced suspension rates and increased attendance rates among primary school students in Tennessee. The equity literacy framework, which outlines that education stakeholders should proactively fight against inequities in education through the use of research-based practices (Gorski, 2017), undergirded the study. This examination of student suspensions, attendance, and discipline gaps is both timely and relevant as national and local discipline issues demand research-based solutions.

Results indicated that among some schools and among particular grade levels, the intervention resulted in lower suspension rates and higher attendance rates although overall, the findings did not support the study prediction that suspension rates would decrease and attendance rates would increase. This calls into question the effectiveness of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B in reducing inequities in discipline at these schools. Gorski (2017) recommends that under the equity literacy framework, schools should make “evidence-informed” decisions to reduce bias and improve outcomes. Evidence from this study shows that in contradiction to the hypothesis, the use of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B intervention did show statistical

significance. However, this significance was in the opposite direction of the hypothesis, displaying that suspension rates significantly increased after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Implications, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In the current study, the outcomes of interest were related to disciplinary practices across America, which remain a concern for researchers, policymakers, school leaders, and educators. Alarming, suspension rates for students in schools remain high even though research has confirmed the ineffectiveness and negative impact of this discipline practice (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Specifically, the disparities between suspension rates of various student groups (e.g., students with exceptionalities, students of color, male student), remain profound (Morgan et al., 2019). Gorski (2017) recommends that educators directly confront inequity like this by proactively working to correct the institutional injustices that contribute to these outcomes. The state of Tennessee developed a preventive discipline program, Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B), to do just that.

Tennessee's tiered RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program was created to align with the state's existing system of tiered supports for academics (Tennessee Behavior Supports Project [TBSP] at University of Memphis, 2017). Considering that RTI<sup>2</sup>-B is currently used in 26 schools across the state, it was of interest in this study to discover the changes in attendance and suspension rates as a result of the program.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation lowered suspension rates and increased attendance rates among elementary school students by grade and race in a rural school district in western Tennessee. Results of the study may inform the use of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B as a method to reduce suspension rates, increase attendance rates, or decrease discipline gaps among student

subgroups. Using a quasi-experimental quantitative analysis, the differences in suspension and attendance rates after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation were analyzed. The questions guiding this inquiry were (1) Is there a statistically significant difference in suspension percentages for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, and if so, is this pattern similar across White and African-American students? and (2) Is there a statistically significant difference in student attendance rates for students after implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program?

A quantitative research design was used to analyze and present the pre- and postintervention differences in student suspension and attendance rates both before and after program implementation at three selective elementary schools. Repeated measures ANOVA and paired samples *t* tests were conducted to address the primary research questions. The use of archived data provided the means to use these methods to determine if the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program created differences in suspension and attendance rates at these three elementary schools.

### **Summary of the Findings for Each Research Question**

The results of this study provided evidence of the differences in students' attendance and suspension rates after the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program at three Tennessee elementary schools. Much like previous Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program research, the goal of this study was to determine if changes in attendance and suspension rates occurred after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. The relationship between pre- and postattendance data by year, pre- and postsuspension data by grade across years, and postintervention differences in race were analyzed.

In order to answer both research questions, paired-samples t-testing were used. This is most appropriate for examining differences in suspension and attendance rates before and after implementation of the behavioral intervention. Additionally, a repeated measures ANOVA was used to provide additional insight into research question 1, as the presence of per-grade-level data allowed for examination of the trend in suspension rates before and after implementation.

### **Research Question 1**

Research question 1 was aimed at determining if there were statistically significant differences in suspension rates after implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B and by race. The results reject the notion that RTI<sup>2</sup>-B intervention had a significant positive impact on suspension rates for students in the study. While statistically significant differences were found at School A, the difference was opposite of the hypothesis, indicating that suspension rates at this school increased after the application of the intervention.

Intervention impact was also examined by race using descriptive analysis across two postintervention years. In year 1, gaps in suspension rates between races were seen, with no White student suspensions the entire year and up to a 12.5% for Black students in the same time period. However, year 2 shows less difference in suspension rates by race, with both White and Black students being suspended at comparable frequencies.

Finally, repeated measures ANOVA was conducted for two classes of students: those in kindergarten and those in 1st grade during the 2013–2014 school year. Examining the five-year trend in suspension rates for these students as they progressed to 4th grade and 5th grade, respectively, revealed similar findings to the paired *t* test. There



was a significant change over time in suspension rates ( $t = 3.52, p = .02$ ), as these rates increased over time.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question was aimed at determining if there were significant differences in student attendance rates after implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B. Overall, study results reject the hypothesis that rates would improve after the application of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B intervention program. This suggests that attendance actually decreased after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation. When schools were examined separately, results indicated that for Schools B and C, the rates of attendance increased between the first and second postintervention years, suggesting that over time, there may be positive results of the intervention in which attendance rates continue to increase over time.

## **Implications**

This research can be used to inform decision-making regarding the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B intervention program for behavior at the local, state, and national level. Currently in Tennessee, policymakers at all levels have recognized the adverse impact of student suspensions and the disproportionality of these rates affecting students of color (Tennessee Leaders for Equity, 2018). According to a 2018 Tennessee Educator Survey, around 30% of teachers in the state feel that their school does not handle student discipline and behavioral issues effectively. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of school administrators across the state reported, on the same survey, that they spend over 10 hours per week dealing with student discipline issues. The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE, 2018) described that exclusionary discipline practices may also be influencing high chronic absenteeism in Tennessee. Further, SCORE (2017)

cited that a massive 63,000 students missed school in 2015 due to exclusionary discipline. With each of these expressed concerns, it is critical that researchers and policymakers focus on generating and using research-based practices to combat these concerning statistics.

Efforts must be made to ensure that all schools using the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program have high levels of training and implement with fidelity. Fidelity occurs when a program or initiative is implemented exactly as it was recommended for use by researchers and/or developers (Harn, Paris, & Stoolmiller, 2013). According to TBSP Memphis (2019), cyclical use of a fidelity inventory is recommended both the PBIS and the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B programs to assure accurate and sustained program implementation. The Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) is one instrument recommended by developers of Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program (Spencer, 2015; TBSP Memphis, 2019). As Durlak and DuPre (2008) note, programs that are implemented with fidelity see outcomes two to three times higher than those that are implemented haphazardly.

The U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) requires that school districts across the nation report discipline percentages (via The Education Trust, 2019). However, the same report details that school discipline data is easy to skew. This is especially true if districts know that accountability indicators depend on low exclusionary discipline rates or reduction of discipline gaps. In Tennessee, the emphasis on accurate discipline reporting by RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program developers has led to a scaling up of school data-tracking processes for student behavior (TBSP Vanderbilt, 2019). This could skew discipline data from pre- to post-implementation years as it changes the way districts report individual incidences.

This study contradicts the research (such as Gill, 2017) supporting PBIS's success at reducing suspensions and increasing attendance. Interestingly, the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B website also claims that the program is effective at reducing exclusionary discipline rates (TBSP Memphis, 2017). However, the current analysis of suspension data across the three schools in the study displayed no significant positive impact. One school in the study did display statistical significance in suspension rates after program application; however, the impact was opposite of what was hypothesized (i.e., higher vs. lower suspension rates). This investigation offers important data that will assist school, district, and state leaders in deciding the impact of programs such as RTI<sup>2</sup>-B on the improvement of discipline practices. Schools like those selected for this study should view this program through the lens of equity literacy, making sure that the initiative is continued based on student data and not the trendiness of a new idea.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study is focused on identifying the effectiveness of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B behavior program at three Tennessee elementary schools. The extent of program impact was determined by analyzing suspension and attendance data both before and after use of the intervention. Additionally, data disaggregated by race was viewed for two years post-implementation to examine if racial differences were present in suspension data. The following recommendations for future research are made with the intent of adding to the literature on programs that impact student discipline, student attendance, and racial disparities in suspension exclusionary discipline:

- Examinations of the impact of fidelity in implementation outcomes for RTI<sup>2</sup>-B;

- Further examinations that incorporate other student subgroups, such as economically disadvantaged (ED), students with disabilities (SWD), and other racial/ethnic groups;
- Examinations of schools' discipline-reporting practices both before and after program implementation;
- Qualitative examinations presenting the perspectives of students, educators, and school leaders on the effectiveness of RTI<sup>2</sup>-B.
- Additional examinations into other preventative or restorative programs used in Tennessee that may lower suspension rates, improve student attendance, and close discipline gaps.

### **Conclusion**

Exclusionary discipline practices remain both a national and local problem, attracting the attention of both educational leaders and policymakers. An increased spotlight on ensuring discipline equity for all students has led many education stakeholders to implement restorative or preventive programs. Some of these programs, such as PBIS, are well established in research as effective. However, there are others, like Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program, that are not yet well studied.

The equity literacy framework calls for education stakeholders to generate and use research-based solutions to issues with student equity in schools (Gorski, 2017). Since inequity in discipline is profound and has been for decades, the time is now to generate reliable solutions. Different education agencies have incorporated programs, for example, restorative justice, character education, social-emotional learning, classroom management, PBIS, and RTI<sup>2</sup>-B, all aimed at rectifying the situation.

While no positive significance in the impact of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program was found in the current study, this study still provides important information for districts and schools to consider while determining whether or not they should adopt RTI<sup>2</sup>-B. Adversely to the hypothesis, the study did conclude that the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B program did show significance, but this significance was opposite of what was predicted. Repeated measures ANOVA and *t* tests displayed significant negative impacts on suspension rates after RTI<sup>2</sup>-B implementation, with those rates increasing over the years of interest in the study. While in-depth analysis regarding student suspension by race was not an option due to limited data availability, gaps in Black and White suspension rates did appear to level out over time; however, this leveling occurred at the expense of suspension rates for both groups seeing postintervention increases.

It should be noted that the negative impacts found in this study could be related to other underlying issues in the fidelity of program implementation or data reporting. Schools that choose to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>-B undergo several days of training to increase program fidelity. However, it still remains that variance in fidelity can strongly impact program outcomes, making it an essential piece to consider when analyzing the results of this study.

Many schools that have implemented the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B system were not accurately tracked student discipline incidents until after undergoing program training focused on the importance of precise reporting. For example, schools may not report all instances of ISS placement as definitions of in-school placement are easily misinterpreted. Due to increased accountability regarding the overuse of suspension at both the state and national level, particularly toward students with disabilities, schools may purposely

underreport by calling ISS other names like “study hall,” “reflection time,” or simply by considering it an alternative general classroom setting.

Even with unforeseen outcomes, investigations such as this one will be instrumental in guiding both further research and practice that aim to close discipline gaps and improve student outcomes. This study highlights two components, suspension and attendance, that remain important factors in the effectiveness of a behavior intervention program. It will remain critical that policymakers and other education stakeholders use research such as this to determine actions to improve disproportionality, reduce suspensions, and improve attendance.

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## Appendix A: Research Consent Form

### Research Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) system in the areas of office discipline referrals and attendance in rural West Tennessee elementary schools. This program may also be referred to Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in literature and research. Information needed for this study includes office discipline referral and attendance data from pre-implementation and post-implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B system in your school(s).

Data from this study can be used to inform both local and state decision-making surrounding the use of the RTI<sup>2</sup>-B system. Final statistics reported will be absent of identifiable student or school-specific information. According to the Institutional Review Board, this study meets "exemption" criteria, meaning that it poses little to no risk to participants. You should, also, be aware that participation in the study is fully voluntary.

I would appreciate your support in the completion of this research through the sharing of data from your school(s). After this signed consent form is received, I will be in contact with your RTI<sup>2</sup>-B coach and/or data specialists in order to retrieve the aforementioned figures. Please contact the principal investigator, Lauren Tate, at (731)414-2723, with any questions or concerns. Signed consent can be scanned via email to [letate@memphis.edu](mailto:letate@memphis.edu).

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent for my school district to take part in the study.

Your Name And School District (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_ County Schools

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date 4-13-18

## Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval

3/24/2019

Mail - Lauren Elizabeth Tate (letate) - Outlook

### PRO-FY2018-511 - Admin Withdrawal: Not Human Subject Research

irb@memphis.edu

Tue 3/20/2018 2:13 PM

To: Lauren Elizabeth Tate (letate) <letate@memphis.edu>; William James Jacob (wjacob) <wjacob@memphis.edu>



Institutional Review Board  
Office of Sponsored Programs  
University of Memphis  
315 Admin Bldg  
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

March 20, 2018

PI Name: Lauren Tate

Co-Investigators:

Advisor and/or Co-PI: William Jacob

Submission Type: Admin Withdrawal

Title: The Effectiveness of RTI2-B, a PBIS Program, in Rural Tennessee Elementary Schools

IRB ID: PRO-FY2018-511

From the information provided on your determination review request for "The Effectiveness of RTI2-B, a PBIS Program, in Rural Tennessee Elementary Schools", the IRB has determined that your activity does not meet the Office of Human Subjects Research Protections definition of human subjects research and 45 CFR part 46 does not apply.

This study does not require IRB approval nor review. Your determination will be administratively withdrawn from Cayuse IRB and you will receive an email similar to this correspondence from irb@memphis.edu. This submission will be archived in Cayuse IRB.

THANKS,  
IRB Administrator  
Research Compliance  
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