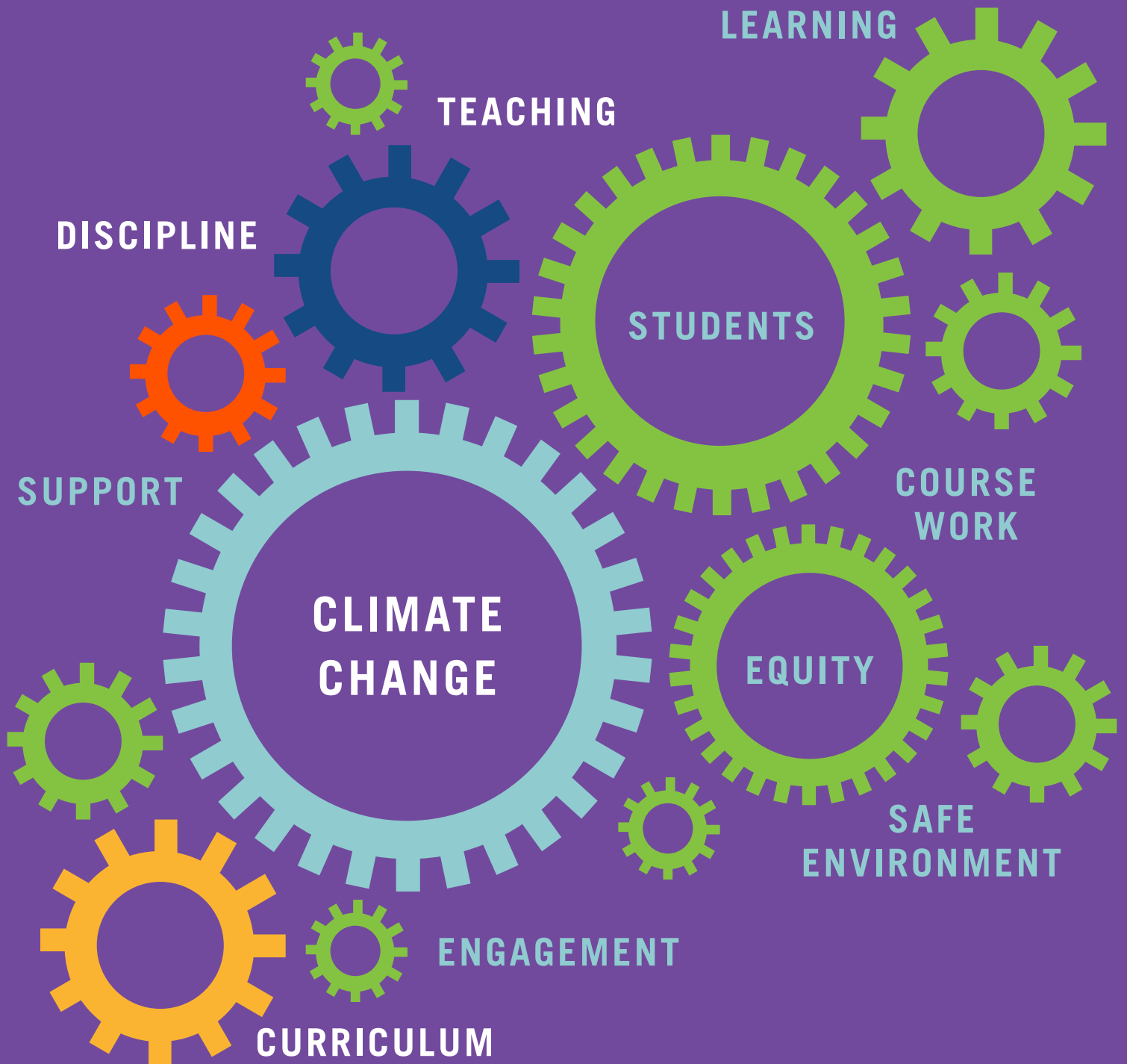


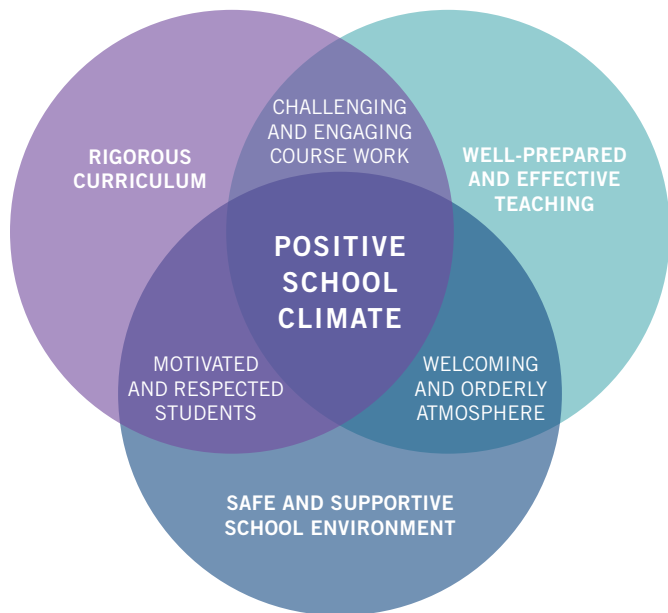


# CLIMATE CHANGE SERIES:

Federal, State, and Local Policy Recommendations  
for Creating a Positive School Climate

JANUARY 2015





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Too frequently, education reform takes a siloed view that focuses on an individual issue instead of a broader and more comprehensive perspective. For example, students' lack of access to challenging and rigorous course work and their lack of access to experienced, engaging, and effective teachers are often discussed as separate issues rather than within the wider context of school climate. School climate—the totality of factors that affect a learning environment—is talked about less often than individual factors, despite research showing that a school's climate, whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between, is connected to the level of students' engagement in their course work and, consequently, to their success.

Instead of responding to issues in isolation, school administrators, policymakers, and legislators should examine how these multiple issues fit together and affect schools and districts, as well as the broader education system. Failing to take a more comprehensive approach toward the goals of reforming education and improving school climate will result in limited, if any, success in achieving these goals. In an effort to create a positive school climate, the Alliance for Excellent Education proposes the following federal, state, and local policy recommendations.

## FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Addressing Discipline Within Overall School Improvement Efforts

- Low-performing schools, as identified under Section 1116 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), should be required to assess schoolwide discipline issues, including through a diagnostic analysis of data submitted in response to the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) Civil Rights Data Collection. Where applicable, these schools should identify and implement evidence-based, schoolwide discipline policies and practices to strengthen student-staff relationships and create a positive school climate. Middle and high schools should describe the process for implementing an early-warning indicator system to identify students in need of targeted supports and integrated services.
- Local education agencies (LEAs) receiving federal funding should track and report to the state and make school- and grade-level discipline data publicly available, including that of nonviolent behavior. The data should include the number and type of instances and the disciplinary response (including number of students suspended, both in school and out of school, and length of suspension). Data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, English language learner (ELL) status, and disability. Any disparities should be addressed through timely and targeted reform, professional development, and increased student services.
- LEAs should track and report, in the disaggregate, student grade retention rates and the percentage of students transferred with the district, including the reason for transfer, to better assess the extent to

which practices that “push out” or disengage students are being applied.

- Competitive federal grant programs, such as Race to the Top, should incentivize the adoption of school discipline codes that are aligned with the principles of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), social-emotional learning, and restorative practices.

### Access to Rigorous and Advanced Course Work

- Support the development and implementation of technologies that can offer specialized and advanced courses to all students to address the challenges rural and urban schools may face in providing and staffing these courses.
- Require LEAs to report on student access to and completion of rigorous course work, disaggregated by income quartile of schools under Section 1112 of ESEA. This should include access to opportunities to earn postsecondary credit while in high school such as through Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and exams, dual enrollment, and performance on AP and IB exams. Local education plans under this section should also describe how the LEAs will identify and address any disparity within student subgroups in equitable access to rigorous course work, including access to the opportunities previously described. This data should be used to target resources and implement the previously described strategies to increase access to these students.
- School improvement plans under Section 1116 of ESEA should include a diagnostic review of data related to student and instructional staff, including but not limited to the most recent data submitted through

ED’s Civil Rights Data Collection and a strategy for addressing any disparities revealed by the data.

- School improvement plans under Section 1116 of ESEA should include strategies for increasing the provision of rigorous course work at the secondary school level, including opportunities to earn postsecondary credit while in high school such as through AP and IB courses and exams and dual enrollment. These plans should also include strategies to increase student engagement and a progression of support for students to succeed in such course work.
- Funding should be increased to support the expansion of AP course offerings and dual enrollment programs.

### Chronic Absenteeism

- School report cards should be required to provide student attendance information in the aggregate and disaggregate, including rates of chronic absenteeism. According to the Everyone Graduates Center, a school can have average daily attendance of 90 percent and still have 40 percent of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students make up that 90 percent.

### Student Assessments

- State and local assessment requirements under Section 1111 of ESEA should measure the full range of academic standards students are expected to meet. In addition, they should involve multiple measures of student academic achievement and include measures of students’ deep content knowledge and their ability to use knowledge to think critically and solve problems and to communicate effectively, and may be delivered in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended performance tasks.

- Grants for assessments under Section 1113 of ESEA should support assessments that develop multiple measures of student academic achievement, including measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding, and elicit complex student demonstrations or applications of knowledge and skills to increase the reliability and validity of state assessment systems; that are balanced assessment systems that include summative, interim, and formative assessments; and that may include computer adaptive assessments, performance assessments, technology based assessments, and through-course assessments. Professional development should include preparing educators with strategies for effectively utilizing student assessment data to inform their practice.

### Access to Well-Prepared and Effective Teaching

- Include strategies for improving current recruitment and placement processes in Title I plans for equitable distribution of teachers within ESEA. These should include efforts to hire and place teachers in a classroom position at least one month prior to the start of the school year. More than one-third of new teachers are hired after the start of the school year<sup>1</sup> which increases the likelihood that they will be placed outside of their certification area in an effort to fill open positions. This practice further prevents teachers from participating in professional development that occurs prior to the start of the school year.
- Incentivize state adoption of an edTPA—a validated teacher performance assessment, such as the one developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity in partnership with the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education—which

many states are using as part of their certification/licensing requirements. Teacher performance assessments such as the edTPA help ensure that teachers entering the profession can demonstrate their ability to be effective in the classroom and meet the needs of all students.<sup>2</sup>

- Support the development of minimum standards for state-based teacher licensure policies. Currently, there is no federal standard for teachers in training before they enter the classroom. In fact, almost all teachers are considered “highly qualified” under federal law due to a federal provision that was extended recently under the ESEA. Before becoming the teacher of record, all prospective teachers should demonstrate the ability to lead classrooms, educate students of differing abilities and needs, and establish a positive classroom climate—a key element of the edTPA.<sup>3</sup>



# STATE AND DISTRICT POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Overall School Discipline Policies

- School staff should create a shared vision for positive school climate that engages school staff, students, families, and the community.
- Based on that vision, school staff should create a positive school climate policy agenda and identify best practices and programs that support that vision.<sup>4</sup> District-level staff should be involved to the extent needed to support the implementation of that vision.
- District-level and school-based staff should reexamine the applicable code of conduct, including through the use of student, parent/caregiver, and staff surveys, to assess current policies. This review should seek to reduce the inclusion of zero-tolerance policies.<sup>5</sup>
- State and district policy should require the presence of a parent/caregiver during any proceeding that could result in a student receiving either an out-of-school or in-school suspension.
- State and district policy should establish, publicly distribute, and post due process procedures for suspensions, transfers, and expulsions with students and parents/caregivers in a clear and easily understandable format.
- School district policy should require that when students are suspended they are provided with the materials and opportunities necessary to ensure that they can make up any exams, classwork, and homework assignments.
- Districts should support schoolwide and, ideally, districtwide evidence-based programs that contribute

to a positive school climate, such as restorative justice programs, SWPBIS, and social-emotional learning, as an alternative to suspensions. Suspensions should be reserved for instances where students pose as a threat to themselves or others.

## The Role of Law Enforcement

- In districts that place law enforcement or armed personnel in schools, appropriate restrictions should be placed on the infractions they are permitted to respond to when they can make an arrest. Districts should define a clear role for law enforcement, where applicable, that is aligned with effective, supportive, and inclusive practices and should provide the necessary training and support.<sup>6</sup>

## Well-Prepared and Effective Teaching

### *Recruitment, certification, and licensing*

- States should assess their teacher preparation and licensing requirements to ensure that educators enter the classroom prepared to provide more rigorous and engaging instruction.
- Support efforts to recruit more diverse candidates. For example, Illinois created the Minority Teachers of Illinois Scholarship Program, which provides scholarships to encourage academically talented students from diverse backgrounds to pursue teaching careers, especially in certain disciplines or in hard-to-staff schools.<sup>7</sup>
- Support and/or incentivize teachers to receive National Board certification. The certification process has been found to produce positive impacts on teacher retention and improve practice. The process of analyzing students' work and assessing their own actions in relation to professional standards is valuable in

improving teaching and illuminates how well teachers are able to engage learners, assess students' current knowledge and skill development, and alter instruction to advance students' performance.

### *Improved working conditions*

- Use school, teacher, and student data<sup>8</sup> to assess the working conditions within each school, identify areas of improvement, and implement responsive strategies aimed at strengthening relationships between staff, and between students and staff. Target professional development to strengthen classroom practices that engage and support students. A number of states have adopted teaching conditions standards, and nine states<sup>9</sup> are utilizing the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Survey<sup>10</sup>. The TELL Survey provides detailed information regarding the perceptions about the presence of teaching and learning conditions that research has shown increase student learning and teacher retention.
- Support teachers in addressing the needs of the whole student by increasing the number of support staff, such as guidance counselors, social workers, and appropriately trained paraprofessionals and assistants to support student achievement.

### *Professional development*

- Provide early-career teachers with opportunities to participate in residency,<sup>11</sup> induction, and mentoring programs in an effort to provide support and build capacity. This should include significantly increasing opportunities for teachers to participate in professional learning communities or other opportunities for peer collaboration.
- District and school leaders should assess professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders

that are intended to support positive and equitable discipline practices and strengthen student, parent/caregiver, and staff relationships. Professional development should provide information and resources related to conflict resolution, effective practices in classroom and behavior management, culturally responsive practices, and the strengthening of teacher-student and teacher-parent/caregiver relationships.

- Provide professional development to support the implementation of equitable and effective approaches to school discipline (see the recent joint school discipline guiding principles and accompanying documents issued by ED and the U.S. Department of Justice for specific strategies).<sup>12</sup> For example, support the development of strategies such as restorative justice and response to intervention, which have been demonstrated to be effective approaches to addressing student behavior in a positive and inclusive way.
- Incorporate strategies for assessing teacher attitudes and providing access to training and support that can reduce deficit-oriented approaches (for example, focusing on what students can do rather than what they cannot) that often result in low student expectations.<sup>13</sup> Such training can also replace reactive and punitive approaches that create or escalate problem behavior with preventive approaches that address the underlying needs of students.<sup>14</sup>
- Provide opportunities for teachers to develop culturally relevant competencies<sup>15</sup> and strategies for teaching diverse learners. Eight of the seventeen states that produce approximately 70 percent of the nation's dropouts have a large number of students of color and ELLs<sup>16</sup> in their schools. The rapidly changing faces of America's classrooms create new urgency for

states and districts to develop an increasingly diverse teaching force that is effective in teaching a diverse set of learners. Numerous studies demonstrate the positive impact that culturally responsive teaching can have on strengthening teacher-student relationships and improving student engagement and outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Collection and Use of Data for Identification, Intervention, and Support**

- District and school leaders should collect, report, and analyze school-, grade-, and classroom-level discipline data (including that of nonviolent behavior including tardiness or truancy, and subjective behavior such as willful defiance) on an ongoing basis. The data should be examined (across the district, schools within the same district, and classrooms within the same school) for instances of disproportionate disciplining. The data should include the number and type of instances and disciplinary response (including number of students suspended, both in school and out of school, and length of suspensions). Data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, ELL status, and disability. Any disparities should be addressed through timely and targeted reform, professional development, and increased student services. Curriculum should emphasize social and emotional learning as a tool for students and staff to promote safe and positive school learning communities.

## **Climate Change Publications**

*Climate Change: Creating an Integrated Framework for Improving School Climate* (August 2013)

*Climate Change: Implementing School Discipline Practices that Create a Positive School Climate* (September 2013)

*Climate Change: Providing Equitable Access to a Rigorous and Engaging Curriculum* (November 2013)

*Climate Change: Improving School Climate by Supporting Great Teaching* (September 2014)

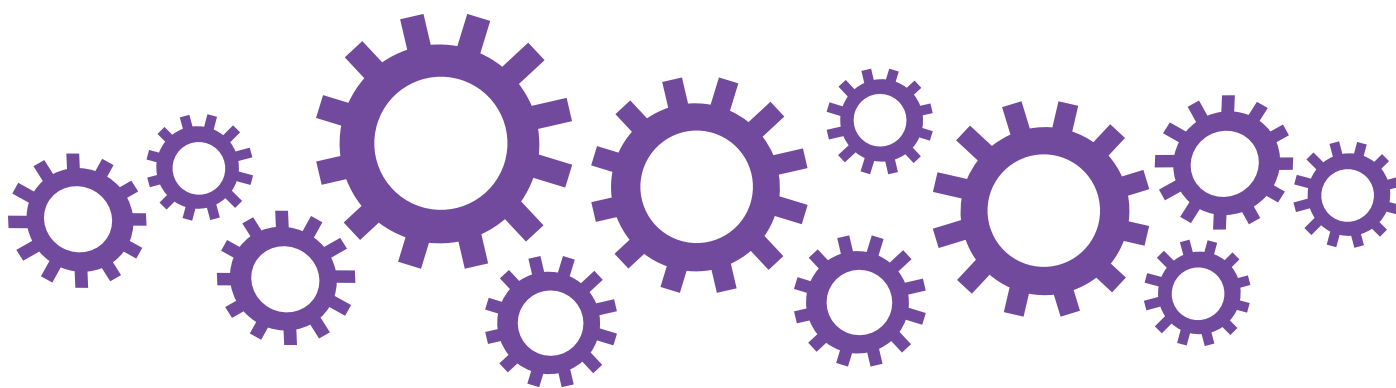
## Acknowledgments

Language for this paper was pulled from the above-mentioned Climate Change publications. Authors include members of the **Alliance for Excellent Education federal advocacy and policy staff**, including **Jessica Cardichon, EdD**, senior director of policy and advocacy and **Martens Roc**, former policy and advocacy associate. **Joseph Bishop, PhD**, director of policy at the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign also contributed to policy recommendations related to well-prepared and effective teaching.

The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)

The **National Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Campaign** unites a growing coalition of advocates, educators, and organizers from across the country working to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality public education. OTL includes local, state, and national organizations, grassroots community leaders, policymakers, youth organizers, business leaders, and philanthropic partners. [www.otlcampaign.org/](http://www.otlcampaign.org/). OTL is an initiative of the Schott Foundation for Public Education, whose mission is to develop and strengthen a broad-based and representative movement to achieve fully resourced, quality pre-K–12 public education. [www.schottfoundation.org/](http://www.schottfoundation.org/)

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> HGSE News, *New Research Finds School Hiring and Support Practices Fall Short* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). This study also finds that of these teachers, sampled across four states, only 23 percent had any sort of reduced load; 56 percent received no extra assistance; and 43 percent went through the entire first year with no observations from a mentor or more experienced teacher.
- <sup>2</sup> Research shows that rigorous, validated, standards-based performance measures can be a powerful tool for capturing high-leverage teaching behaviors linked to improved student performance. EdTPA shares a common architecture and lineage with other successful performance assessments such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, California's Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT) for initial licensure, and Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) for professional licensure.
- <sup>3</sup> L. Darling-Hammond, S. Newton, and R. Wei, *Developing and Assessing Beginning Teacher Effectiveness: The Potential of Performance Assessments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2012), <http://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/657> (accessed June 10, 2014). In this quantitative study on the PACT assessment, Darling-Hammond, Newton, and Wei find that PACT scores are significant predictors of teaching effectiveness.
- <sup>4</sup> T. Dary and T. Pickeral, *School Climate: Practices for Implementation and Sustainability*. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1 (New York, NY: National School Climate Center, 2013), <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/documents/SchoolClimatePracticeBriefs-2013.pdf> (accessed September 1, 2013).
- <sup>5</sup> National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, *Stopping Out-of-School Suspensions: A Guide for State Policy*, <http://www.otlcampaign.org/resources/stopping-out-school-suspensions-guide-state-policy> (accessed September 1, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Advancement Project, "Proposed Memorandum of Understanding Between the School District and the Police Department," [http://b.3cdn.net/advancement/cf357b9f96d8c55ff8\\_rdm6ib9js.pdf](http://b.3cdn.net/advancement/cf357b9f96d8c55ff8_rdm6ib9js.pdf) (accessed September 1, 2013).
- <sup>7</sup> For more information, visit <http://bit.ly/tq-illinois>.
- <sup>8</sup> Data should include performance, behavior, referral, and attendance data, as well as data collected from staff, student, and parent/caregiver surveys. This should also include data submitted for the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection.
- <sup>9</sup> These states are Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Vermont.
- <sup>10</sup> For more information on the New Teacher Center and the TELL Survey, visit <http://www.newteachercenter.org/node/1359>.
- <sup>11</sup> Studies of these types of programs demonstrate that these teachers stay in the profession at higher rates and become competent more quickly than those who learn by trial and error. For example, teacher residency programs help create a pipeline of effective teachers who remain teaching in high-need schools, raising their effectiveness. Further, the effects of strong initial preparation are likely enhanced by strong induction and mentoring in the early years of teaching. See American Federation of Teachers, "Meeting the Challenge: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools," 2007, [http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/hardtostaff\\_2007.pdf](http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/hardtostaff_2007.pdf) (accessed January 3, 2014).
- <sup>12</sup> For more information, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> R. Ferguson, *What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Wiener Center for Social Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, October 2002).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Numerous studies demonstrate the positive impact that culturally responsive teaching can have on strengthening teacher-student relationships and improving student engagement and outcomes. See G. Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010). See also H. Richards, A. Brown, and T. Forde, *Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Teaching Exceptional Children* (Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, 2011). Further, the Discipline Disparities Series notes that successful schools "[r]egularly include instructional activities that help adults and students learn about one another. For instance, many teachers have daily morning circles or check-ins about students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Teachers assign autobiographies or portfolios of students' interests, skills, and accomplishments, which can be developed, interactively, online, or using multimedia." In an effort to strengthen culturally responsive practice, "[c]lassroom material and schoolwide events reflect diversity, including the range of racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual identities of the students themselves. Material and events (thoughtful literature, films, assemblies) can also demonstrate and prompt discussion over the complexity of any identity, rather than

presenting stereotypical visions of ‘groups.’” Further, “professional development programming could include the Double-Check program, which uses a framework to help teachers self-assess on their culturally responsive teaching. Teachers reflect on the following dimensions of their teaching: Sensitivity to Student’s Cultural and Situational Messages, Reflective Thinking about Children and ‘Group Membership,’ Effective Communication, and Connection to Curriculum.”

<sup>16</sup> R. Balfanz et al., “Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools,” July 2009, <http://diplomasnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/graduating-america-balfanz-almeida-steinberg-santos-fox.pdf> (accessed January 3, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. See also Richards, Brown, and Forde, *Addressing Diversity in Schools*.



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