

# SINGLED

**RACIAL DISPARITIES IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION'S SCHOOL SUSPENSION RATES ARE SPURRING SOME LOCAL DISTRICTS TO SEEK ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING BEHAVIOR ISSUES SO THAT STUDENTS STAY IN SCHOOL. BY CHRISTINE H. O'TOOLE**

**Z**ero tolerance.

It sounds tough. If school students act up, they're out: suspended or expelled for bad behavior. But the impact of these policies, dubbed exclusionary practice, radiates beyond campus, harming families and the community.

Suspensions at U.S. public schools have doubled in the United States since the 1970s. But the practice hasn't forced the punished students to behave better.

In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported in 2011 that being suspended even once makes students 12 percent more likely to drop out of school and three to 10 times more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system. Other research has shown that suspended or expelled youth are twice as likely to get arrested during the months they were suspended.

Most troubling, African American students are far more likely to receive school punishments than whites, putting them on track to later incarceration. A recent analysis of Allegheny County school data by University of Pittsburgh researchers showed that black students are suspended at a rate seven times higher than that of students who are not African American

with the disparity particularly stark in districts with majority white student populations but significant percentages of black students.

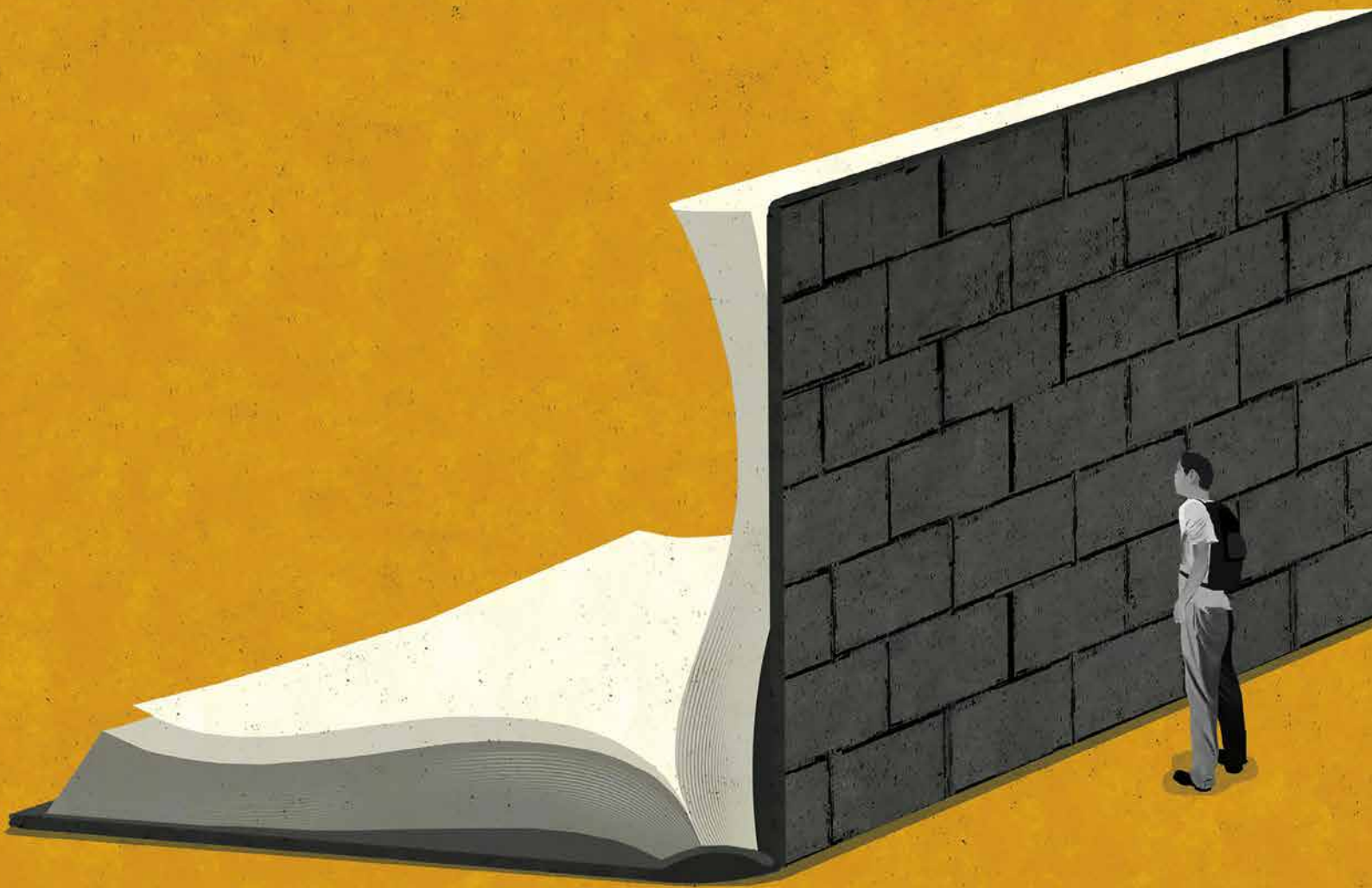
"That number—seven times higher—points to a structurally racist set of behaviors," said Grant Oliphant, president of The Heinz Endowments, responding to the findings in "Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh: Local Challenges and Promising Solutions." The Endowments' African American Men and Boys Initiative commissioned the study.

"What does it mean for the kids involved? This is a phenomenon where African Americans are being singled out. What it means is they are not in school learning," Mr. Oliphant said. "As a result of suspensions, they're marked as 'bad kids' and have higher interaction with law enforcement. So, the national school-to-prison pipeline begins here, with decisions to suspend and expel students."

And suspensions have a lifetime impact both on students' futures and the region's.

Pitt's findings showed that a 10-point difference in suspensions per 100 correlated to a 3 percent lower graduation rate. Using the 2014–15 school year as an example, the researchers estimated that at least 12 percent, or 58, of the 480 students who dropped out of Allegheny

# OUT



County schools that year did so because of suspension experiences. The study determined that these 58 individuals who did not graduate will cost the county over their working-age time span more than \$9 million in lost tax revenue and over \$30 million in socioeconomic financial losses, such as reduced consumer spending and additional expenses for social supports.

Researchers studying the costs of suspensions, including the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, believe there has to be a fairer and more productive way to handle misbehavior. Several local school districts are trying preventive strategies, including the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Woodland Hills, a district serving students from 12 suburban communities east of Pittsburgh. Based on the principle of restorative justice, they focus less on punishment. Instead, they emphasize righting wrongs and building healthy relationships within the school.

At Woodland Hills, the work begins in a circle of middle school students.

Nineteen sixth-graders who gathered on Oct. 4 in the Woodland Hills Intermediate School's Maker Lab, surrounded by tools and art supplies, were invited there to become Leaders In Training. These students, along with fourth- and fifth-graders, confront bad behavior, like fighting or bullying, and express caring and confidence to their classmates. They choose to work in one of four groups: mentoring, an annual student-planned event, healing circles, and the Wolverine Cup, a friendly competition across the school's 25 homerooms.

Keatin Whitfield signed up to be a mentor to fourth-graders. The eager 11-year-old would have seemed an unlikely leader, having transferred to the school only weeks before. But teachers recommended her, and her application essay impressed Shawn Thomas, the school's restorative justice coordinator.



**A RECENT ANALYSIS OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY SCHOOL DATA SHOWED THAT BLACK STUDENTS ARE SUSPENDED AT A RATE SEVEN TIMES HIGHER THAN THAT OF STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT BLACK.**

As the mentoring group composed a statement of its goals for the year, Keatin grabbed a pink marker. She neatly lettered one word.

Empathy.

To Mr. Thomas, empathy is the first step in reducing Woodland Hills' worrisome suspension rates. His project, based on models from Houston and California, helps students resolve conflicts when they arise, engage an offender to recognize and repair harm through healing circles, and restore a sense of community.

Woodland Hills administrators and teachers knew their schools needed a better approach. Compared to the statewide average of 10 suspensions per 100 public school students, and the countywide rate of 14 per 100, Woodland Hills' rate was 41 per 100.

The district's problems were echoed throughout the region. University of Pittsburgh's Center for Race and Social Problems, which released in August its comprehensive study comparing Allegheny County school suspensions with statewide statistics, found that overall the county posted five of the 11 highest suspension rates in Pennsylvania, along with having black students' suspension rates significantly higher than those for their non-black peers. For the past two academic years, the Endowments has supported the center, which directs and evaluates the Woodland Hills pilot and its expansion to other local districts.

Mr. Thomas, 37, took the restorative justice post at Woodland Hills Intermediate School after several years as chief supervisor at the county's Shuman Juvenile Detention Center.

"My job at Shuman Center was to maintain safety—point blank," he recalled. "It was not about helping youth develop relationships. I wanted to have a bigger impact."

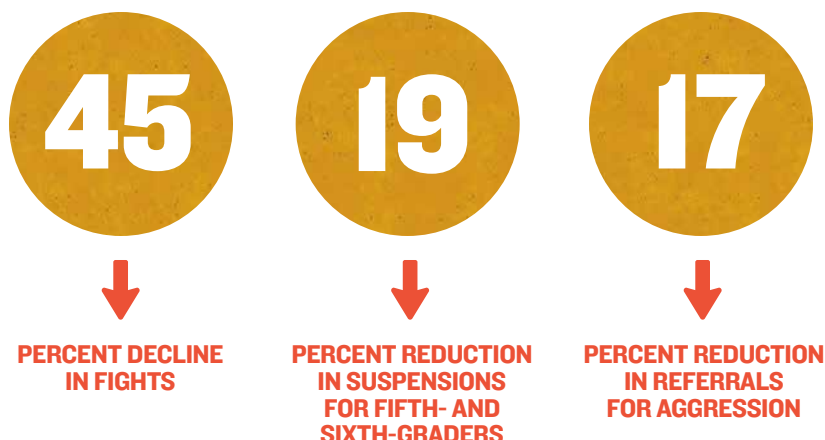
When Pitt sought a leader for the restorative justice project, Mr. Thomas, a Cheney University graduate with a master's degree in social work, found an opportunity to invert standard approaches. Using a three-tier model, the foundation is community building to enhance school culture, climate and relationships. Next are strategic response interventions to restore after harm has occurred. The top tier is reentry, welcoming back a student following suspension or other school disruption.

At the intermediate school, the most common infraction of school rules is disrespect to staff, which comprises about 60 percent of referrals, Mr. Thomas said. Fighting, often at lunchtime, gym class or recess, is another common cause.

"Our teachers have really bought into the restorative justice idea. Instead of writing a kid up for defiant behavior, they say, 'I see how you and the other kid are responding to each other. I want you to do a [healing] circle with Mister

# TRENDING DOWN

To reduce school suspensions and their negative impact on students' lives, the Woodland Hills School District is among those in the Pittsburgh region trying new prevention strategies. As part of a pilot program in the intermediate school, restorative justice approaches for addressing behavioral concerns have yielded positive results.



Shawn.' Before it was, 'I'm writing you up. Deal with the consequence.' Now there's a filter."

The Wolverine Cup competition allows homerooms to earn points for group achievements, like adhering to the school's uniform code or reducing student referrals to the school's assistant principal. Last year's Wolverine Cup winners earned 900 points and claimed the Cup's reward, a class trip to the Carnegie Museum of Art.

But the real prize of the restorative justice work was a calmer school atmosphere. With its 600 students, Woodland Hills Intermediate documented a 45 percent decline in fights and a 17 percent reduction in referrals for aggression. Suspensions for fifth- and sixth-graders declined 19 percent. At year-end, 17 percent of students reported that they now felt safer at school.

Building trust and positive relationships among students is only one part of the puzzle. As Mr. Oliphant noted, adult racial biases in both suburban and urban districts need to be addressed as well.

"If you don't talk about race, you can't talk about culture," said James Huguley, assistant professor of social work and lead author of the Pitt report. "The Pittsburgh area has one of the poorest African American communities in the country. We must understand the context here. We don't suspend a lot of kids, but when we do, they're black."

Researchers believe that disparities in school discipline practices are tied to widespread U.S. attitudes. Recent tests have revealed that as many as 80 percent of whites have anti-black biases. Some 40 percent of African Americans hold the same bias against their own race. Conflating a student's character with a violation of school rules, teachers and administrators may perceive black students, especially young men, as dangerous.

Racial bias training among police officers and other public employees can build awareness of unconscious prejudice, and has been implemented among Pittsburgh district teachers through its Beyond Diversity program.

Like Woodland Hills Intermediate, Pittsburgh Public Schools also reduced suspensions after the implementation of its restorative justice program in 22 schools across the district. Evaluation of the two-year project, funded by \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Justice School Safety Initiative, showed modest decreases in the district's suspension rates. During the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years, the rates dropped overall from 16 percent of students suspended to 13 percent.

Developed by the International Institute for Restorative Practice, the Beyond Diversity project trained teachers and paired participating elementary, middle and high schools with peer schools that did not implement the program. In the schools that used restorative practices, suspension rates dropped twice as much as in the control group. Black students had previously been suspended four times as often as white students, and that rate dropped slightly to 3.5 times as often as white students. The RAND Corporation evaluated the study.

The Pittsburgh district plans to expand restorative justice practices throughout all schools. It has announced that it will phase in a new policy barring suspensions of students in kindergarten through second grade.

Data collected by Pitt's Center on Race and Social Problems indicates that throughout the county, even at schools without formal restorative justice programs, suspension rates are dropping—unevenly, but steadily. From 2012–13 to 2015–16, suspension rates decreased by 2.6 percent, a better rate than achieved statewide.

To Carmen Anderson, the Endowments' director of Equity and Social Justice, the trend suggests that restorative justice is gaining traction as a positive disciplinary approach.

"What we learn collectively, as various districts test ideas, is promising," she said. "The first step is awareness. Yes, it matters that districts are engaged in conversation about the issue, but conversation must lead to action in both policy and practice." **h**