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**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**  
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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Virtual Release  
*Policies and Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning  
in Rhode Island: School Climate*

*This new report uses an equity lens to look at policies, practices, and measures of school climate, including student mental and behavioral health.*

Providence, RI (September 18, 2020) – **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release its newest publication, *Policies and Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Rhode Island: School Climate*, at a virtual policy roundtable on Monday, September 21, 2020 from 3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.** Featured speakers will include Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT; Angélica M. Infante-Green, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education; Melanie Nunez Ortiz, Youth member of Young Voices; Manuel-Antonio Rodriguez, Youth member of Providence Student Union; Ramona Santos Torres, Executive Director, Parents Leading for Educational Equity; Kristine Lapierre, Teacher at Providence Public Schools, Teach Plus Rhode Island Fellow, Jamestown Public Schools School Committee Member; and Harrison Peters, Superintendent, Providence Public Schools. Senior Policy Analyst Paige Clausius-Parks will facilitate the discussion and share findings from the publication.

To join the event on Monday, please use the following Zoom link:

[https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_McW0MwPEQhOKJlloa94KcQ](https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_McW0MwPEQhOKJlloa94KcQ)

This new report uses an equity lens to look at policies, practices, and measures of school climate, including student mental and behavioral health. The report suggests actions we can take to ensure that all students, particularly students of color, low-income students, differently-abled students and Multilingual Learners, are in schools that prioritize strong relationships between students and educators and promote excellent, equitable learning while also ensuring student safety and emotional well-being.

“The traumatic experiences of students including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-standing impacts of systemic racism must be acknowledged and addressed by schools,” said Paige Clausius-Parks, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Senior Policy Analyst. “Now is the time when students need the most from their schools including a positive school climate that nurtures healthy student-teacher relationships, provides mental and behavioral health supports, and refrains from harsh disciplinary practices.”

School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and includes the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; safety; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; discipline policies; and academic outcomes. A positive school climate promotes social, mental, emotional, behavioral, and learning success while also ensuring physical and social safety.

A positive school climate is an essential element of an effective learning environment and can improve student and teacher attendance, student motivation to learn, academic achievement, and graduation rates. **Creating and implementing racially aware policies and practices can improve school climates and increase equity.**

“School culture is a foundational cornerstone for student social and emotional and academic achievement and success,” said Ramona Santos Torres, Co-Founder & Executive Director of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE). “We have known for decades now that we have to radically improve the spaces in which our students learn. The question for all of us adults is: what are we prepared to do that is different this time in order to break the cycle of racism and discrimination that Black and Brown students have to endure in our school system?”

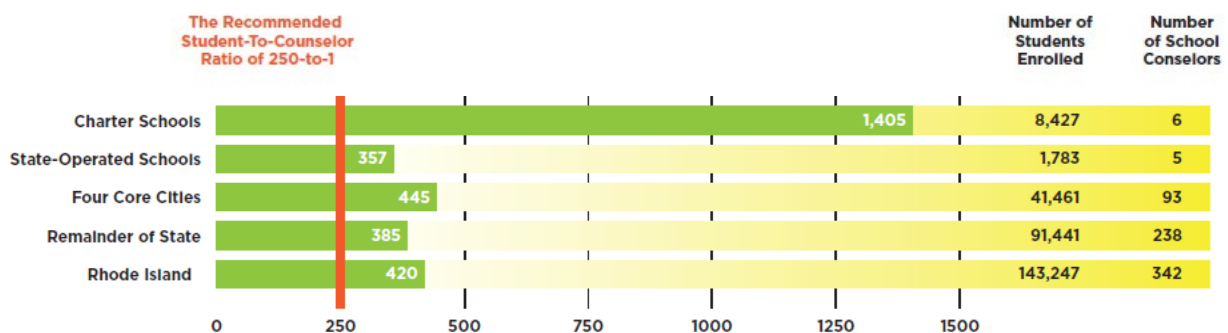
### ***Mental and Behavioral Health***

Increasing the ability of educators to identify racism and to understand the impact of discrimination and microaggressions on student mental health must be a top priority.

In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in 10 (9.8%) has a significant functional impairment. In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty.

School-based mental health professionals have an important role to play in creating and sustaining positive school climates and can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement and career preparation, and lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents.

## **Rhode Island Student-to-School Counselor Ratio, 2018-2019 School Year**



Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey, 2018-2019. Rhode Island Department of Education, Public school enrollment in pre-school through grade 12 as of October 1, 2018. Note: Foster, Glocester, Jamestown, Little Compton, and several charter schools do not serve secondary school students.

In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, there were 392 students for every school counselor, 841 students for every school psychologist, and 685 students for every school social worker, far above the recommended ratios. (See page 3 of report for full chart of Rhode Island School student-to-school counselor ratios by district.)

### **Measures of School Climate**

*SurveyWorks* is an annual survey administered to Rhode Island public school students and includes several measures of school climate.

#### **The Rhode Island 2020 *SurveyWorks* Results:**

- Forty-one percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report positive perceptions of school climate, down from 45% in 2017. Compared to the national dataset, Rhode Island scores near the 10th percentile on this topic.
- Between 2018 and 2020, the positive perception of school belonging for students in grades six through 12 declined from 34% to 32%.
- Sixty percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report that stress interfered with their ability to participate in school.
- Forty-nine percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report remaining calm, even if someone is bothering them or saying something bad.
- Forty-five percent of females and 46% of males in grades six through 12 report favorable student-teacher relationships compared to 31% of gender non-conforming students.
- In Rhode Island, 54% of White, 52% of Asian, 49% of Hispanic/Latino, 44% of Black, 44% of Multiracial students, and 40% of Native American students in grades six through 12 responded favorably on questions about the perception of fairness of school rules.

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, *SurveyWorks*, Student Survey, Grades 6-12, 2020. Retrieved June 29, 2020, from [ride.ri.gov](http://ride.ri.gov)

Discrimination or expecting future discrimination from teachers is associated with increased stress, decreased engagement in school, and negative academic outcomes. **Stress caused by discrimination or stereotype threat, a feeling of apprehension about confirming negative stereotypes, impacts attention, memory, and executive functioning, increases anxiety, anger and depression among students of color, and is connected to disparities in academic outcomes.**

"In order to better the equity in schools, there needs to be a complete restructuring of what school is meant to be for students," said Providence Student Union youth member Manuel-Antonio Rodriguez. "Students don't feel safe and comfortable in an environment that focuses on imposing an authoritarian rule over students rather than creating a space for students to engage and thrive in. Steps going forward need to shift the cultural norm of teaching students to be oppressed and complicit to empowering students with encouragement and respect."

### **Suspensions**

Suspension usually does not deter students from exhibiting negative behaviors and may reinforce negative behavior patterns. Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure, juvenile justice system involvement, disengagement from school,

isolation from teachers and peers, and dropping out of school. Being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.

### Out-of-School Suspensions by Infraction, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

BY TYPE OF INFRACTION*	#	%
Fighting	2,072	21%
Insubordination/Disrespect	1,820	18%
Assault of Student or Teacher	1,422	14%
Disorderly Conduct	1,415	14%
Harassment/Intimidation/Threat	1,054	11%
Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco Offenses	993	10%
Obscene/Abusive Language	539	5%
Arson/Larceny/Robbery/Vandalism	231	2%
Weapon Possession	178	2%
Other Offenses	154	2%
Electronic Devices/Technology	103	1%
Attendance Offenses	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>9,981</i>	

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

*\*Harassment offenses include hazing and hate crimes. Assault offenses include sexual assault.*

Since 2016, when the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child’s behavior poses a demonstrable threat, the number of out-of-school suspensions has decreased by less than 1%. During the 2018-2019 school year, more than half of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, such as insubordination/disrespect, disorderly conduct, obscene/abusive language, alcohol/drug/tobacco offenses, and electronic devices/technology offenses.

### Bias in School Discipline by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

	% OF STUDENTS ENROLLED	% OF SUSPENSIONS
Students With Disabilities	15%	31%
White Students	57%	44%
Hispanic Students	26%	34%
Black Students	9%	12%
Asian Students	3%	2%
Native American Students	1%	2%

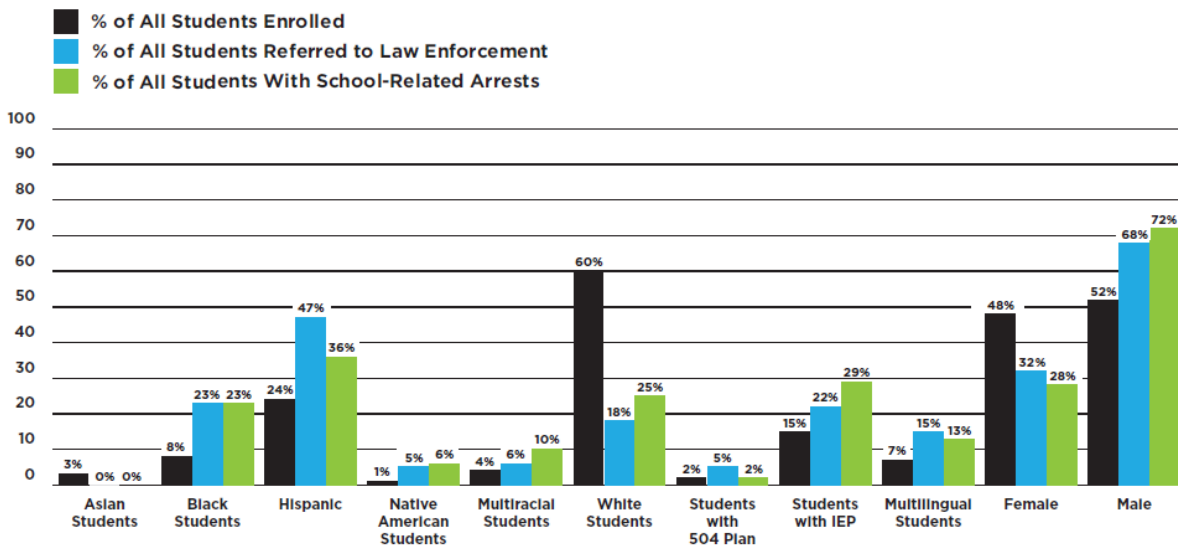
Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year. % suspensions includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Detailed data by district is available at [www.ride.ri.gov](http://www.ride.ri.gov)

The 2016 law also required that school districts identify any racial, ethnic, or special education disparities and develop a plan to reduce such disparities. In Rhode Island, during the 2018-2019 school year, differently-abled students/students with disabilities and students of color continued to be suspended disproportionately.

**Law Enforcement**

Student arrest and juvenile detention increases a student’s likelihood of future arrests, decreases the likelihood of completing high school and may result in long-lasting consequences including restricted eligibility for federal grants and student loans and barriers to college enrollment and employment.

**Bias in School Discipline by Race/Ethnicity, Special Education Status, English Proficiency, and Gender, Rhode Island, 2015-2016**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016 school year.

In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, Black, Hispanic, differently-abled students/students with disabilities/students with IEPs, and Multilingual Learners were disproportionately referred to law enforcement and had school-related arrests.

**Promising Practices**

- Schools that consistently and deliberately **engage students and educators as co-creators and coleaders** in setting clear academic and behavioral expectations and subsequently teach, model, and reinforce these expectations create positive school climates.
- Restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive disciplinary practices are effective approaches for creating positive student-teacher relationships, improving students’ sense of belonging, building safe schools, and increasing academic outcomes.

"This report shines a spotlight on the importance of creating positive school climates through an equity lens, where students have a sense of belonging and the social and emotional supports they need to thrive", said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. "Action steps include elevating the voices of students and their families, enforcing the law restricting out-of-school suspensions, increasing the number of mental health professionals in schools, hiring more teachers of color, and ongoing training on anti-racism, implicit bias, culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices, and student-centered learning."

**A full set of action items is included in this report.**

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*Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education, and development of Rhode Island children.*