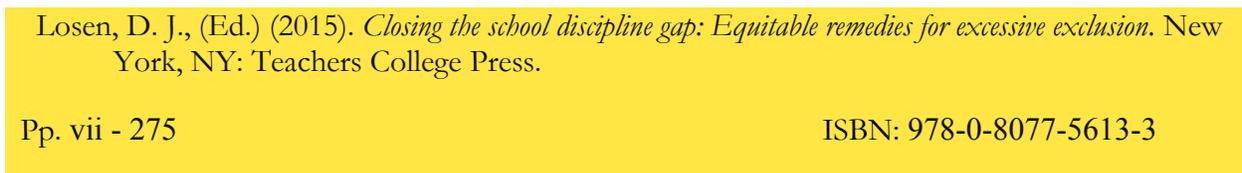




April 4, 2016

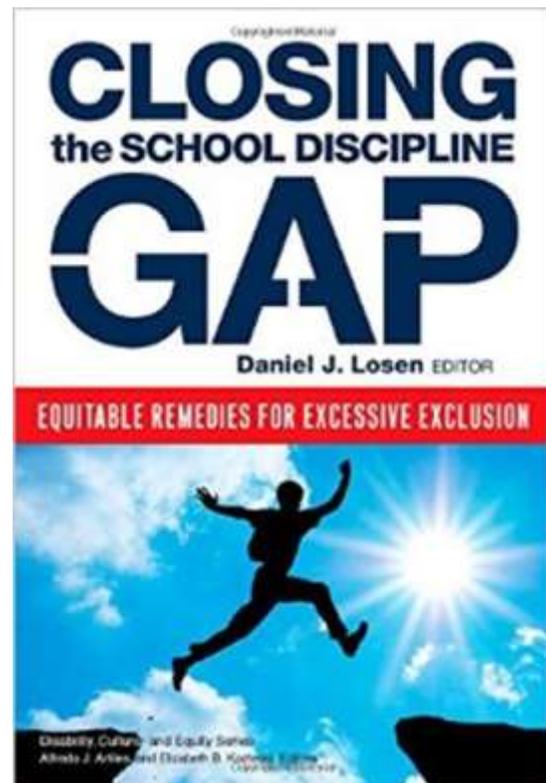
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As I started reading Daniel J. Losen's *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*, a video went viral on social media. It showed a white sheriff's deputy removing a Black female student from the classroom: he grabs her arm, yanks her out of her desk, slams her to the ground, then drags and shoves her across the floor and out the door. Her offense: she had refused to stop using her cellphone. A firestorm of protest and conversation followed, with people of every opinion raising questions about race, gender, and the use of discipline in schools. Had administrators at that South Carolina school read Daniel J. Losen's new book, taken it seriously, and followed its recommendations, that horrific assault might never have happened.

Daniel J. Losen has edited a collection of 16 articles that closely and substantively examine how out-of-school suspensions and expulsions are used in public schools across



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the United States. Losen and contributors document a pervasive, dangerous, and discriminatory gap that disproportionately targets and punishes students who are male, Black, American Indian, Latino, English-language learners, and /or have a disability status. This discriminatory use of school discipline has harmful long-term consequences for students, communities, and the nation. Exclusionary school discipline is both damaging and unnecessary; contributors offer short- and long-term alternatives at the classroom, school, district, state, and national levels. In contrast to the aggressive and violent action taken at the South Carolina school, Losen argues “by eliminating excessive and unnecessary disciplinary removal schools can dramatically improve the safety and productivity of the learning environment for all children, and especially for historically disadvantaged children” (p. 2). This timely, well-researched collection brings critical attention to a vital issue.

The problem is severe. Suspension affects more than 1 in 3 students nationwide; more than 3.45 million students are given out-of-school suspensions annually in the US. There is a racial, gender, and disability-based disparity in both the rate and impact of suspension: “schools suspend and expel children from historically disadvantaged subgroups at two and three times the rate of their nondisadvantaged peers” (p. 2). School suspensions are consistently associated with lower academic performance and disengagement, and further, exclusionary discipline is “highly correlated with high school dropout, arrest, and incarceration” (p. 31). The deeper dive into these statistics, comparing and cross-analyzing specific groups of children by racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, type of disability, grade level, district size, teacher experience and other criteria, is one of the strengths of this book. Evidence shows “Black students face the highest risk of suspension, followed by Native Americans

and Latinos” (p. 3). In high school the disparity in suspension rates for Black students goes up to 17% (p. 3). In addition, “students with disabilities...tend to be suspended at more than twice the rate of their non-disabled peers” (p. 7), and high school students with disabilities have an astounding 19.3% risk of being suspended (p. 89).

Part I of *Closing the school discipline gap* consists of nine articles on “Directions for Broad Policy Change.” These articles present overwhelming, substantive data documenting the damaging short- and long-term effects of using in-school or out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary policy, and offering evidence-based concrete and policy remedies.

The book’s first chapter (by Robert Balfanz, Vaughn Byrnes, and Joanna Fox) documents how early and conclusively the damage begins: “Being suspended even once in 9th grade is associated with a twofold increase in the risk for dropping out” (p. 27). Because suspensions are linked to other academic factors, the authors advise “districts and schools need to focus on more than just decreasing suspension rates alone...” (p. 25). In Chapter 2, Tracey L. Shollenberger examines data from a national, longitudinal survey to analyze outcomes from suspension with an in-depth analysis by race, showing that school suspensions correlate to lower academic achievement and often lead to higher drop-out rates, higher risk of arrest and incarceration, and life-long harm. “Nearly half of Black boys (46%), more than two in five Hispanic boys (42%), and more than one in three White boys (36%) who were suspended at any point during their school careers had not obtained a high school diploma by their late 20s” (p. 36). A national, longitudinal survey documented “strong associations between suspension and negative outcomes are a national phenomenon” (p. 41).

Chapter 3 examines whether the use of security measures, including the “school resource officers” used by the South Carolina

school, deter misbehavior and make schools safer. Researchers Jeremy Finn and Timothy Servoss find, to the contrary: “employing high security measures predicts higher suspension rates for Black high school students” (p. 7). Some commentators on the South Carolina video — including a CNN analyst — expressed a problematic belief that Black students are suspended at higher rates due to their behavior. Finn and Servoss counter that belief: “if one Black and one White student had the same behavior rating, the odds of the Black students being excluded from the classroom or school were 1.8 times greater than those of the White student. Likewise, Latino students had 1.6 greater odds...” (p. 52). Chapter 4 makes the economic case that the discipline gap carries financial as well as personal costs. Researchers (Miner P. Marchbanks III, Jamilia J. Blake, Eric A. Booth, Dottie Carmichael, Allison L. Seibert, and Tony Fabelo) found the cost of dropping out for each cohort they studied could add up to \$750 million dollars in lost earnings, lost taxes, and possible imprisonment (p. 69), burdening taxpayers, communities, and society. In Chapter 5, Blake, Bettie Ray Butler, and Danielle Smith urge us to include Black girls in the discussion and research: not only are Black girls’ suspension rates 8% higher than other female students, but they are also unfairly held to white, feminine, middle class standards. Would the student in South Carolina have been similarly disciplined had she been white?

While each chapter presents a damning picture, I found the study in chapter 6 of racial disparities broken down by Special Education classifications to be one of the most appalling and heartbreaking. For example, in the 2009-2010 school year, 36% of Black high school male students with disability status received suspensions (p. 90). For students with disability status, especially if they are Black, “federal, state, district, and school-level policies and practices are likely

contributing to the high rates of disciplinary exclusion” (p. 90). This study was done by Losen, Jongyeon Ee, Cheri Hodson, and Tia E. Martinez; Losen also co-edited, with Gary Orfield, the 2002 collection *Racial inequity in special education*.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 report on reducing suspensions of Black male students by improving their academic engagement; non-exclusionary practices that can keep schools safe; and specific practices contributing to the high rate of out-of-school suspensions. Chapter 7 (by Ivory A. Toldson, Tyne McGee, and Brianna P. Lemmons) is an in-depth analysis of research on Black male students, finding “academic disengagement and receiving disciplinary referrals have a cyclical relationship among Black males, which can ultimately lead to dropping out” (p. 107), and offering policy and practice recommendations to reduce the problem. Chapter 8, a study based in Chicago by Matthew P. Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W. Johnson, considers what factors support school safety, coming up with some jaw-dropping findings.

In chapter 9, Russell Skiba and his associates (Choong-Geun Chung, Megan Trachok, Timberly Baker, Adam Sheya, and Robin Hughes) closely analyze factors including the types of infractions resulting in discipline; student characteristics (race, gender, poverty level) independent of behavior; and school features, such as teacher attitudes, school climate, and proportion of Black enrollment. Their findings thoroughly counter the mistaken impression so widely found on-line that students get the punishment they deserve. The authors emphatically conclude: “It often has been assumed that disciplinary disparities are primarily the result of poor students of color engaging in higher rates of disruptive behavior, but the evidence to date has not supported that belief. Race consistently predicts suspension and expulsion even after

statistically controlling for factors related to poverty... There is also no evidence that Black students in the same schools and districts engage in higher rates of misbehavior to merit their higher rates of school discipline” (p. 134).

Part II presents extensive evidence documenting methods, models, policy changes and other approaches to help resolve this critical issue. Many of these findings of success are nothing short of astonishing. Restorative justice shows special promise in the landscape of remedial approaches, as researcher Thalia Gonzalez discusses in Chapter 10. Her longitudinal study of restorative justice practices in Denver Public Schools documents an astonishing 40% fewer suspensions (p. 158), a celebratory 86% decline in police citations, and an actual decrease in the racial disparity in suspensions. Reinforcing the correlation between suspensions and academic achievement, the study determined “after controlling for poverty and other factors, lower suspending districts had higher test scores” (p. 164). There were many qualitative improvements as well, such as students taking more responsibility for their behavior, improved peer relationships, disruption of the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and a safer school community. In a mutual commitment to restorative justice implementation, Denver Public Schools and the Denver Police Department reached an agreement defining and limiting the role of “school resource officers.” This book provides hope that social justice practices can help prevent incidents like the one in South Carolina.

Chapter 11 (by Anne Gregory, Joseph P. Allen, Amori Yee Mikami, Christopher A. Hafen, and Robert C. Pianta) offers a successful model for teacher professional development. In chapter 12, Dewey Cornell and Peter Lovegrove present an objective model for threat assessment. David M. Osher, Jeffrey M. Poirier, G. Roger Jarjoura, and

Russel C. Brown, writing in Chapter 13, acknowledge the harsh realities facing underfunded and challenged schools, and warn against the “quick fix.” Studying a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program implemented district-wide in Cleveland Public Schools, the researchers note that in the best-case scenarios, over three years they saw a 60% decline in out of school suspensions districtwide; reduction in disruptive behavior, fighting, harassment, and injury; and an increase in attendance rate (p. 198-199).

Often, discussions of disciplinary measures focus only on student behavior; Chapter 14 focuses on changing adult behavior through school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS). Researchers Judi E. Vanderhaar, Joseph M. Petrosko, and Marco A. Munoz found use of SWPBIS successfully decreased disparities in disciplinary exclusion between Native American and white students in an Oregon school. Methods included “staff development in cultural sensitivity, culturally relevant instruction, and strong school relationships with parents and families” (p. 216). They warn that SWPBIS programs should be carefully chosen, monitored, and evaluated; should include data for race, gender, and disability status; and should be modified when necessary. In addition, like all successful programs, they require time, skills, support and resources to work.

Chapter 15 raises serious concerns about the use of alternative schools for students who have been kicked or pushed out of their regular school settings. While such schools may have positive features such as smaller class sizes, researchers Judi E. Vanderhaar, Joseph M. Petrosko, and Marco A. Munoz find short- and long-term harm and discrimination, including a connection to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Black and Latino students. Researchers note: “moving students to alternative schools has

exacerbated inequities rooted in race, poverty, and special education status” (p. 224).

In chapter 16, an interview with Baltimore City Schools official Karen Webber-Ndour by Losen adds resonance to the book’s carefully accumulated statistics: “Many students have experienced or witnessed serious violence, incarceration, sexual abuse, hunger, or abandonment” she says; “if we are not really listening to their voices, not paying attention to their struggles, they are not going to listen to us, or trust that we really will help them...” (pp. 238-239). Losen echoes Webber-Ndour in the book’s conclusion; after issuing a call to action with a list of useful, wide-ranging policy recommendations, he ends with the belief that at the core of effective change is “creating healthy and positive relationships” (p. 250).

Chapter by chapter, study by study, an avalanche of evidence documents the racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. The factor of race occurs in combination with, but also trumps, other risk factors, including poverty, to the point where “attending a school with more Black students increases a student’s risk of OSS nearly as much as involvement in drugs, weapons, or assault” (p. 139). Solutions must not simply reduce suspension rates, but also reduce the discrimination involved in this practice (p. 147).

The most common arguments for the use of suspension are: 1) to improve school safety; 2) to improve student behavior; and, 3) to support the learning environment for non-disciplined students. Throughout the book, Losen and his contributors refute these arguments. For example, they found “schools with high suspension rates are still less safe than others that serve students with similar backgrounds in similar neighborhoods” (p. 128). Restorative justice practices not only resulted in fewer suspensions, but in safer schools for everyone. In addition, suspensions are often assigned “for fairly minor

misbehavior and do not pose a serious threat to school safety” (p. 40). And, as common sense and empathy would tell us, “punitive measures are less likely to instill a sense of safety than measures that foster respect and trust” (p. 129). Researchers found “out-of-school suspensions... fail to deter further misconduct and might even encourage it” (p. 45).

*Closing the school discipline gap* promotes possibilities for change at the individual school level, often at not-prohibitive costs. For example, while many schools in poor and dangerous neighborhoods are pushed to invest in expensive security hardware, SEL strategies “pay greater dividends than adding security measures and produce noteworthy improvements even where resources are limited” (p. 11). Many of the case studies provide reason for optimism: looking at schools in poor and high crime neighborhoods, researchers Mathew P. Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W. Johnson find that improving school achievement can reduce risk factors including crime and poverty (p. 125), and “safety is greater in schools with high-quality relationships among students, teachers, and families” (p. 127). Yet, optimism is also tempered by the profound, even life-and-death risks students may face: “the greatest benefit to CPS [Chicago Public Schools] students of selecting a higher-achieving school rather than a neighborhood school is the decreased likelihood of getting into trouble with the police” (p. 125).

The book offers a menu of useful policy recommendations, including a call for more research, “more equitable distribution of novice teachers” (p. 99), and “integrating measures of school discipline into accountability frameworks and facilitating data collection” (p. 41). The most effective methods take a comprehensive view and consider multiple factors (p. 11). Another option is legal action. Discrimination based on

race and disability status is illegal. Schools with high rates of discriminatory suspension, and schools pushing students out in order to meet NCLB benchmarks (p. 41), may be violating civil rights laws.

The researchers in *Closing the school discipline gap* compile data gathered from multiple sources using numerous research methods. These include the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) which followed a cohort of nearly 9,000 students from 12-17 years old to 26-31 years old (p. 33); a longitudinal study and analysis for a cohort of nearly 182,000 Florida students; a national cohort analysis “which included nearly half the nation’s school districts and roughly 85% of all public school students” (p. 20); randomized control study of a teacher-training program; multilevel forms of regression analysis (p. 46); cross-sectional analysis (p. 8); scaling (p. 47); and personal narrative. The Denver Public Schools longitudinal study is described as an “unusually rich combination of empirical and qualitative data allowing for comprehensive analysis” (p. 152). The Texas study looking at economic factors controlled for over 40 variables (p. 63). The statistical MANOVA method was also used (p. 110).

Inevitably, there are things left out of even the most comprehensive collection. Losen notes “some factors that are beyond the scope of this book” (p. 243), such as bias against LGTB students. Research on the intersectionalities of sexuality and gender identity with race and ethnicity in school discipline would be fascinating, timely, and useful.

Also beyond the scope of the book are political factors that may drive these problems and prevent using suggested remedies. A neoliberal, market-based approach to public education; increasing corporate and military presence in public schools; ideological fighting over public education; attacks on teachers unions;

defunding of public schools; and structural racism all shape the climate of public education today. A Chicago-based study documenting the importance of teacher-student relationships flies in the face of Chicago’s 2013 closing of 49 public neighborhood schools that decimated generations-long relationships between schools and community members. Corruption and kick-back schemes can undermine the recommendation that “policymakers and administrators must carefully scrutinize teacher support programs...” (p. 177).

At times, the book’s “can-do” approach glosses over entrenched difficulties or controversial factors, both structural and cultural. The study of Cleveland schools in Chapter 13 realistically acknowledges urban realities that make these issues so challenging, such as high rates of lead poisoning, long-term poverty, home discipline practices, and students’ unaddressed mental health needs (pp. 194-195).

Throughout this collection, evidence of racial discrimination is undeniable. For example, “among the strongest factors associated with racial disparities” was the “principal’s attitudes toward discipline” (p. 132). Yet, the word “racism” never appears. Perhaps it is not “provable” or is too loaded with different meanings.

Many of the remedies offered appear to be available and even affordable; so, why aren’t these remedies more widely used? Do we need to change school culture, and if so, how? In schools that surveyed as “unsafe,” 40% of students do not feel safe *in their classrooms* (p. 122 - my emphasis). How do teachers and students facing threats of physical violence feel about disciplinary exclusion and possible remedies?

Because *Closing the school discipline gap* is so far-reaching and compelling, it raises many questions for further research. For example, why is autism is almost uniquely *not* racialized among disability categories (p. 97)? Do

teachers and administrators see autistic children of any race as less responsible for their behavior? Is autism seen as a more 'legitimate' disability than, say, ADHD? Have parents of autistic children been more successful in advocating for this issue? I would love to see further research.

What is the historic context of the discipline gap? For example, is it related to the rise of the War on Drugs and zero tolerance policies in the 1980s? (Alexander, 2010). The School-to-Prison Pipeline (the subject of Losen's 2012 book, *The school-to-prison pipeline: Structuring legal reform*, co-authored with Catherine Kim and Damon Hewitt), is referred to but not deeply explored. How are these issues related?

*Closing the school discipline gap* is a much-needed, timely, and substantive contribution

to a critical issue in education. The broad and in-depth data is carefully accumulated and thoughtfully analyzed. The collection presents a deeply disturbing picture of discriminatory school suspensions with long-term harm for individuals, communities, public education, and society, and makes a compelling case against the use of school suspensions for disciplinary reasons. The research and recommendations connect discipline practices to a wide range of critical issues affecting our schools, as well as with broader issues of social justice. *Closing the school discipline gap* should be required reading for any school, district or state using suspensions. It is a how-to guide for parents, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers. This book is a wake-up call for anyone concerned with justice and public education.

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## About the Reviewer

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