

## **Safely Navigating the “Dangerous Space Between Good Intentions and Meaningful Interventions”: A Study on the Use of School Suspensions in Manitoba, Canada**

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### **Abstract**

*This qualitative study delves into the perspectives of school leaders in a Canadian province, exploring their views on student suspensions and alternative approaches to school discipline. Amid a provincial advocacy organization’s call for a review and reduction of suspensions in that jurisdiction, the study captures both constructive and critical views of school leaders on the practice. Findings reveal a general endorsement of the authority to suspend students under specific conditions. School leaders are, however, conflicted about what constitutes the condition of imminent safety risk, and they advocate for discretion in making that determination. Proposing progressive-discipline strategies as alternatives, they underscore the necessity of available external resources from provincial social systems to ensure the viability and success of suggested alternatives. Collectively, this study navigates the landscape of school discipline, emphasizing the delicate balance between maintaining order and fostering an environment that is conducive for all involved in supporting student success.*

The evolution of student discipline has reflected broad societal changes, moving away from harsh methods that were once riddled with physical pain, shame, and humiliation (Adams, 2000; Hurn, 1993). Corporal punishment, which was practised in schools for the majority of the 20th century according to the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, placed educators in the role of parents and caregivers when considering disciplinary actions with students. The United Nations General Assembly’s (1959) Declaration of the Rights of the Child, however, fostered an agreement that defined the rights of youth, initiating the gradual

eradication of punitive physical disciplinary practices. In 2004, the Supreme Court of Canada rendered a majority decision on Section 43 of the Criminal Code (1985) that ruled out corporal punishment for children under the age of two or over the age of 12 and excluded its use by teachers. As corporal punishment was prohibited by law, the disciplinary actions permitted at schools were limited to uses of force such as “restraint and removal” (Durrant et al., 2009, p. 4). One example in the latter category involves *school suspension*, which Skiba and Rausch (2006) defined as a practice that is used to manage student misbehaviour or misconduct, removing a student from a school (out-of-school) or from a classroom setting (in-school).

In the jurisdiction of this study, a report by the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (2018), contained cautionary advice relating to school suspensions. Citing the case of an Indigenous youth suspended from school multiple times during one year, the Advocate noted, “When professionals are delivering services to children, those professionals hold an incredible privilege to ensure that the services that they provide help children build skills that support and protect them as they emerge into adulthood” (p. 8). Furthermore, the Advocate elaborated that, despite the youth’s typical and happy early life, he had descended into risk-taking behaviours, which ended with his untimely death. The report detailed a scenario of suspensions from school that involved weeks away from classes. The report consisted of five multisectoral recommendations, the second of which was pertinent to education: “To review the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and develop a province-wide strategy to limit, reduce or possibly phase out exclusionary practices, except in situations of imminent safety risk to students and staff” (p. 55). With knowledge of the foregoing, we undertook this independent study to examine “the dangerous space between good intentions and meaningful interventions” (p. 2)—a pattern of interactions by service providers (including school personnel) that are well intended but subsequently inappropriate and at times harmful. Within this context, the purposes of this study were to document the constructive and critical perspectives of school leaders (principals, vice-principals, or designates) on suspension practices and to explore alternative approaches to school discipline. Additionally, if the option of suspension was to be used, school leaders were asked to define the threshold for imminent safety risk. To underpin this exploration, we turned to the literature to provide a synthesis of scholarly perspectives on the subject.

### **Overview of the Literature**

We began by drawing inspiration from Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs (1943), the multi-tier model that depicts a pyramid of human necessities, effectively placing urgent items involving physiological security at the base (air, water, food, and shelter), followed by safety concerns (health, employment, or environment). The key operative in this hierarchy involves the notion that the needs presenting at the foundation are the first human priorities that must be realized prior to a focus on other requirements higher in the pyramid. In education, schools most often encounter physiological and safety needs that must be addressed before students can develop elevated levels of acceptance and belonging or make academic progress and realize learning potential. In a school environment, security and safety needs involve not only students but their families, school staff, and members of the community. A positive environment or school climate exists when all parties feel safe, when everyone demonstrates positive behaviours, and when there is an element of trust.

Occurring together, these factors can underpin a sense of belonging, inclusion, and student achievement.

In a report to the Toronto District School Board (Zheng & De Jesus, 2017), positive school climate was described as one where individuals feel not only secure and safe but also feel welcome and valued. Eccles et al. (1993) noted the importance of positive school climate on student motivation, while Ruus et al. (2007) and Virtanen et al. (2009) made the connection between positive climate and the well-being of children and youth. Positive school climate has also been associated with enhanced mental health and reductions in substance use (LaRusso et al., 2008; Ruus et al., 2007), reduced sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009), and decreases in violent or aggressive behaviours (Gregory et al., 2010; Karcher, 2002). Moreover, positive school climate is associated with improved academic achievement (Burdick-Will, 2013; Ramey, 2015). The challenge arises when students engage in misconduct, which can impact climate and ultimately diminish school safety.

Behaviours that involve insolence, intimidation, aggression, disruption, or violence can negatively impact classroom and school climates. Though defined school policies and practices can assist in setting and instructing positive expectations for social-emotional learning (Brint et al., 2001; Ingersoll, 2006), these processes by default can also sanction inequitable practices that result in students from minority groups being targeted disproportionately (Cruz et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2017; Lcoe & Manley, 2019). Greflund (2013) added that potential disparity in school discipline begins with office referrals but becomes more entrenched with the practice of school suspensions. While both responses are notably reactive in nature and provide temporary solutions, exclusionary practices can result in detrimental and protracted outcomes.

Exclusionary practices such as suspensions have been driven by the notion of *zero tolerance*, a concept derived from the military but used frequently in the justice system. Skiba et al. (2011) reported that zero tolerance requires stringent adherence to consequences linked to specific types of conduct. Moreover, they reported that this practice effectively narrows the discretion of administrators when determining disciplinary consequences. In Ontario (Canada), for example, Milne and Aurini (2017) revealed that zero-tolerance policies across public schools had triggered dramatic increases in the number of suspensions due to mandatory consequences enshrined in *Safe Schools Policy and Practice: An Agenda for Action* (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). A subsequent review of the suspension trend by government officials in that province revealed that a disproportionate number of students in racialized minorities were targeted through the zero-tolerance legislation, which resulted in the Education Amendment Act (Progressive Discipline and School Safety) of 2007, followed by a regulation on the Suspension of Elementary School Pupils (2020). Manitoba instituted a similar amendment to the Public Schools Amendment Act – Safe and Inclusive Schools (2013), focusing on both safe and caring learning environments in order to enhance equity, diversity, inclusion, and student achievement. Provincial updates of this nature set the stage for and acquaint school leaders with a continuum of positive, progressive, and proactive disciplinary approaches to support social-emotional learning in addition to more reactive approaches (Owen et al., 2015).

Progressive disciplinary strategies can be found in systems or demonstrated in the form of classroom-based practice. Gregory et al. (2017), for example, outlined responsive

instructional strategies that could be applied by teachers to proactively support students. Suggestions included developing supportive relationships with students, enhancing culturally aware and bias-free settings, and creating opportunities for students to learn from their behaviour challenges. Gregory et al. (2017) also advocated for using discipline data to better understand sources of student conflict or inequitable application of consequences. They advocated for solution-focused approaches when responding to behaviour, inclusion of family and student voice when designing discipline policies, and reassuring students that they would be reintegrated after an incident of misconduct.

Examples of progressive-discipline approaches at the systems level include structural frameworks such as the Circle of Courage (<https://starr.org/>), Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2002), restorative practices stemming from the youth justice system (González, 2012; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Zehr, 2002), the use of Violence Threat Risk Assessments (VTRAs; Cornell, 2020), and various methods of supporting behaviour through student-specific planning practices (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022) or WrapAround strategies (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2013). Notably, the Manitoba Indigenous Inclusion Directorate (2022) has developed *Mamàhtawisiwin – The Wonder We Are Born With*, a resource document that provides a pathway for schools to embed more equitable, diverse, and inclusive practices that foster a sense of belonging for all students. In short, through the application of progressive disciplinary approaches at all levels of the organization, school leaders can potentially interrupt negative trajectories and possibilities of involvement with the criminal justice system and enhance student engagement, attendance, and achievement (Balfanz et al., 2014).

### **Key Theoretical Perspectives**

With schools under pressure for students to succeed, school leaders are challenged with establishing foundations for enhanced achievement through positive school climate and staff commitment. This brings to light the first theoretical perspective that underscores this research study. Social-cognitive theorist Bandura (1986) asserted the idea of *collective efficacy*, which he defined as a pattern of human behaviour involving the belief in shared capacity to establish and achieve courses of action. Furthermore, he stated that “among the types of thoughts that affect action, none is more central or pervasive than people’s judgements of their capabilities to deal effectively with different realities” (p. 21). Similarly, Goddard et al. (2004) and Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) suggested that teachers are more likely to have confidence that their actions could be of consequence, even with the knowledge of their students’ socio-economic, demographic, or achievement histories. In essence, with a sense of collective efficacy, teachers are able to demonstrate a greater commitment to positive outcomes for their students, regardless of possible barriers. Thus, in this study we identified teacher collective efficacy as a key concept in shifting school disciplinary practices beyond “the methodology of the current evidence base” (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, 2018, p. 51). Furthermore, Goddard et al. (2015) indicated that principal leadership is highly correlated with the creation of conditions for such elements of cohesion and collective influence.

Despite good intentions on the part of teachers and their leaders, however, student misconduct can undermine a positive school context. Hence, the second theoretical

consideration follows from an *ecological-systems perspective* (Bronfenbrenner & Cici, 1994). Student behavioural infractions in schools can range from minor and disruptive to aggressive or violent (Milne & Aurini, 2017). While one would expect students to be suspended more commonly for serious infractions or those which impact school safety, Raffaele Mendez and Knoff (2003) countered that students had been suspended more often for less disruptive behaviours. Skiba et al. (2014) added that the latter types of infractions might include incidents of insolence, disrespect, class disruption, tardiness, or absenteeism. School suspensions have been associated with student disengagement (Butler et al., 2005), delayed graduation (Raffaele Mendez, 2003), failure or attrition (Arcia, 2006; Moskowitz et al., 1979), and increased risk of misconduct and substance use (Hemphill et al., 2006, 2009; 2011). Noltemeyer et al. (2015) emphasized that out-of-school suspensions are correlated with harmful outcomes, and they challenged educators to find methods of instruction for appropriate behaviour while limiting exclusion from schools and classrooms. Owen et al. (2015) reinforced the importance of facilitating professional learning and development to improve instruction in the areas of academic and social-emotional learning. One of the most damaging impacts of school suspensions is the phenomena of the school-to-prison pipeline, which involves the trend of students to shift away from positive school experiences toward legal and correctional systems (Dohrn, 2002; Kupchik, 2010; Meiners, 2011; Mittleman, 2018; Price, 2009; Theriot, 2009). By considering the social-ecological–systems perspective, however, school leaders can rightly counteract this tendency by developing a sense of community and belonging and by recognizing the vital roles of equity, diversity, and inclusion in both policy and practice (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Accordingly, a third theoretical perspective involves the notion of *transformative (social justice) leadership*. Shields (2010) highlighted Freire’s (1998) assertion “that education is not the ultimate lever for social transformation, but without it, transformation cannot occur” (p. 37). Shields contended that transformative leaders should begin with queries related to democracy and justice and should become critical of inequitable processes relating to wider social environments. Hinojosa (2008) found that poverty remained a solid predictor of a school suspension, as did factors related to parental presence, school engagement, and access to educational resources. The incidence of poverty in a catchment influences the frequency of student disciplinary actions and intensifies the inequalities faced by marginalized groups (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Correspondingly, racial diversity is a key element in predicting school suspensions, even when controlling for elements of socio-economic status. For example, in the United States, African American students have been suspended more often than their European American peers (Krezmien et al., 2006; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2002; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2008). A similar situation was reported in relation to Black students in the Greater Toronto Area (James & Turner, 2017). Likewise, in Canadian schools, Indigenous students have been suspended disproportionately (Greflund, 2013) to non-Indigenous peers. Himmelstein and Brückner (2011), as well as Poteat et al. (2015), have raised the alarm regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, who they argue are at elevated risk of exclusion from schools. Additionally, Parks Ennis and Katsiyannis (2017) advised that students with low academic capability, with intellectual disabilities, or with emotional and behavioural challenges also experience consistent over-representation in terms of school exclusion, restraint, and seclusion, as well as changes in school placement. The

distinctive feature of transformative leadership relating to marginalized populations involves the important work of school leaders in emphasizing the deconstruction of mindsets and reconstruction of more equitable knowledge frameworks that recognize both power and privilege (Shields, 2010).

A final theoretical perspective that garners attention in this study involves a concept from the organizational literature known as “coupling” (Glassman, 1973; Weick, 1976, 1982). Weick (1976) argued that schools are *loosely coupled systems*, his neutral description of how they function. He contended that schools, unlike other organizations, often have reduced control over their working conditions, such as the choice of students or selection of curriculum for instructional purposes. Hence, though the concept of loose coupling can bring to mind negative imagery involving the absence of regulation, slower coordination, or delegated discretion, Weick claimed relevant advantages for the profession, including greater knowledge and understanding of local contexts, improved responsiveness, and increased agility, adaptability, and trust. In the past, with zero-tolerance policies and related enforcement, schools (by government regulation) became far more *tightly coupled*. This effectively defined expectations for teachers and removed discretionary decision-making on the part of school leaders relating to student behaviour and suspensions. With recent amendments to legislation and shifts to progressive disciplinary approaches, the context in education has returned to a more loosely coupled stance. This has allowed for increased choice on the part of school leaders, including encouragement about local decision-making and consideration of particular or unique circumstances when rendering disciplinary consequences for students. It is important to realize that the introduction of any new legislation, policy, or directive could substantially shift the narrative around loose coupling in the education system and might ultimately impact the discretion of school leaders.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

With the foregoing review of literature and theoretical framework in mind, the purposes of this study were to document both the constructive and critical perspectives of provincial school leaders (principals and vice-principals) on their discipline practices in the space between intention and intervention. School leaders were also asked to define the term “imminent safety risk” and to explore alternative disciplinary approaches. Within this process, the following research questions were proposed:

- (1) What are the constructive facets of student suspensions in Manitoba schools?
- (2) What are the problematic or unhelpful elements involved in student suspensions?
- (3) If a school suspension is necessarily applied due to imminent safety risk, how would that risk be defined?
- (4) How could student discipline be managed differently?

### **Methods**

This qualitative study was part of a larger mixed-methods project approved by the University Human Research Ethics Board and funded by a University of Winnipeg Major

Research Grant. The project included both an online survey and focus groups; however, the current study incorporates the analysis of the focus-group data. One-hour focus groups were arranged in collaboration with the Manitoba Teachers' Society – Council of School Leaders (MTS-COSL), a special area group of principals and vice-principals within the provincial teachers' organization. Focus groups have traditionally been used as a way to collect qualitative data by engaging a small group of individuals with informal discussions designed around particular topics (Wilkinson, 2004). In this study the focus-group protocol contained seven prompts, ranging from discussion starters on the constructive and critical perspectives of school suspensions to queries into how student behaviours could be managed differently and how thresholds of risk could be determined. Additionally, there were prompts regarding planning processes and strategies used with students both during and post suspension, as well as a final prompt asking participants if there was anything further that they wished to add.

## **Participants**

Explicit recruiting information for the focus groups was shared with COSL, including the background, purpose, and procedure of the study, as well as contact information for the first author. The research team shared this recruiting information with school leaders, who voluntarily reached out and expressed interest in participation. There were three focus groups held, with 10 participants in total. The first occurred in person at MTS in tandem with a fall annual general meeting of COSL. For those who could not participate in the in-person opportunity, two online focus groups were arranged in the following weeks, which occurred with two participants in each session. There were no restrictions to participation insofar as age, gender, or number of years in school leadership roles; however, all participants were required to be employed as school principals or vice-principals with membership in MTS-COSL at the time of the focus-group meetings. The 10 participants who were in the focus groups had been in school leadership positions between 7 and 31 years. Nine school leaders identified as male and one as female, and all were currently in the role of school principal. Six participants were located in early- or middle-years buildings, whereas four were in high schools. Four school leaders stated that they worked in urban settings, whereas six were employed in rural schools. Three of the six rural principals worked in schools in northern Manitoba.

## **Data Analysis**

The conversations from the focus groups were audio-recorded, with the in-person group recorded on the first author's iPhone and the online focus groups on Zoom. The audio recordings were transcribed by a senior research assistant, and the transcribed data was analyzed along with field notes documented by the research team. The technique of constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) was used as the qualitative approach in this study. It was first applied in grounded theory research but, according to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008), it could also be used to analyze focus-group data, which was a primary driver for choosing this method. Accordingly, the process of constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) involves three main stages: The first incorporates open coding of focus-group data into smaller units, followed by axial

coding into larger categories. A third stage includes the development of ideas emerging from the categories. The findings are reported in relation to the identified research questions, with emergent themes indicated within each question.

## **Findings**

### **Constructive Aspects of School Suspensions**

School leaders in the focus groups were first asked to identify their perspectives on the constructive aspects of school suspensions. Themes of “student, school, and community safety,” “function and purpose,” “communication and messaging,” as well as “family involvement and collaborative planning,” emerged through data analysis. First, most participants revealed that they seldom suspended students and, in fact, used the practice most often as a last resort. A school leader began by stating, “Responses have changed over time—I can’t recall the last suspension that occurred at my school.” School leaders cautiously voiced support for the process yet explained the necessity to consider suspensions on a case-by-case basis. One school leader clarified the importance of being able to suspend to keep everyone safe, including the student(s) involved and bystanders:

If the violence is to the point where it’s a danger to everybody, you need a break, that child needs a break, and the rest of that class need a break. So that to me is having the ability to suspend; that’s a constructive piece of it.

The school leader reinforced the link between the authority to suspend and school safety. They expressed concern that, one day, this authority might be limited or removed by government regulation: “It would be very easy for students and the community to say, ‘If you can’t suspend anymore, you have no power and you have no control.’” Another school leader added, “It [the suspension] can act a bit like a circuit breaker, just while you’re letting the temperature cool—a short outage can give a slight reprieve. That in itself is not a solution, but it allows a pathway toward a resolution.” Another principal spoke of the importance of reflection in the suspension process and the involvement of the school team: “When an event occurs, it is important to provide follow-up time to make sure that the consequences serve the appropriate function for the situation that is occurring.” A school leader emphasized that a suspension can send a clear message to a student: “In my experience, it says, ‘You went too far.’ I’ll counsel you up to a certain point, but at that point I can’t have you in the building.” An additional perspective was added about communication:

It sends a message to parents and caregivers that their child may need some help, an indication that the family needs to be at the table and plan together. If the process has gone well, you might have a response from the family that says, “I understand, thank you.” Families can give input on what they do when they see those behaviours at home and have input on the plan for re-entry.

School re-entry processes were described as integral to a constructive process, with most school leaders arranging for student re-entry in the same phone call as the suspension notification. Another school leader elaborated that a re-entry plan for a student might involve a meeting to initiate or update a student’s safety plan. If students were suspended more than twice during a year, a school leader commented,



We're going to be looking at that as a school team and including our guidance counsellor, me [the principal], their teacher(s), and in some instances senior admin [school-division personnel]. The student is probably also falling quite far behind in their studies and, at some point, when they reach high school, the attainment of a credit within a semester is no longer plausible. It should be that we've identified that this child has high needs and there's going to be safety planning that happens periodically. Part of the plan could be that, if the behaviour gets to this point, then a suspension is something we may have to put in place. But we try multiple things before we get to that.

Another school leader agreed, noting, "It's never the answer or the fix. I think as long as that's always understood—that the process starts long before a child would be removed from a learning environment. The process starts with interventions, supports, and teaching." A focus-group participant summarized the conversation:

One of my first principals said, "The kid that's the most difficult is the one that you have to draw closest to you," and I've always hung on to that in my career. Those are the kids who actually need connection, not exclusion. I don't think principals suspend kids unless they've already thought, "Is there any other thing that I can do first?"

### **Problematic Elements of School Suspensions**

School leaders were also asked to provide their perspectives on the problematic or unhelpful elements of student suspensions. In response to this question, they identified themes relating to "lack of flexibility and discretion," "unintended barriers," "the negative impacts on rapport with families," as well as "the exclusion of students of low ability or students with disabilities" (typically sent home without recording a suspension). School leaders expressed most apprehension about the lack of discretion as a result of rigid policies on student suspensions: "Every once in a while, you see people wanting to make human behaviour black and white [saying], 'If you do this, then this [will happen].' That kind of policy is terrible. It doesn't require professional judgement." Another added,

Thinking back to past years where the zero-tolerance language was a lot more popular, you ended up with really poor relationships and rifts between families, kids, and schools, [along with] labels, self-esteem issues, and everything that goes with that. There was no room for interpretation, no room for context, and that is harmful.

A school leader affirmed the importance of continued discretion in decision-making about suspensions: "I am pretty confident that I know my students quite well, and if in doubt, I'm going to consult with the teachers and my [student services] team." All of the focus groups highlighted the vital responsibility of building community, and concern was voiced about suspensions (especially out-of-school) eroding established connections with families. One school leader emphasized that "a suspension runs counter to the premise of drawing the child closer—building rapport, building relationship, and building confidence so that the child will have adult support and modelling." Furthermore, focus-group participants each discussed the challenges of maintaining parental support when suspensions did occur. A school leader reflected,

If you're doing a suspension, you need parental support. If you don't have a plan in place with families and they are not on board, then what have we taught the students? They get a break from school, they play video games, they go out and, in many cases, we start to see the

opposite happen where the student wants to be at home and not necessarily at school, which was already part of the problem that led to the situation.

Another school leader shared their deliberations when considering a suspension:

When I assign a suspension, I don't know whether I'm now setting up a scenario where the student is going to up the ante because they don't want to be at school. That's a huge part of the negativity of all of this.

Several school administrators noted the number of students with additional learning needs who were involved in violent behavioural incidents: "They've become dysregulated, they have behaviour plans, and they have student services involvement. But they're not going to be suspended because they have limitations to understanding—some of them are non-verbal." Despite the previous statement, school leaders did speak about the periodic need for removal of students with additional needs from the common learning environment and from the school. Two of the school leaders agreed that they would not consider this a suspension but rather an adaptation to assist the child in being more successful: "We're not suspending them—we're adapting their day. We still give them work to do at home, but we're making it as safe as possible for them because it's an overwhelming system for many of our students." Another school leader recounted such an experience:

I had to phone a parent and say, "It's one o'clock in the afternoon, and this is the type of day we had. The child needs a break and needs to go home now. Let's start fresh tomorrow." And more often than not, you're going to get the parents' [and caregivers'] buy-in on that because you're trying to get that child to focus and get the community in the building to refocus. It gives you an opportunity to start fresh as well.

Nonetheless, several of the school leaders mentioned a shift in their divisional policies and processes requiring them to formalize any removal of a student from school as a suspension. One in particular commented on this change as problematic:

I really dislike this need to call things "suspensions" because I find that it actually creates a barrier to working with students and families. You really want to take the time you need to build the skills for kids to be successful. If that requires some changes to their learning environments for periods of time, that's what it requires. We meet the children where they're at. This idea that it's got to be one thing or another—there's just no clear line.

### ***The Challenge of Defining Imminent Safety Risk***

School leaders were asked about their definition of "imminent safety risk" and whether they believed that school suspensions should be applied only in that instance. The participants in the focus groups seemed genuinely at odds with a common understanding of imminent safety risk, while others speculated about the nature of the statement and potential future implications. Several school leaders seemed confounded with the timeline around the term "imminent." One argued, "The response of a suspension would be after the fact all the time, and Kevin Cameron<sup>1</sup> referred to many incidents of school violence that actually occur when kids are on suspension." Another colleague in the group offered a slightly different take: "I couldn't tell you what would be considered an imminent danger

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<sup>1</sup> Executive director, North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response.

because there is no one thing that necessarily happens day to day like that. Imminent implies unknown—it's upcoming!" Another school leader brought up the idea that broadened the conversation:

We talk about psychological safety—when is that threatened? If my school isn't taking care of behaviours properly, I might feel psychologically unsafe. Safety doesn't mean you're in the pathway of a swing. There's a much wider definition of imminent safety risk if you want to go there.

One school principal related the conversation that they had with parents and caregivers in regard to school safety: "I do a lot of education about what is safe. And so, this idea of imminent danger is perspective driven. I've worked in schools from high to low socio-economic, and those definitions are vastly different." A school leader contended that the term "imminent danger" may have surfaced due to public perception that student suspensions are widespread and rampant:

I might be wrong with that, but it feels like the public thought we were just inadvertently suspending kids. Has there been an evaluation of suspension decisions? Is there something wrong with the suspension decisions being made because it seems to be alluding to that.

Another participant expressed feeling tension with the suggestion that suspensions should only be used in cases of imminent safety risk: "I really worry about policy statements that have these tight definitions that don't allow people on the front line to use the skills that we've developed over our years of experience." A colleague added, "Decision-making is always done as a team with the people who know the child well. That allows for the fluidity that children require from the adults in their lives."

### **Managing Student Behaviours Differently**

The final query in the focus groups involved a question on how student behaviour could be managed differently. School leaders cited the use of progressive disciplinary strategies as alternatives, such as restitution, VTRA, and WrapAround planning. Other suggestions included additional behavioural supports and resources to assist students and teachers, consideration of cultural proficiency in the discipline process, and building a climate for alternative approaches. One school leader recalled the successful application of restitution at their school:

It's the discussion of how you're going to make things right, saying "What would you do next time?" and you document it. If the student does the same thing again, you remind them what they said. Now we're going to have to come up with a different plan to solve the problem.

Another school leader added,

We also have other platforms like VTRA models that we can use to create student profiles. If we finally get to the point where we send a child home, we've got data that can be used for planning and support.

That said, several school leaders voiced concern about the lack of behavioural supports for students available to schools, especially in rural and remote locations of the province. One noted the following:

I would say there are a lot of systems that are absent from the table. I've been involved for the past ten years, and we struggle as a rural and northern community. In my opinion, our mental health services are very understaffed.

Several school leaders advocated for a behavioural-support-teacher or clinician allocation to schools. One suggested, "I think it comes with resources, a person in the school who could spend time with children or help teachers with behaviour planning." Additional ideas were also offered as possible alternatives when supporting student behaviour:

I wish researchers had undertaken a study into what worked during the pandemic because we had students who [previously] had full time EA [educational assistant] support that during the pandemic no longer needed any. There are a couple things we attributed to that—smaller class sizes really allowed teachers to get to know and bond with the students. The other thing we observed was the additional space—two metres between students—kids described that as allowing them to feel more secure.

Cultural considerations were noted in terms of approaches to school discipline:

In this particular school, I've had to navigate the tapestry. Some want you to suspend kids and think you're not doing your job and you're being soft if you're not suspending—but in certain cultures, it doesn't look good if matters of discipline are out there publicly. We work very closely with the community. In terms of a policy mandate, nothing should be carved in stone, but it should be framed by a context.

One school leader concluded,

You build a climate and include the families of the kids and say look, we're taking behaviours very, very seriously; however, we're also looking at alternatives. If it's transparent, people can work with that and understand there are other ways.

## **Discussion**

Given the findings of this study detailing the perspectives of school leaders on key questions about school suspensions, we make the following observations in light of the four-point theoretical framework identified earlier:

In terms of *leveraging collective efficacy*, school leaders were clear about the vital role that staff, parents, caregivers, and community members played in ensuring the success of behavioural approaches with students. School leaders observed that school suspensions could be constructively used when parent and family involvement was in place. School leaders reported regular check-ins with teachers in their schools when determining suspensions and worked with the student services teams to support behaviour intervention and safety planning for students.

Considering *social-ecological systems* within work environments, school leaders advocated for the importance of planning and working with school staff and families to ensure that interventions for student behaviour did not impact the connections and rapport that had been established over time. Furthermore, school leaders emphasized the need for flexibility in the policies and processes around student discipline, which would allow them to adjust consequences depending on particular and unique situations.

In regard to *leading for transformative social justice*, school leaders described several progressive-discipline strategies used regularly to proactively and positively address

student behaviours. They also reinforced the need to recognize cultural considerations when administering discipline within school communities. School leaders noted the need for varied responses, other than school suspensions, for students with additional learning needs who were involved in behavioural incidents.

In response to each question in the study, school leaders expressed preference for flexibility and responsiveness akin to *loosely coupled systems* and were wary of potential future changes to legislation and policy that might tighten up and negatively affect processes around school suspensions. They maintained the need for discretion in decision-making that would allow for more nuanced understandings of specific situations and the ability to adapt student discipline in their schools as necessary.

## Conclusion

In summary, school leaders in this Canadian jurisdiction were aware of the concerns of the provincial community advocate around school suspensions and were forthcoming about constructive and critical perspectives between intentions and interventions. As Smith (2007) contended,

a school principal is at the centre of a complex organizational web. There are strands inside the school to the various points of service delivery. There are strands that extend outward to families and the community, as well as to local regional agencies and groups. There are strands that extend upward to the school district and from there to the ministry of education. (p. 279)

School leaders in this study voiced cautious support about the use of student suspensions as a means of ensuring safety in the province's schools. They reasoned that, as long as this practice was used as a proactive and preventative approach, with clear communication around notification and re-entry, suspensions could be constructively applied. Second, aspects that were considered unhelpful or problematic about suspensions were identified as factors that would limit discretion relating to decision-making about disciplinary actions. School leaders noted that prescriptive policies dealing with student behaviours often resulted in an erosion of connections with families and caregivers, which were considered to be the cornerstones of collaborative planning for social-emotional learning. Third, although a variety of different perspectives were suggested regarding the definition of imminent safety risk, school leaders did not concur on a common definition of this suggested terminology. Again, school leaders were concerned that a restrictive description of this nature might impact collaboration with school teams and families when determining appropriate responses for student behaviour. In the final query on how student behaviour could be approached differently, school leaders supported the use of progressive strategies similar to those offered in the literature. At the same time, however, they stated that limited resources and supports in other provincial social systems impacted their ability to engage in intersectoral partnerships and to select and apply alternatives to manage student discipline. Additionally, school leaders reflected on the importance of understanding cultural norms when considering responses to student behaviour challenges and the vital need to ensure that diverse communities understood the expectations and practices around discipline in schools. Ultimately, transparency, flexibility, and context were determined to be key factors for students, families, schools, and communities when collaborating in a complex and interconnected network to support student behaviour.

## Limitations

We acknowledge the following limitations in this research to facilitate the interpretation of results. This qualitative study involved an exploration of the perspectives of 10 school leaders. As a result, it is difficult to generalize based on this sample size. In this study, views were also representative of school leaders and did not include perspectives held by other stakeholder voices in the education sector, although this could be a focus of future research.

Nonetheless, the data did provide an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of school leaders, and the findings could provide valuable insights for those addressing similar challenges while in school-leadership positions. Additionally, the study was conducted in one geographical location with the findings specific to local socio-cultural contexts and provincial policies. Nonetheless, the observations made and the broad-based suggestions documented in this study could be considered beyond this jurisdiction.

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