



"I JUST WANT TO LEARN"

*Girls of Color and the
School-to-Prison Pipeline in Massachusetts*



**Massachusetts
Applesseed**
Center for Law & Justice

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Girls of Color and The School-to-Prison Pipeline in Massachusetts



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Appleseed**

Center for Law & Justice

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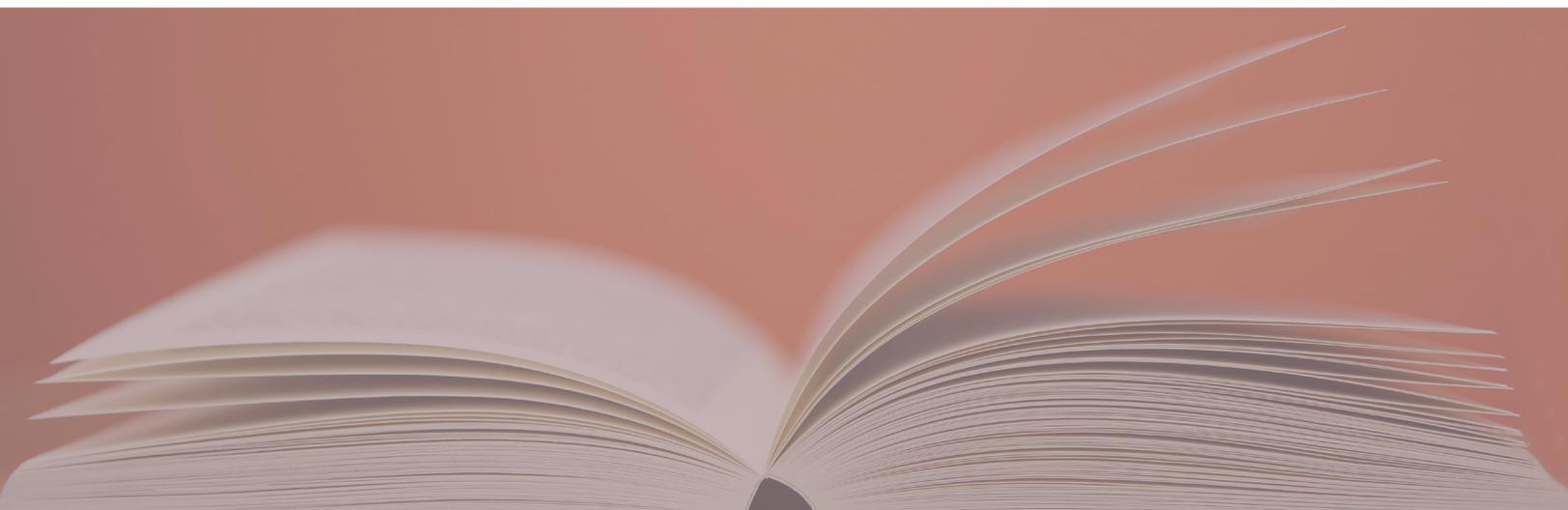


PREFACE

Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice (Massachusetts Appleseed) is part of a nonprofit network of 18 public interest justice centers in the United States and Mexico. Massachusetts Appleseed's mission is to promote equal rights and opportunities for Massachusetts residents by developing and advocating for systemic solutions to social justice issues. Collaborating with pro bono and community partners, we identify gaps in services and access in areas such as education, homelessness, and the legal system. Our goal is to create systemic change through in-depth research, community problem-solving, and consensus building. Central to this work is our commitment to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly with an intersectional lens. To that end, in 2020 we published our collaborative, data-driven report *Protecting Girls of Color from the School-to-Prison Pipeline*,¹ which found that Black girls in Massachusetts were almost 4 times more likely to be disciplined compared with their counterparts.

Yet we realized that having this data alone isn't enough. We wanted to engage with the *why* behind this data and uplift the lived experiences behind these types of statistics; we also knew it wasn't our place as researchers to answer these follow-up questions alone. So in June of 2021, we brought together a Community Advisory Board (made up of students, advocates, school professionals and representatives of numerous organizations across the state) to collaborate with Massachusetts Appleseed researchers on this qualitative follow-up study. In the following pages are thoughts, reflections, takeaways, and points of inspiration from some of our incredible Community Advisory Board members who served as key partners in designing and executing this research study and report.

¹ *Protecting Girls of Color from the School to Prison Pipeline*, Appleseed Network, 2020.





“Studies such as these are important for reshaping our systems to better nurture the next generation of students. Being a part of this study has taught me a lot about critically analyzing these systems we live in and working in a team dedicated to the same goal of bettering schools for girls of color. As you read this report, read with both an open mind and heart. Read knowing that the girls who participated represent but are not the sole representatives of the community of Black girls in Massachusetts. Read this knowing that while significant, the voices of many other youth are still missing. Read this knowing that there is something to be done and that something must be done urgently to protect our youth.”

Cleopatra Mavhunga, MHLAC, FFREE

“Being a part of this amazing project has been really eye opening for me. Talking to all of these wonderful, talented young girls, and hearing their stories has really put a light on the mistreatment of girls of color in schools. Listening to these girls stories I can also relate to what they have been through, and through this project I hope that I can continue to fight for change and I hope others can use their voice as well.”

Thora Henry,
High School Class of 2024

“As a community, it is our responsibility to understand the experiences of Black and Brown girls. It has been an honor to serve on this Board as we worked to learn about Black and Brown girls’ experiences and the ways in which we could support them. I hope this report inspires you all to center and support Black and Brown girls.”

Ivanna Solano,
Love Your Magic

"It is important to give light and meaningful data to inequities we know exist in the Commonwealth and beyond. By listening to the voices of our youth we are better able to drive the changes at which they need to be successful."

Falynne Correia,
Professional School Counselor

"Black Girls... Don't be afraid to use your voice. Your thoughts, opinions, and ideas are just as important as anybody else's. When you speak, speak with boldness and purpose. Have courage, be confident, and always be true to yourself! Live your life fearlessly! Your voice has GREAT power; don't be afraid to utilize it when needed. You're NOT an angry Black woman; you're a woman who has something important to say. Your voice matters and so do YOU."

Stephanie Lahart
(Quote selected by Jalissa Brown,
High School Class of 2024)

"Joining this Community Advisory board gave me the opportunity to highlight and uplift the voices of girls of color in Massachusetts as well as gain experience and connections with the people I worked with. I often advocate for myself and other students of color at the PWI [primarily white institution] I attend and am often viewed as someone who "complains too much" or is just "unhappy" when truly schools all over Massachusetts still mistreat and ignore students of color, especially the girls of color. If I cannot get through to my school I hope that the work we all have invested here breaks through to some other schools we reach. I hope the Massachusetts educational system and school administrators see this report, see us Black girls, and hear us. I hope that educators will reflect on themselves and devote themselves to supporting girls and boys of color. I want to continue this work so I thank MA Appleseed for this opportunity and assisting me embark on my journey of activism for women and girls of color."

Qai Hinds, High School Class of 2023

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“I joined this Community Advisory Board as a representative for Elevated Thought because I believe that we have the power to change our realities. Community-building work like this, the work that we have done in supporting the creation of this report, and the reading and internalizing of this report that I hope you all will do are the first steps. My hope is that you will read this report with care and compassion in your heart for all of the Black and Brown young women that have had to endure the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline. I hope that this report moves you to listen to the voices of young people and young women when they ask for what they need. Thank you to the Massachusetts Applesseed Center for Law and Justice for bringing together a wide array of folks and supporting us in doing this important work.”

Rania Henriquez, Elevated Thought

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“These are authentic stories from real girls living and attending our schools here in Massachusetts, and unfortunately their experiences are not unique. Their bravery, perseverance, and understanding of self at such a young age is remarkable. I could see my younger self in so many of their experiences, the version of myself that was too timid to speak up. Though I wish these scenarios were not still arising for young girls of color, I’m so proud to see them use their voices in this way. I also want to commend MA Applesseed for taking the lead on this study and allowing individuals like myself to have the opportunity to have a significant role in this unique experience.”

**Moriah Wiggins,
NAACP New Bedford**

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“The opportunity to participate in this project has been such an honor to us at JDI. JDI recognizes that the trauma inflicted by systems - including school systems - is deeply intertwined with the harm and trauma of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. We are fully committed to ensuring that the experiences shared by the courageous BIPOC girls in this report will become the basis for systems and culture change and healing in Massachusetts for years to come.”

**Hema Sarang-Sieminski,
Policy Director, Jane Doe Inc**

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“I always get comments like ‘Why do you look mad?’, ‘Why so serious?’ But like, you don’t know me and you never will so don’t assume anything about me. Just because I look the way I look doesn’t mean I’m aggressive.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

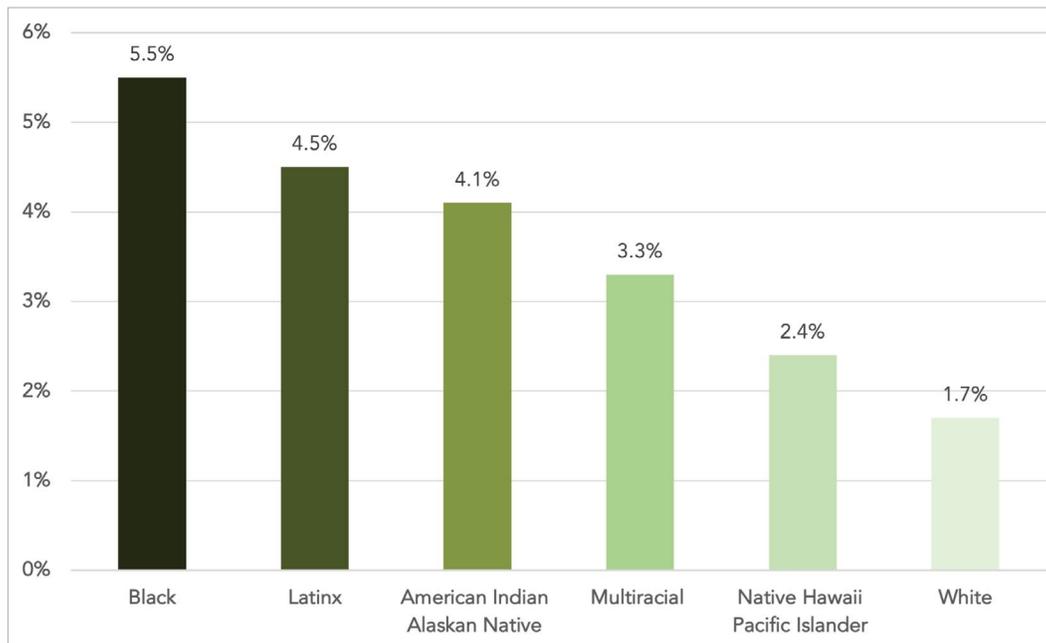
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report serves as a follow-up study to Massachusetts Appleseed's collaborative, data-driven report *Protecting Girls of Color from the School-to-Prison Pipeline*,² which found that Black girls in Massachusetts were almost 4 times more likely to be disciplined compared with their white counterparts.

To dive more deeply into these disparities, not only for Black girls but all girls of color across the Commonwealth, Massachusetts Appleseed collaborated with pro bono partner Edgeworth Analytics. We found that within the state of Massachusetts during the 2018-2019 school year (the last school year not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic) girls of color continued to face significant disparities in relation to school discipline, as this chart details below.

Figure 1: Percentage of Female Students Disciplined Across Racial/Ethnic Identity, 2018-2019 School Year in Massachusetts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, 2,401 (5.5%) of the 44,013 Black female students across the state experienced exclusionary discipline, compared to 4,622 (1.7%) of the 276,683 white female students.

² Ibid.

We also collaborated with Edgeworth Analytics to develop a public and interactive data dashboard where similar statistics (further broken down by intersectional categories such as disability status, English-language status, and socioeconomic status) from the 2017-2018 school year can be evaluated at the school district level, and such data can be compared with state totals. [Click here or see the footnote below to explore this tool.](#)³

Yet having this data alone isn't enough. We wanted to engage with the *why* behind this data and uplift the lived experiences behind these types of statistics; we also knew it wasn't our place as researchers to answer these follow-up questions alone. So in June of 2021, we brought together a Community Advisory Board (made up of students, advocates, school professionals and representatives of numerous organizations across the state) to ask: **Why** are girls of color in Massachusetts disciplined at a much higher rate than white girls?

The Community Advisory Board chose to pursue an interview-based research study to answer this question, as that would allow girls of color to use their voices and share their own personal experiences on school and school discipline. Eleven interviews – totaling 14 hours – were conducted with female students of color who had experienced exclusionary discipline (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or school-related arrest) at a Massachusetts public school. Here is what we found:

I. School Environment

- » Many girls of color we spoke to mentioned significant mental health concerns that they or their peers are experiencing, often connected to the pressure they feel to excel academically and/or attend college – this pressure is further pronounced for first-generation students.
- » These girls of color are facing an anti-Black curriculum that can often be alienating, and many wish their schools would more rigorously engage with Black history throughout the year, and particularly during Black history month.
- » Female students of color spoke about how they continually face a hostile environment in school, experiencing the weight of stereotypes relating to their race/ethnicity, or the intersection of their gender and racial/ethnic identity – often being immediately assumed loud or rude – and even sometimes feeling physically uncomfortable at school or in the classroom.
- » When asked about support systems or adults they could confide in at school when dealing with mental health issues, academic pressure, or racialized and gendered stereotypes, nearly 65% of the students interviewed referred to non-teaching faculty like a counselor, social

³ [Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year](#), Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

worker, coach, or administrator as a primary source of support.

- » Students did share about ways in which their teachers have had a positive impact on them over the years, yet many felt some lack of empathy, respect and/or understanding between them and their teachers, which kept students from looking to teachers as a source of support in school. A few students noted that some of the reasons they were hesitant to open up to teachers were teachers' perceived lack of confidentiality.
- » The disconnect between primarily white teachers and their students of color interviewed for this report ranges from disparate treatment towards students of color to explicitly offensive and racist behavior, like when one student was called "ghetto" by a teacher. While of course these incidents do not reflect the entirety of Massachusetts' strong teaching force – and fundamentally many teachers in our state are understaffed, burnt out, and in need of additional trainings, resources, and supports – the racially discriminatory behavior that does occur, which may be due in part to the lack of teacher diversity in Massachusetts, needs to be addressed.

II. What Does Discipline Look Like for Girls of Color in Massachusetts Schools?

- » Overwhelmingly, the girls interviewed for this report explained that they first experienced exclusionary discipline in elementary and middle school; almost 65% of them were first pushed out of the classroom in 3rd, 4th or 5th grade while roughly 35% of students interviewed experienced their first suspension or expulsion in 7th or 8th grade.
- » Many girls interviewed for this report spoke about the inequitable application of dress codes leading to discipline. These types of dress code inequities are particularly prevalent for girls of color with different body types.
- » A large majority of the girls interviewed for this report explained that the discipline they received in class stemmed directly from feeling disrespected or mistreated by teachers, for example sharing out an opinion in class that the teacher did not receive well. In addition, sometimes these young women would get in trouble in school when they would react to offensive or inappropriate behavior from another student. This suggests in both cases that many girls of color are getting in trouble for reactive behavior, rather than inciting disruptive incidents directly.
- » Many girls shared that they were frequently unable to explain their side of the story before they were disciplined, something they desperately wanted to do.

- » When it came to the provision of consequences, many students spoke about the harmful impact of students receiving differing punishments for the same actions – often due to their race, gender, or both – and their desire for equity when it came to consequences and accountability at school.

III. The Short-Term and Long-Term Impact of School Discipline

- » Many girls interviewed for this report spoke about how the impact of exclusionary discipline on them at such a young age didn't end the day after they were suspended, or even that year, but that years later their removal from the classroom still has an impact on them.
- » In the short-term, many students spoke about how after they experienced exclusionary discipline, school staff held a negative opinion of them – thinking of them as “disruptive,” “abusive,” or “violent” after they returned from their suspension or expulsion.
- » As teachers, faculty, and security continued to assume the worst of these girls after their first time being suspended or expelled, many girls explained they felt the need to take up less space, quiet themselves, and withdraw their outgoing personalities for fear of being disciplined again.

IV. What Are Female Students of Color Doing About the Discrimination They Face in Schools, and What Else Do They Want to See Changed?

- » Many students shared stories of their own, or of their friends, standing up against the discrimination they are experiencing in school by having meetings with school leaders or petitioning against faculty engaging in racist behavior, sometimes successfully leading to change.
- » The female students of color we spoke with have a lot of ideas for larger systemic ways to improve equity and reform discipline in schools across Massachusetts, including: a diverse teacher and administrative workforce that they can connect with better; prioritization of the student voice; greater mental health supports and services; ensuring students are held accountable for their actions, but in a meaningful and equitable way that allows students to learn from their actions while not harming their education by removing them from the classroom; and implementing restorative practices or conflict mediation – when done correctly – as an opportunity for students to engage with their actions in a healthy and meaningful way that will keep them in the classroom where they belong.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AT THE STATEWIDE LEVEL

The Massachusetts Legislature should:

- » Ban the suspension and expulsion of students for dress code violations.
- » Ban the suspension and expulsion of young students.
- » Enact comprehensive discipline reform legislation.
- » Create a system to encourage and retain diverse teachers in Massachusetts.
- » Reform and/or limit the use of school resources officers (SROs) and school police.
- » Establish a taskforce/commission or designate funding to further explore the relationship between girls of colors' experiences of abuse, sexual assault, and sexual harassment in relation to school discipline and juvenile justice system involvement.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should:

- » Establish a culture shift away from punitive and exclusionary discipline and instead towards alternatives that keep students in the classroom.
- » Diversify the Massachusetts curriculum to reflect the history and experiences of non-white histories and cultures.
- » Require and provide more rigorous training for teachers and all educational staff on anti-racist practices, cultural competency, and trauma-informed learning.
- » Place a greater investment in recruitment and retention of a diverse teaching force.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

School Committees and Superintendents should:

- » Support the mental health of students by hiring more social workers and school counselors (especially those of color, of varying backgrounds, and preferably who have experience working with students of color).
- » Support the mental health of students by allowing students multiple mental health days throughout the year and having daytime breaks for students while in school.
- » Invest funding into the training and implementation of restorative justice or similar alternatives.
- » Implement systems where students can provide anonymous feedback and/or report on inappropriate behavior from teachers and faculty.
- » Create pathways for student support outside of the school, and outside of mandatory reporting requirements.
- » Encourage students and parents to attend school committee meetings, and conduct listening sessions with parents and students at least annually.

AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Teachers and Administrators should:

- » Allow students the opportunity to explain their side of the story before subjecting them to discipline.
- » Institute periodic check-ins between teachers and students.
- » Encourage the creation of affinity groups, especially in schools where certain identities are in the minority.
- » Collaborate with students – and in particular girls of color – on student voice opportunities such as forums, meetings, etc.

Students and Parents should:

- » Explore know-your-rights resources and opportunities on school discipline (see recommendations section for suggested resources).
- » Continue to speak up when students experience discrimination in school by setting up meetings with school and district leadership, using petitions, etc.
- » Leverage the data within this report and the [Interactive Dashboard](#) to set up meetings with local school leadership to discuss how they plan to address these disparities in your own school and district.

INTRODUCTION

Background: The School-to-Prison Pipeline and Girls of Color

Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice (Massachusetts Appleseed) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as policies, practices, and procedures that disproportionately push students of color and students with disabilities out of the education system and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems. In [prior reports](#) on this topic, we have noted how students who are repeatedly excluded from school through suspensions, expulsions, or school-related arrests struggle to keep up with their classmates, do not feel welcomed into the school community, and often drop out of school altogether.⁴ These students who drop out – or more accurately, who are pushed out – of school are more than eight times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system compared to their counterparts who graduate.

This phenomenon is also referred to by many as the school-to-confinement pipeline because many students experience push-out from school into detention centers or experience house arrest with electronic monitoring, forms of confinement beyond what the term “prison” connotes.⁵ Massachusetts Appleseed continues to utilize the term school-to-prison pipeline as this remains the dominant terminology, though we acknowledge that this term should be used to encompass additional forms of detention that many students experience.

Historically, the study and advocacy to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline has focused on boys and young men of color. This focus is logical as numerically, male students – and Black male students in particular – are the largest population experiencing exclusionary discipline, being pushed out of school and into incarceration or other forms of detention. This is true across the nation and in Massachusetts as well. However, despite the fact that roughly three-fourths of the school population disciplined is male in Massachusetts, that still leaves thousands of female students across the state experiencing pushout that often get ignored in these conversations.⁶ On the national level however, there are some pioneering researchers who devoted themselves to shedding light on the unique experiences that girls of color face in relation to school discipline and school pushout.

4 [Keep Kids in Class: New Approaches to School Discipline](#), Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2017.

5 Monique W Morris. *PUSHOUT: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. New York: The New Press, 2018, p.12.

6 [Keep Kids in Class](#)

As Dr. Monique Morris, author of the 2016 book PUSHOUT: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools, notes⁷:

“Literature exploring the school-to-prison pipeline is dominated by an investigation of discipline, and in particular, the use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) among Black males, and largely obfuscates the ways in which Black females and males experience this phenomenon together and differently.”

This report seeks to expand upon the work of Dr. Monique Morris and other essential scholars who in the last ten years have begun to explore disciplinary disparities that girls of color face. The recent research into the unique identity and experiences of girls of color in schools would not have been possible without Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw’s 1989 essay in which she introduced the theory of intersectionality. In her own words, **Dr. Crenshaw describes intersectionality** as a “prism for understanding how multiple forms of inequality or oppression sometimes compound themselves.”⁸ In her original essay on the matter, she described how Black women, being both Black and female, held a unique experience of systemic oppression and discrimination reflected in the court system given the intersection of their race and gender.

In 2012, Dr. Monique Morris authored one of the **first papers** applying this lens to the school-to-prison pipeline while at the African American Policy Forum (which Dr. Crenshaw co-founded) and highlighted that, “By 2010, Black girls were 36 percent of juvenile females in residential placement...During these same periods Black girls also experienced a dramatic rise in per-district suspension rates. Between 2002 and 2006, per-district suspension rates of Black girls increased 5.3 percentage points compared to the 1.7 percentage point increase for Black boys.”⁹ Dr. Morris followed up on this work with her 2016 book PUSHOUT: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School, mentioned above. The primary argument of her book¹⁰ was to reveal the

“Multiple ways in which racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequity converge to marginalize Black girls in their learning environments – relegating many to an inferior quality of education because they are perceived as defiant, delinquent, aggressive, too sexy, too proud, and too loud to be treated with dignity in their schools.”

7 Morris, *PUSHOUT*, p.9

8 Kimberlé Crenshaw: *What is Intersectionality?* National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), June 22, 2018.

9 Monique W Morris. *Race, Gender and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Expanding Our Discussion to Include Black Girls*, African American Policy Forum, October 2012, p.3.

10 Morris, *PUSHOUT*, p.13.

In the years around and following the publication of Dr. Morris' *PUSHOUT* book, fellow researchers and policy institutions began to further explore the unique ways in which girls of color experienced disproportionate discipline in schools given the intersection of their race and gender. The National Women's Law Center (NWLC) has released multiple reports between 2017-2020 that examine not only how Black girls but also Latinx girls, Native American girls, and Asian American Pacific Islander girls experience disparities in suspensions and expulsions.¹¹ The NWLC also took a close look at the way girls of color faced unique burdens around dress code and the banning of natural hairstyle in D.C., leading to missed instruction.¹²

Similarly, in 2015 and 2017 the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown Law released two reports examining the school-to-prison pipeline with an intersectional lens. *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story* focused on the reality that girls' rate of sexual abuse is 4 times higher than boys' (31%) in the juvenile justice system. The report found that sexual abuse is one of the primary indicators of entry into the juvenile justice system (e.g., young girls arrested on prostitution charges are often treated as perpetrators rather than victims), and that the most common crimes for which girls are arrested — including running away, substance abuse, and truancy — are also the most common symptoms of abuse.¹³

Two years later the Center on Poverty and Inequality released a related report entitled *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. This report focused on the phenomenon of adultification, a form of age compression where Black girls are seen more like adult women than children, resulting in different perceptions of their behavior and different treatment than their white, same-aged female peers. This study found that particularly from ages 5-14, participants viewed Black girls as more adult than white girls. Participants saw Black girls as less needing of nurturing and protection, and as knowing more about adult topics including sex. Because they are seen as more adult, the study found that Black girls are not given the benefit of innocence or immaturity that colors the behavior of white girls. Instead, Black girls are seen as more culpable and worthy of harsher treatment and stricter surveillance of their behavior.¹⁴ This same year, in 2017, the New York based organization Girls for Gender Equity released their comprehensive report *The School Girls Deserve* – a report based on a participatory action research (PAR) model

11 Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, Kayla Patrick, Neena Chaudhry. *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls of Color*, National Women's Law Center, 2017.

12 Alexandra Brodsky, Nia Evans, Kayla Patrick, Revati Mahurkar, Angel, Beatrice, Chrissy, et al. *Dress Coded: Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. Schools*, National Women's Law Center, 2018.

13 Malika Saada Saar, Lindsay Rosenthal, Yasmin Vafa. *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*, Human Rights Project for Girls, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Ms. Foundation for Women, 2019.

14 Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, Thalia González. *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020.

Massachusetts Appleseed's Prior Research

In 2017, two Black girls from Malden, Massachusetts – Deanna and Mya Cook – who attended Mystic Valley Regional Charter School, were **punished** for wearing braid extensions in their hair as it violated the school's dress code.¹⁷ The Cook sisters refused to remove the extensions, claiming the policy was discriminatory and unevenly enforced. In response, the school escalated their punishments from detention to prohibiting the sisters from participating in their respective sports teams and telling Mya she could not attend prom. **The Cook sisters were not alone.** Another parent from the same Malden school said her 15-year-old daughter, Lauren, received detention time for her braids. The detention escalated to a suspension when Lauren refused to remove her braids the following week. Meanwhile, white students at the school with dyed hair—another dress code violation—received no punishment.¹⁸

This incident led Massachusetts Appleseed to shift our focus from researching the school-to-prison pipeline more generally towards an intersectional analysis of how girls of color are uniquely impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline across the nation, and in Massachusetts in particular. Following the incident in Malden we established a collaboration with two other Appleseed Network centers, Alabama Appleseed and Kansas Appleseed, to conduct a cross-state quantitative analysis of exclusionary school discipline – suspensions, expulsions, and school-related arrests – experienced by Black girls. Released in 2020, *Protecting Girls of Color from the School-to-Prison Pipeline* utilized federal data from the 2015-2016 school year and found that across Alabama, Kansas, and Massachusetts, Black girls were 5.2 times more likely to be disciplined than white girls.

Breaking down the numbers by each individual state, the report found that Kansas had the highest disciplinary disparities out of all three states as Black girls were 6.2 times more likely to be disciplined than their white counterparts. The discrepancy was 3.7 times in Alabama, and 3.9 times in Massachusetts. Drilling down even deeper into the Massachusetts data, we found that Black girls were 4 times more likely to face a school-based arrest, 5 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension and 5 times more likely to be expelled than their white counterparts.¹⁹ After the release of this brief data-driven report, we knew that we wanted to engage in a follow-up study that would dive even deeper into these statistics and highlight the stories behind these disparities.

17 Katie Mettler, "Mass. school punishes twins for hair braid extensions. Their parents say it's racial discrimination." May 15, 2017.

18 Kay Lazar, "Black Malden charter students punished for braided hair extensions" May 11, 2017.

19 Protecting Girls of Color from the School to Prison Pipeline, Appleseed Network.

Our prior research found that Black girls in Massachusetts were

4X more likely

to face a school-based arrest

5X more likely

to receive an out-of-school suspension

5X more likely

to be expelled

than their white counterparts.

Diving Deeply Into the Data

To support a more in-depth quantitative analysis of disciplinary disparities for all girls of color in Massachusetts – not only Black girls but also Latinx girls, multiracial girls, Asian girls,²⁰ American Indian Alaskan Native girls, and Native Hawaii Pacific Islander girls – Massachusetts Appleseed collaborated with pro bono partner Edgeworth Analytics to examine school discipline disparities for this population during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years, the last two school years not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the Edgeworth team identified significant disciplinary disparities for most girls of color, and further identified the unique experiences of girls of color with disabilities, girls of color considered economically disadvantaged, and girls of color who are English-language learners.

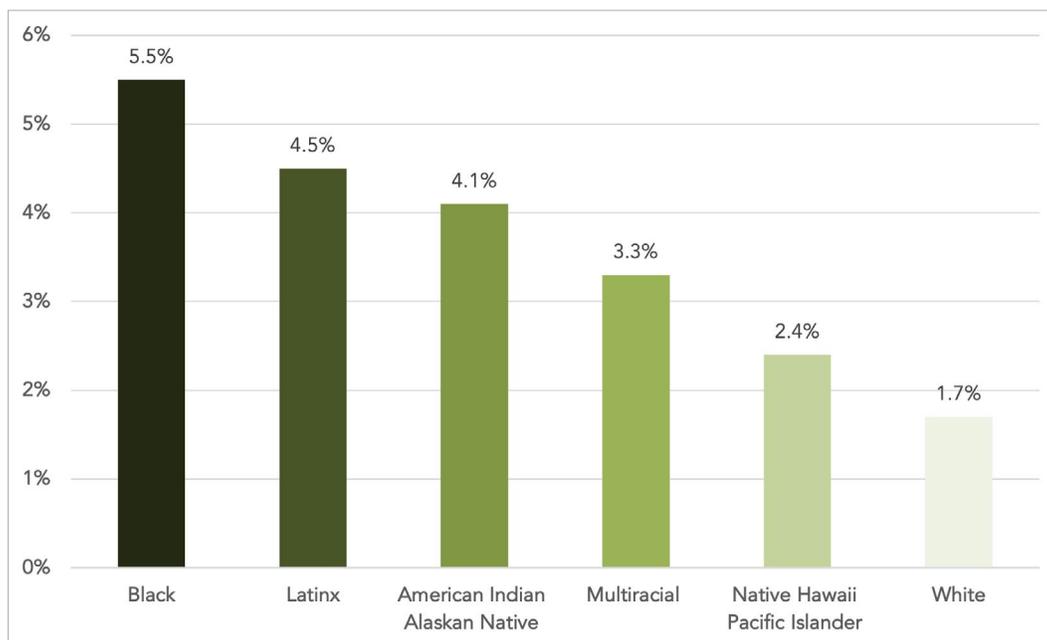
Within the data set used for our analysis, school discipline includes:

- » In-school suspension (1 day or more)
- » Out-of-school suspension (1 day or more)
- » Permanent Expulsion/Expulsion
- » **Removed to an alternate setting**, by an impartial hearing officer or school personnel. Alternative settings can include home tutoring, in-district alternative program, alternative program in another district, private alternative setting, or work/community service setting.
- » **Emergency Removal**. The removal of a student from school temporarily when a student is charged with a disciplinary offense and the continued presence of the student poses a danger to persons or property, or materially and substantially disrupts the order of the school, and, in the principal's judgment, there is no alternative available to alleviate the danger or disruption.

²⁰ Asian girls were the only female demographic of color that had a negative disparity compared to white girls, meaning more white girls experienced discipline than Asian girls during the two school years examined for this analysis.

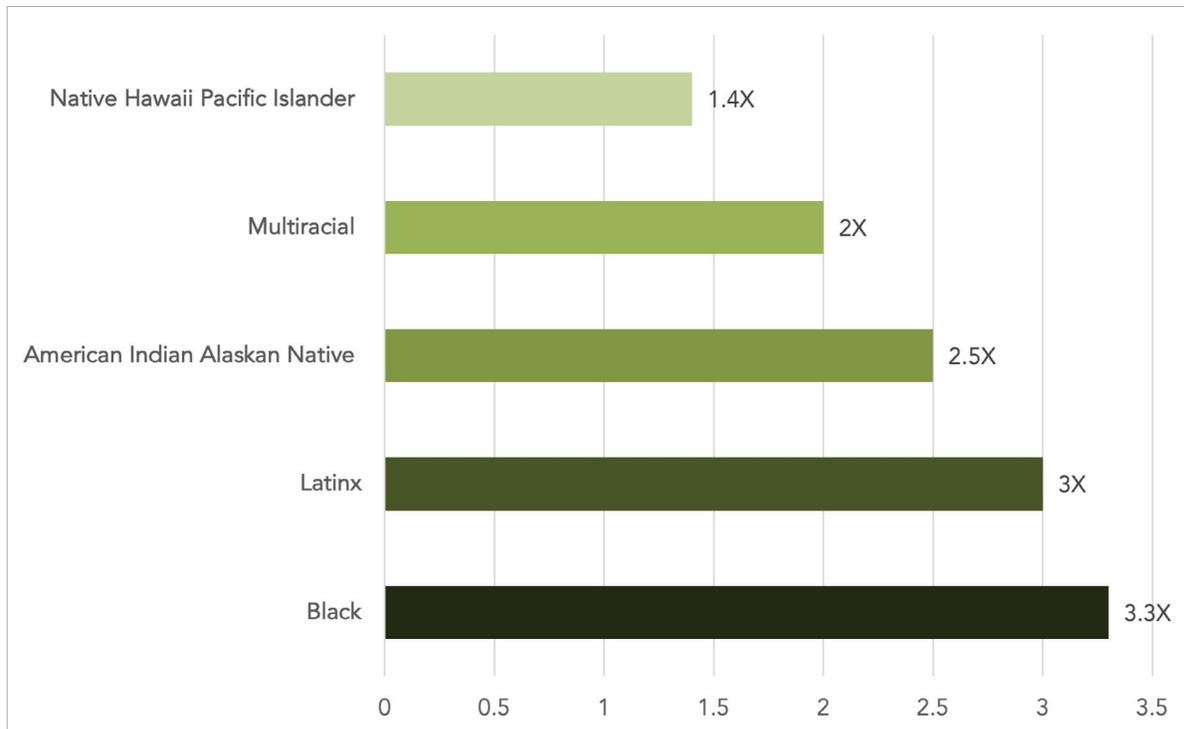
The following charts detail the significant racial disparities that girls of color experienced in relation to discipline during the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts:

Figure 2: Percentage of Female Students Disciplined Across Racial/Ethnic Identity, 2018-2019 School Year in Massachusetts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, 2,401 (5.5%) of the 44,013 Black female students across the state experienced exclusionary discipline, compared to 4,622 (1.7%) of the 276,683 white female students

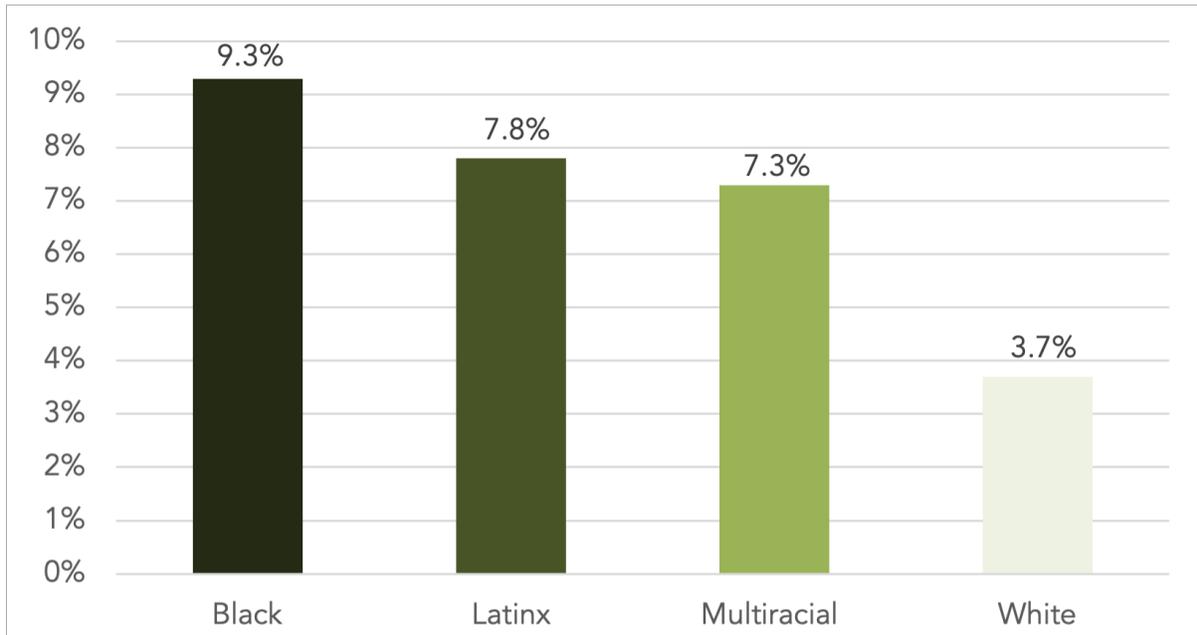
Figure 3: Female Students of Color More Likely To Be Disciplined Than White Female Counterparts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, Black female students across the state were 3.3 times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than white female students.

These disparities are extremely pronounced for girls of color with a disability:

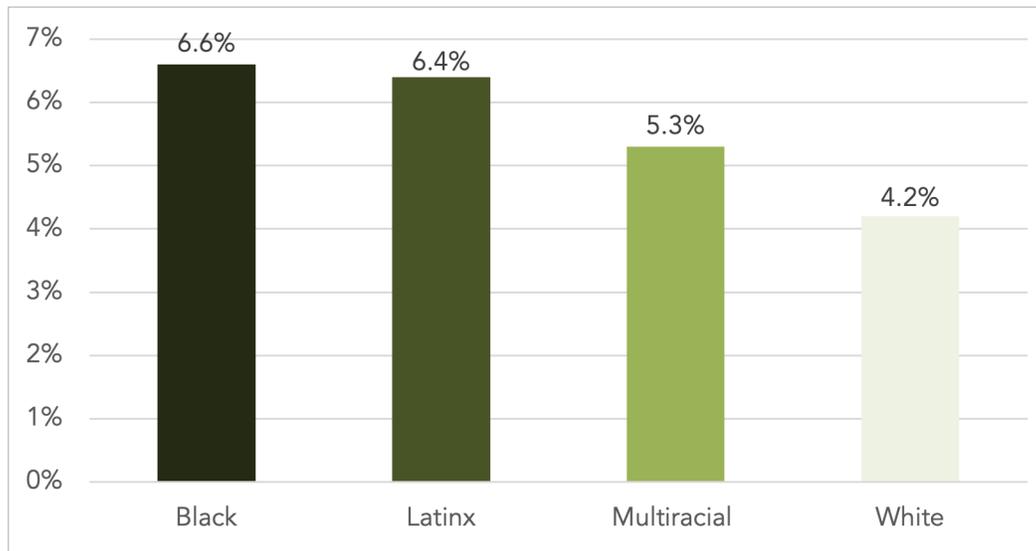
Figure 4: Percentage of Female Students With a Disability Disciplined Across Racial/Ethnic Identity, 2018-2019 School Year in Massachusetts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, 637 (9.3%) of the 6,867 Black female students with a disability across the state experienced exclusionary discipline, compared to 1,397 (3.7%) of the 37,521 white female students with a disability.

Similarly, girls of color considered economically disadvantaged by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education²¹ experienced significantly more discipline than white girls with a similar socioeconomic status received:

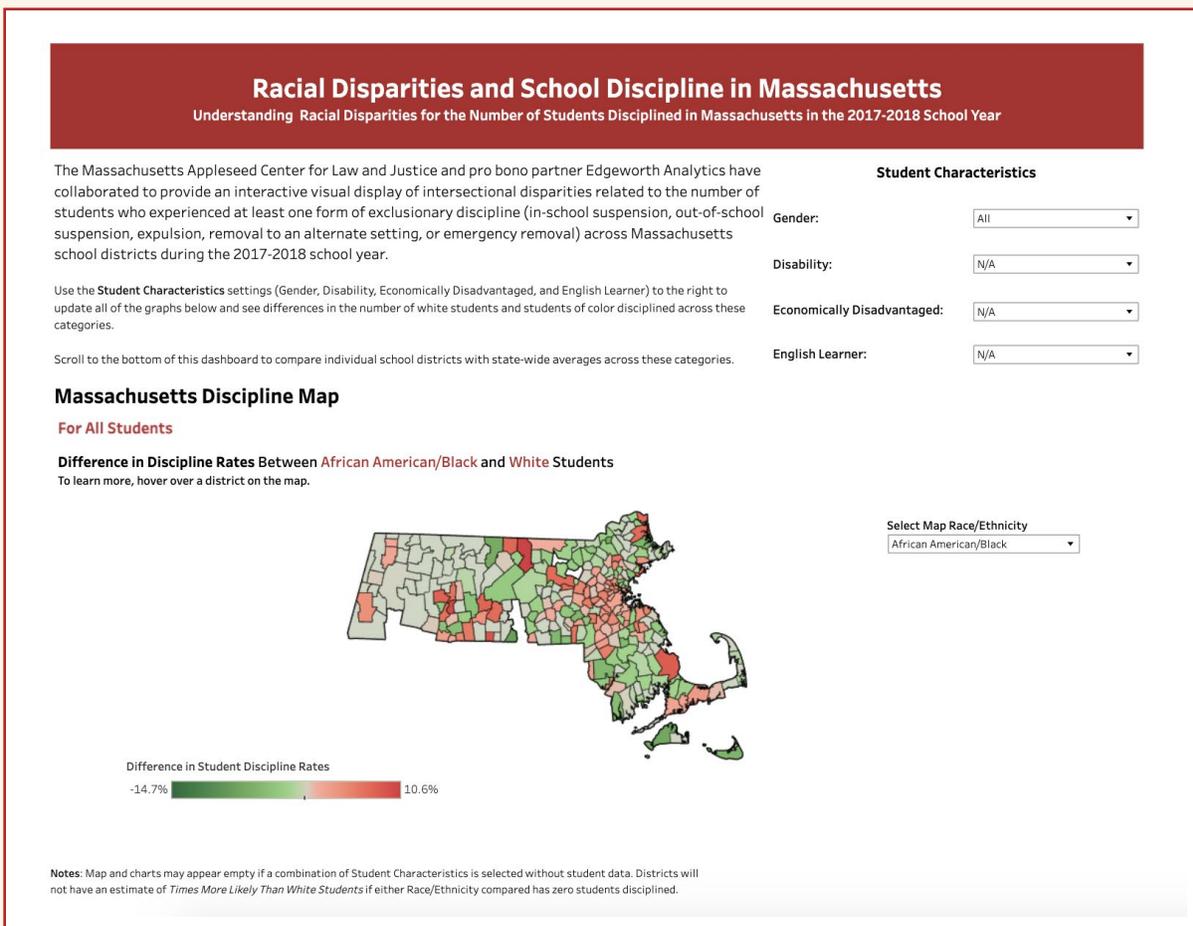
Figure 5: Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Female Students Disciplined Across Racial/Ethnic Identity, 2018-2019 School Year in Massachusetts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, 1,745 (6.6%) of the 26,506 Black female students considered economically disadvantaged across the state experienced exclusionary discipline, compared to 2,494 (4.2%) of the 59,953 white female students considered economically disadvantaged.

²¹ Calculated based on a student's participation in one or more of the following state-administered programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) foster care program; and MassHealth (Medicaid)

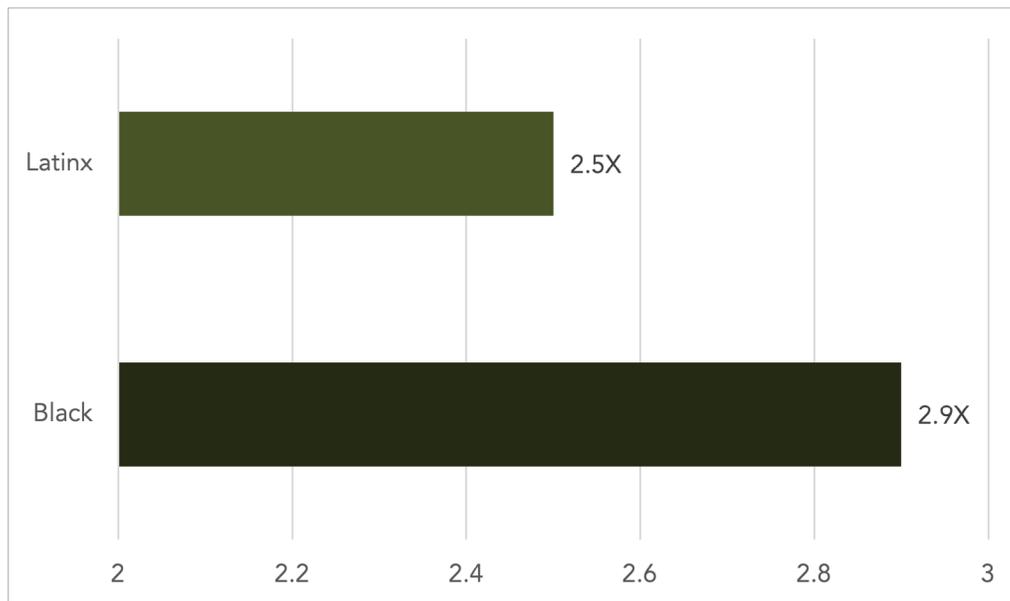
In addition to conducting this data analysis for disparities across the entire Commonwealth, the Edgeworth Analytics team also developed a **public interactive data dashboard** where similar statistics from the 2017-2018 school year can be broken down by individual districts and data can be compared with these state totals. Click here or see the footnote below to explore this tool.²²



²² Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

Lastly, female students of color that were English-language learners²³ experienced greater than duplicated rates when it came to the likelihood they would experience exclusionary discipline compared to white students who are English-language learners:

Figure 6: Female English-Language Learners of Color More Likely To Be Disciplined Than White Female Counterparts



During the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, Black female English-Language Learners and Latinx English-Language Learners across the state were 2.9 and 2.5 times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than white female English-Language Learners, respectively.

²³ A student whose first language is a language other than English who is unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English.

Community Advisory Board

In conjunction with partnering alongside Edgeworth Analytics to obtain a greater understanding of the statistical disparities girls of color face relating to school discipline in Massachusetts, Massachusetts Appleseed also wanted to engage in a follow-up study that explored the stories behind the experiences, and that shed light on what these disparities actually looked like in the classroom. Because Massachusetts Appleseed had an all-white staff at the time this research was conducted, we knew it wasn't our place as researchers to try and answer these questions alone.

Inspired by the practices of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which community members serve as equal partners and leaders in research projects about their communities, we sent out a call across the state for Massachusetts students, educators, parents, and non-profit advocates to collaboratively design and execute this project with us through a Community Advisory Board (CAB). While this Board is not a full-fledged PAR project, this is the first project Massachusetts Appleseed has implemented with a community-driven focus not only with reference to those interviewed and surveyed, but with reference to how the project is designed from the ground-up.

In June of 2021, our Community Advisory Board came to fruition. The entire board was filled by women of color, half of whom were current or recent students who had personal experiences with school discipline in the Massachusetts educational system, and the other half were adults in the school system or non-profit advocacy community representing organizations including Framingham Families for Racial Equity In Education, YW Boston's F.Y.R.E Program, Jane Doe Inc., I Have a Future, the NAACP of New Bedford, Elevated Thought, and Love Your Magic. From all different corners of the Commonwealth, the members of this Advisory Board agreed to a yearlong commitment to collaborate with Massachusetts Appleseed on this qualitative follow-up study and were compensated for their time and expertise accordingly. The responsibilities of the CAB included: identifying research questions, drafting an interview questionnaire, recruiting students to interview, conducting student interviews, coding interview results to identify key patterns and findings, developing concrete policy recommendations, aiding in the creation of this policy report, and planning a community event to share the findings of the report in order to get the results of this work into the hands of community members directly.

The overarching research question that Massachusetts Appleseed approached this Advisory Board with, based upon the results of our initial 2020 report, was: Why are girls of color in Massachusetts disciplined at a much higher rate than white girls? From there, the CAB members identified more detailed research questions they wanted to answer with this study:

1. Do girls of color in Massachusetts feel like they can be themselves at school? How do they feel they are perceived by their teachers?
2. How do cultural background/family dynamics impact school-discipline that girls of color face, or their ability to advocate for themselves in school?
3. Do girls of color in Massachusetts who experience discipline in later years often have a history of discipline from elementary school?
4. What are the types of alleged offenses that girls of color are frequently disciplined for? Is it common for girls of color in Massachusetts to experience exclusionary discipline for age-typical behavior (hairstyle, wearing leggings, chewing gum, “talking too much”) that their white counterparts are not disciplined for?
5. What is the relationship between sexual trauma/dating violence/witness to domestic violence and school discipline for girls of color in Massachusetts?
6. What supports are girls of color in Massachusetts looking for at school? What do they want to see change/what recommendations do they have?

Methodology

The primary method that Massachusetts Appleseed and the Community Advisory Board members decided to pursue for this study was an interview-based format that would allow girls of color to use their voices and share their own personal experiences and stories on school and school discipline. While the Board acknowledged the need for the teacher and parent voice to be a part of this larger conversation as well, the Board decided to keep the focus of *this* study directly on students and their unique perspective, as the direct student voice so often gets left out of the narrative.

The CAB members decided that to qualify for an interview with this study, an individual must:

- » Be a female/female-identifying student, or a student assigned female at birth, that goes to a Massachusetts public school (including charter schools);
- » Be in 7th – 12th grade;
- » Identify as a person of color;
- » Have at least one experience with exclusionary school discipline at a Massachusetts public school (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or school-related arrest).

Interview opportunities were advertised through social media, via presentations at community organizations, and shared with the networks of individual CAB members (see *Appendix A* for the online flyer that was used during our recruitment period). Students who expressed interest were directed to an online survey to see if they qualified based upon the metrics listed above. There was an explicit attempt by both Massachusetts Appleseed staff and CAB members to share this opportunity with as many different types of communities as possible across the entire state.

Before engaging in the interview, students who qualified had to review and sign a consent form explaining the interview process and how their data would be used and kept confidential. This form was required to be signed by a parent as well if the student in question was under 18. All interviews lasted between 1-2 hours and were held over Zoom. The interview was primarily facilitated by a Community Advisory Board Member alongside a Massachusetts Appleseed researcher, attending to take notes. The interview guide (see *Appendix B*) was designed by CAB members who submitted interview questions based upon our Research Questions listed above, and left in a semi-structured format so that CAB members conducting interviews could ask follow-up questions and move around different sections of the interview as necessary. At the end of every interview, students were provided a resource toolkit (see *Appendix C*) with both state and national programs and resources recommended by CAB members.

Both student interviewee's and the CAB members conducting the interviews were compensated for their time. Students and CAB members were compensated \$25 an hour for these interviews. In total, 11 interviews were conducted between January-May 2022, totaling 14 hours of interviews. After the majority of interviews had been conducted, Massachusetts Appleseed staff worked with a subcommittee of CAB members to inductively code the results (meaning we identified key themes organically instead of creating categories first and sorting our results into them) and identify key patterns, themes, and policy recommendations that were then presented on and approved by the full Advisory Board.

Interview Demographics

A total of 11 interviews were conducted for this study between January-May 2022, totaling 14 hours of interviews. All of the students interviewed used she/her pronouns, and for the rest of the report will be referred to as female students/girls. A majority of these students currently attend school in the Greater Boston area, including Hyde Park, Chelsea, Roxbury, Roslindale and Dorchester. Other students interviewed for this report attended school in Swampscott (a METCO student) and Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. Despite the attempts listed above to be proportionally statewide in scope for this project, our end results were somewhat limited, in part due to the difficulty of connecting with students virtually given the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other limitations of this study relate to student populations who have experienced dating/domestic violence and students with disabilities. With reference to students who experienced dating/domestic violence or other forms of sexual assault, our online screener survey did include optional questions (and content warnings beforehand) about whether students had experienced “sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence or family violence” and if so, whether they would be comfortable discussing how those experiences impacted their education during their initial interview, or a follow-up interview. No students consented to speak about this topic during either an initial interview or a follow-up interview. Thus, more research on this is likely necessary in Massachusetts as this report cannot shed further light on a population, that based upon national research detailed above, we know to be particularly vulnerable to school discipline and justice system involvement more generally. In addition, no students that we interviewed for this study voluntarily shared any information about any disability or special education services they receive, though based upon Massachusetts specific data we know that between 7.3%-9.3% of Black, Latinx, and multi-racial girls in Massachusetts with disabilities experienced school discipline during the 2018-2019 school year.



Figure 7: Racial/Ethnic Background of Female Students Interviewed

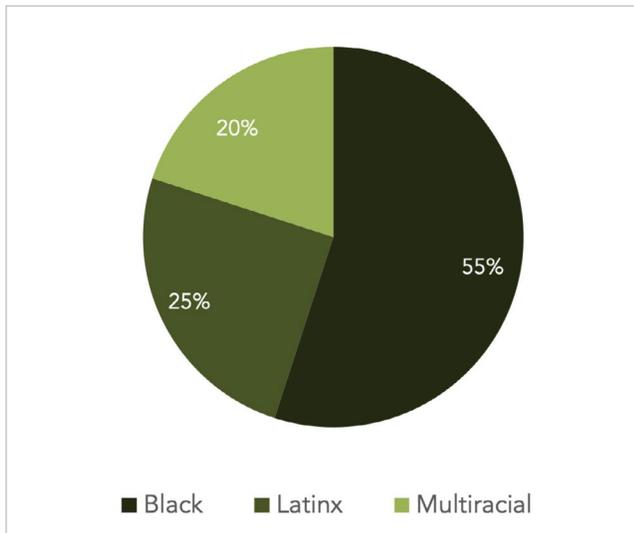
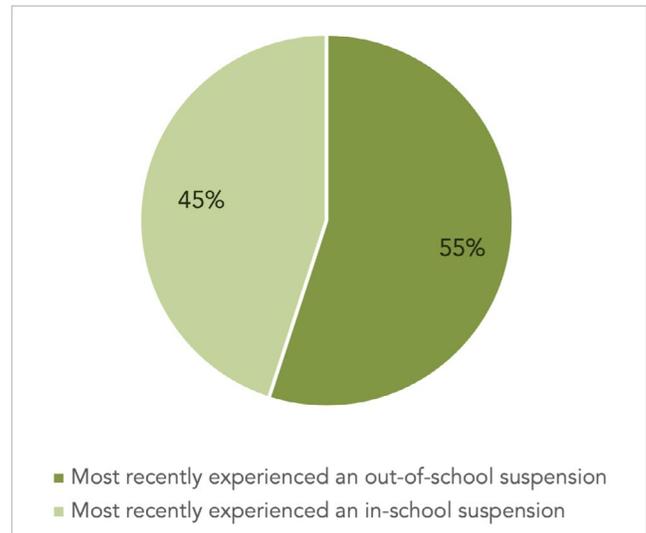


Figure 8: Interviewee's Most Recent Experiences with Suspension



With regard to the racial/ethnic background of the female students interviewed for this report, almost 55% of the students identified as Black (African American, Jamaican, Burundian, Haitian), almost 20% identified as Latinx (Dominican/Hispanic), and just over 25% identified as multiracial (Afro-Latinx, Black/Indian, and Jamaican/White/Portuguese).

All students interviewed had experienced at least one suspension before; 55% most recently experienced an out-of-school suspension, while 45% most recently had experienced an in-school suspension.

The last piece of relevant demographic data to note is that a vast majority of students interviewed for this study were current high school students at the time of their interview.

At the end of every interview, all students were provided the option of reviewing all quotes attributed to them before this report's publication. Those who took this offer had the opportunity to edit or veto these quotes before giving their official approval. The Findings section below embraces the voices of these students from their interviews directly, highlighting their thoughts and experiences about school and school discipline in Massachusetts as female students of color.

I. FINDINGS

Family Life

Before diving into Massachusetts' school environment and school culture, it is necessary to keep in mind the inner life of the whole student. What experiences do they take with them into school, and how does their family life impact their school life?

Some students interviewed for this report mentioned how **supportive and encouraging their family** is about school:

*"It's a lot of encouragement that comes from them, going into school, doing what I have to do, knowing what I have to do for future outcomes and results and mak[ing] sure you stay on top of your work...I know that they will always have my back."
– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district*

*"My family to me is very supportive. If anything was to happen in school, if I had an issue, they would be supportive."
– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district*

Other girls spoke about how their parents "try to understand my experience in school, but they don't fully grasp [it]"²⁴ and that their parents are "close-minded"²⁵ and frequently take on the point of view of their teachers instead of listening to them.²⁶

Regardless of the level of support that the girls interviewed for this report received from their parents, many also reflected on the expectations their family had of them and the **mental pressure** they felt to succeed in school and ultimately attend college:

*"My mother is very strict with grades. Sometimes it takes a toll on my mental health, but I know she is in the right place, and she cares for what I do for my future. I know where she is coming from but sometimes it's too much for me."
– Imani*

²⁴ Imani

²⁵ Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

²⁶ Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district; Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

*"I have had a panic attack in relation to school during quarantine. My mom [was] lecturing about my grades, and I broke down, I couldn't take it, the pressure to excel."
– Imani*

Almost 50% of students interviewed mentioned their parents expect them to go to college:²⁷

*"My mom, she wants me to do really good in school. Get As and Bs and be an honors student, and go to college, be successful in the future."
– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district*

*"They want me to go to college, and I want that for myself as well."
– Imani*

*"If some of us don't go to college they will look at us as failures."
– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district*

The pressure to attend college is that much more all-consuming for students that are first-generation:

*"Going to college, on my dad's side [I'm] the first-generation other than my sister, so [it's] a high expectation. [I feel] a little bit of pressure, but I understand where he is coming from with that because he didn't have the opportunity. If we're given it, we should take it."
– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district*

*"My family impacts my school life by reminding me constantly that they came to America for our futures, so they would want to see us go to college. I'm first generation, it's either I go to college or disappoint them like my aunt did... Sometimes it feels like it's not my choice but it's something I have to do, and even if I don't like it, it will benefit me later on. Even if it's stressful, it's something I will eventually do."
– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district*

²⁷ Imani; Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district; Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district; Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district; Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

All students interviewed for this report were also asked to reflect on whether any familial responsibilities they had (taking care of siblings, getting a job to help contribute financially, etc.) had a significant impact on their school life. While a few students did hold these types of responsibilities, most we spoke to felt that it had little impact on their learning. However, this only represents the perspective of the students interviewed for this particular project, and these types of family responsibilities may significantly impact other students' ability to devote the necessary time and energy to succeed in school.

Mental Health

The female students of color interviewed for this project who opened up about their own **mental health struggles** reveal how the ongoing national emergency in child and adolescent mental health has been **exacerbated by both "COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice"** as **declared** by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) in June of 2021.²⁸ As one student interviewed for this report explained:

*"Some students are not mentally there, cause I know I'm not mentally fully healthy and the school, the way they react to certain situations it doesn't help."
– Imani.*

These mental health burdens have in recent years disproportionately impacted "children from communities of color" in part due to the "inequities that result from structural racism" as explained in the AP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency. Anne, a student we interviewed for this project, spoke on this exact phenomenon, sharing:

"I feel like I have social anxiety around a lot of people. As a Black girl having social anxiety, I feel like they look at me as rude because I'm not talking. They look at me differently than a white or Hispanic girl with anxiety."

²⁸ AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Academy of Pediatrics, October 19, 2021.

A Lack of Representation in the School Curriculum

These female students of color who are coming into school with the pressure to excel, which frequently leads to mental health issues, are then met in class with an **anti-Black curriculum** that can often be alienating, even for non-Black students:

“In Chelsea, [things] related to Hispanics in Chelsea is celebrated all year round but Black culture is a one-day thing that isn’t celebrated at all or completely dragged on till [the] last minute, and it’s the same with other cultures as well; it’s either all Hispanics or nothing at all. Chelsea don’t have Black studies or African studies. It’s either whitewashed or it’s just Hispanic, always one of the two.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“We should learn about stuff that’s happening today like BLM (Black Lives Matter).”

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

Multiple students highlighted the importance of **Black History Month** to them in particular, and the ways in which schools should more rigorously engage with Black history:

“Black history month, you guys don’t teach your students about that...I wasn’t there for middle school, but I heard that they only learned about [the] surface level of Black teachers...Never learned about Harriet Tubman or James Baldwin... The history of students of color was all around us [at my Charter school for middle school]. They taught us about everything, we knew Black history, but it’s never talked about in an all-white school.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“For Black history month they do the bare minimum. We had an event for Black History Month, but non-Black students came and that made me uncomfortable.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“Talking back to one of the teachers, I had an opinion about Black history month, I had an opinion on why were we only learning about Black men and not Black women.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

Stereotypes and Microaggressions at School

Just as these students experience a whitewashed curriculum reflected back at them in their textbooks, at school female students of color continually face a hostile environment, experiencing the **weight of stereotypes** relating to their race/ethnicity, or the intersection of their gender and racial/ethnic identity:

"I always get comments like 'Why do you look mad?', 'Why so serious?' But like, you don't know me and you never will so don't assume anything about me. Just because I look the way I look doesn't mean I'm aggressive."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"Yeah, they assume, usually where I come from, I'm a bad kid because of where I live, or the way I dress. 'She's not going to be good in the future.' They assume stuff without even knowing me...For some certain teachers I can't act the way I act because they will classify that as ghetto or hood, or like me trying to be something that I'm not. Sometimes I have to be more quiet, or talk a certain way that I don't talk."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"Whenever I'm in the classroom, [other students say] 'I didn't expect you to be so quiet' or 'Why are you always so quiet?' They assume I'm supposed to be loud and chatty, because that's how Black girls are portrayed to be."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"They just assume that I would speak a different language or that I would be loud or something, because I'm usually a quiet kid... [It makes me feel]...stereotyped."

– AJ, 8th grade student

"I'm pretty comfortable [in school], but then when I [am myself] it's 'Loud ghetto Black girl' is the first thing they like to say. It's aggravating because I can't say anything or do anything without walking on eggshells because you feel you will be stereotyped as soon as anything is said."

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

"In some situations, I don't feel safe enough to say, 'I don't like this' or 'I don't like that.' I don't want to be a person that is called dramatic or a bully, I don't want to cause problems."

– Imani

"I do not feel like I can fully express myself at school or have a place where I can express myself other than my home. I don't feel like people that are like me are celebrated in the way that they should be. If I do something out of the norm, they will say I would do something for attention."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

In addition to facing offensive stereotypes attributed to young women of color – often being immediately **assumed loud or rude** – girls of color shared the ways in which they sometimes **feel physically uncomfortable** at school or in the classroom:

"No Black student should hear the n-word being used excessively by a non-Black person. It makes me feel like I'm oppressed, even if they are not referring it to me, you can feel the oppression in the word. You can feel the trauma, you can feel everything the word carries."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"[In class] whenever they are speaking about any other African country everybody turns around to look at me like it has something to do with me."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"I'm the only kid of color in the class. It kind of gets to a certain point where I'm kind of enclosed but at the same time I need to be aware. It's kind of breathtaking, it gets really tiring."

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

Finding Support Systems in Counselors, Social Workers, and Administrators

When asked about **support systems** or adults they could confide in at school, nearly 65% of the students interviewed referred to non-teaching faculty like a **counselor, social worker, coach, or administrator** as a primary source of support:²⁹

“My advisor, we are really close...I see her as my confidant. I can trust her with anything. Any minor inconvenience that happens at school she is always there for me. She is really open minded. She puts herself in the position to know where you are coming from. She also understands what’s wrong and it’s nice learning from my mistakes.”

– Anonymous 10th grade student

“It took a while to find a support system at school. I have an amazing METCO director. She’s always there for us in any type of situation, not only personal but also racial tension or racial incidents that happened in school.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“My Black social worker, I feel comfortable around him. He is very joyous and has a joyful soul.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“My counselor...She is white, but we have a good bond. She’s not too hard, too pushy. She is there for you in the present, there for you and wants good for you in the future.”

– Danny

“I have my favorite gym coach. There’s also a guidance counselor. She is there for everybody, that is her job, it’s like...She is there and very supportive. She doesn’t talk down, she is there to help you, not there to criticize.”

– Anonymous 8th grade student

²⁹ Anonymous 10th grade student; Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district; Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district; Danny; Anonymous 8th grade student; Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district; Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“The student support person, I don’t really tell her much but sometimes I feel as if she can tell how isolated and by myself I am, she will tell me to come sit with her or ask how my work is going, let me help around the school.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

“I recently met Dr. G. and if I were to want to say something about a topic that bothers me I would talk to him. Dr. G works with Black students whose voices aren’t heard, he pushes us to speak and not just for ourselves but for others; so they too can be inspired and feel uplifted to speak.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

The Teacher-Student Relationship

Compared to social workers, counselors, and administrators, students’ interpersonal relationships with teachers appear to be more of a mixed bag. Overall, while some students did share about ways in which their teachers have had a positive impact on them over the years, many felt some **lack of empathy, respect and/or understanding between them and their teachers**, which kept students from looking to teachers as a source of support in school.

On the positive end of the spectrum, girls interviewed for this report spoke about how their teachers help them catch up on missing work,³⁰ asked them if they need to see someone if something is wrong,³¹ or support students in their assertion that the school environment needs to change with respect to race.³² One student, Anne, shared that her “English teacher, she helps me with a lot. Every time a non-Black person says the n-word, she looks at me to let me know I’m ok and is very comforting.”³³ These examples showcase the many teachers across the Commonwealth who have devoted their professional careers to helping young people build out their educational and interpersonal lives; teachers that will forever positively impact who their students become. We need to support educators that acknowledge the racial discrimination in our schools and serve as allies to stand up against it. Teachers often engage in this learning by attending trainings on how to bring anti-racist pedagogy into their classrooms. However, many of Massachusetts’ teachers are simply overworked, and racial bias training is often taken on by individual teachers or school staff after-hours, on top of their many existing responsibilities. Systematically, teachers are frequently not provided the supports they need to serve our state’s diverse student body in the ways that they need.

³⁰ Imani

³¹ Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

³² Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

³³ Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

As such, despite the positive examples above of teachers supporting or connecting with their students, girls interviewed for this report also spoke about the barriers they experienced with some teachers which kept them from making stronger connections. When asked if any teachers have had a memorable positive impact on them, one student named Imani answered, “Not that I can recall.”³⁴ Other students explained that they don’t feel as comfortable opening up to their teachers about sensitive topics, sharing, “As far as mentally, I wouldn’t talk to any teachers,”³⁵ and that “[It’s] different with teachers. I can go and talk to them, but compared to my guidance counselor and coach, I can literally speak to them about anything. I can talk to them about anything without being judged,”³⁶ revealing that despite a positive relationship some girls may have with their teachers on the surface, there may be a deeper lack of comfort that many girls of color have with some of their teachers. As one student, AJ, interviewed for this report put it, “The teachers are more of a community and then the students are a different community.”³⁷

In addition, a few students noted that one of the reasons they were hesitant to open up to teachers was teachers’ perceived **lack of confidentiality**:

“I don’t want to talk to them because things get said and done. [With] how busy my school is, I feel as if someone was going to hear me. Even if we are on the phone, teachers will tell other teachers and it’s not something I’m comfortable with.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

“I know a lot of teens now always, when they go to teachers for help it will go back to the parent. But first [the teacher] should take steps for it, sometimes it’s not as severe. They should take the steps to help them, set them up with a counselor, someone to talk to, set them on goals.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

34 Imani

35 Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

36 Anonymous 8th grade student

37 AJ, 8th grade student

“When I was younger, in middle school, [I had] a teacher in 7th grade. I kept telling her stuff about me personally and the first thing she said was ‘We need to tell your parents.’ She didn’t listen to what I was saying. She listened to reply without listening to what I’m saying. [She said] ‘Your parents need to handle that, I’m just your teacher’... Before going to a parent, for example if I’m telling a teacher I’m depressed, I wouldn’t want them to go to my mom, I would want her to talk to me and figure something out before talking to anyone else.”
– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

While no students interviewed for this report opted to share how dating or domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, or family violence may impact their relationship with school itself and with their teachers, it should still be noted that these types of experiences with survivorship may also be contributing to a strained relationship between teachers and students, specifically with reference to confidentiality concerns and the perceived lack of understanding, empathy, and support from teachers that the students we interviewed mentioned. Further research is warranted to explore this in greater depth.

Lack of Diversity in Teaching Staff

This fear of judgment or discomfort opening up to teachers may also be connected to the [lack of diversity in the Massachusetts teaching force](#); “Statewide, 43 percent of K-12 students are nonwhite but only 8 percent of teachers are people of color.”³⁸ As one student, Nagida, interviewed for this report explains:

“You guys have students of color at your school, you want us to feel safe and involved, but at the same time you are not teaching teachers how to handle certain situationsWhether they are racial comments or [racial] ignorance, a lot of teachers let it be as a slap on the wrist, instead of confronting the situation and saying that’s not right.”

When students of color are led by white teachers who are not equipped to address the racial inequities that inevitably exist inside the classroom – often due to a lack of time, resources, and training through no fault of their own – it’s understandable that students may feel disconnected or uncomfortable building a stronger relationship with these adult figures. As another student, AJ, interviewed for this report shared, “it’s sometimes odd” having white teachers “because we go through topics like slavery and having a white person teach about slavery is not something that you would really want to go through.”³⁹ Comparatively, research has shown that when students of color have similarly diverse teachers, those teachers often serve as role models and lead to direct improvements in educational outcomes for Black and Brown students. According to the [Brooking’s Institute](#), “Minority students often perform better on standardized tests, have improved attendance, and are suspended less frequently (which may suggest either different degrees of behavior or different treatment, or both) when they have at least one same-race teacher.”⁴⁰ Thus, without a diverse teacher workforce, girls of color across Massachusetts are likely experiencing poorer educational outcomes, outcomes that may be influenced by some teachers’ racial biases and engagement in discrimination (either implicitly or explicitly) detailed next.

38 Makeeba McCreary, Jesse Solomon. “[Time for action to increase teacher diversity in Mass.](#)” Commonwealth Magazine. December 16, 2021.

39 AJ, 8th grade student

40 David Figilo. [The Importance of a Diverse Teaching Force](#), Brookings, November 16, 2017.

Teachers and Racial Discrimination

The disconnect between the primarily white teachers and their students of color interviewed for this report ranges from **disparate treatment** between white students and students of color to explicit **offensive and racist behavior** directed towards female students of color, as explained by the girls interviewed for this report. Despite the many dedicated teachers passionate about racial justice across Massachusetts, it's clear from these student interviews that racial biases continue to exist in our classrooms:

"My math teacher...So most times I have stomach problems. I have to go to the nurse, and [my math teacher] immediately assumes that people are skipping and I would get in trouble a lot for that. It mostly happens to people of color."

– Anonymous 10th grade student

"I do have an English class, there's a white girl and me. When we go to the bathroom, this was in 8th grade, and you are supposed to raise your hand and whoever raises their hand first can go. At the time I had a white male teacher and I had raised my hand first for the bathroom, but he just ignored me and kept going on with the lesson. But then a white girl raised her hand second and she was picked first and I was second. It didn't make sense because I raised my hand first and those were the rules. It made me realize people choose and pick favorites, and it's mostly because of the color of your skin."

– Anonymous 10th grade student

Discussing the microaggressions they had experienced from teachers in school, one student shared that, "[My] teacher, she grabbed my braids and said 'I tried getting braids before but they were messing with my scalp.' I just walked away, I was dumbstruck."

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

"A teacher called me doing something 'ghetto.' I said, 'I don't think we should be using that word.' [My teacher] said he didn't see an issue with it, he kept repeating that."

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

While much of the realities outlined in this report so far have existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the **trauma** that both teachers and students, and in particular students of color, have experienced throughout this time – having been socially isolated and facing high incidences of death in their communities – has had a significant impact on behavior as everyone entered the classroom again for the 2021-2022 school year:

In some school environments students have finally begun to open up again, while most students interviewed spoke about how isolation remains the norm:

“In-person, students are showing their personality, showing who they are. You couldn’t do that online. Students are more active in person...Before I didn’t express my emotions at all to anyone. [Now] I’m opening up to teachers and more students, listening to others’ feedback, observing more. [I’m] more conscious of other people’s feelings and surroundings.”
– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

“It’s not really social. I feel like after COVID everyone started distancing themselves...People are not as open minded as before. Just closed up. People don’t really associate as much as before. Because we are so used to being behind a screen, most of the time we didn’t really show our faces. I just feel like COVID had a huge impact on that. It affects everyone in the school. Everyone is by themselves.”
– Anonymous 10th grade student

“Some students, cause they weren’t used to it for a while, I feel like they needed to readjust to it...I was just mainly keeping to myself and trying to focus on my work a lot.”
– AJ, 8th grade student

“Before quarantine I was very social. I had a lot of friends, but we fell apart. I was like ‘I don’t really need anyone,’ but that is not something people should do. Isolating yourself all the time is not the best thing to do.”
– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

Another common theme was one of ***built-up anger and aggression*** among students:

"Since people had not been in school, it took a long time to set good structure and good rules. Especially the new freshman. In the beginning, a lot of people had problems over quarantine, lots of fights in the beginning of the year. In November and October things died down, it was rough but not terrible. Now things are better, there is structure, but there is [still] not enough structure."

– Danny

"I feel like there is a lot of built-up anger because of how aggressive they are, to do things, to want things. Before it was here every now and then because every kid had their issues, but now it's more. It gets me upset because their anger reflects on our class as a whole, on our grades...I just want to learn and go home."

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

Teachers and administrators are similarly frustrated, burnt out, and struggling to adjust back to the in-person environment; in a more hopeful turn though, school staff are now able to recognize how this new school culture is impacting their students as well:

“

"Teachers are starting to notice that there is a mental health crisis that they need to resolve to see the change in student's behavior that they desire to see."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

”

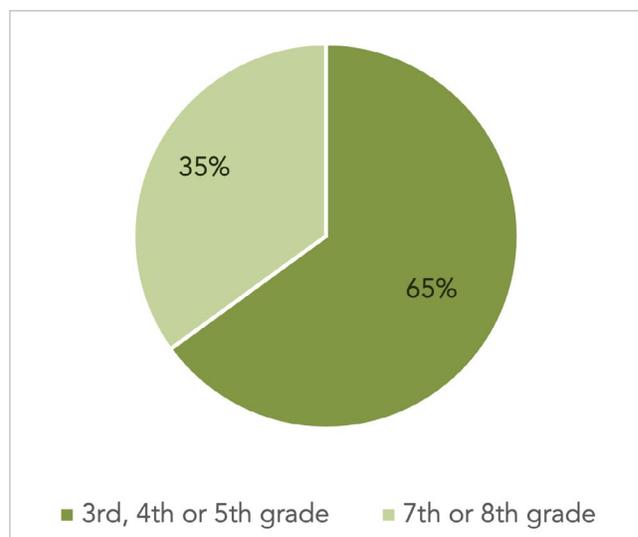
II. WHAT DOES DISCIPLINE LOOK LIKE FOR GIRLS OF COLOR IN MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOLS?

Exclusionary Discipline Starts at an Early Age

Overwhelmingly, the girls interviewed for this report explained that they **first experienced exclusionary discipline** – being removed from the classroom through an in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, referral to law enforcement, or school-related arrest – **in elementary and middle school**. In fact, almost 65% of the girls interviewed were first pushed out of the classroom in 3rd, 4th or 5th grade,⁴¹ while roughly 35% of students interviewed experienced their first suspension or expulsion in 7th or 8th grade.⁴²

This finding suggesting that students are beginning to experience such strong disciplinary action at an early age aligns with statewide data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; during the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, there were 4,935 days of school missed by students in Pre-K through 3rd grade due to discipline, and 6,385 days lost for students in 4th and 5th grade due to discipline.⁴³ One student interviewed for this report shared the difficulty in being suspended in middle school for the first time:

Figure 9: Grade of First Exclusionary Discipline Experience for Female Students Interviewed



41 Imani; Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district; Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district; Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district; Danny; Anonymous 8th grade student; Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

42 Anonymous 10th grade student; Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district; Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district; AJ, 8th grade student

43 DESE 2018-2019/2019-2020 Total Number of Days Missed Due to an OSS or Emergency Removal (obtained via public records request)

"This year [8th grade] was my first time getting suspended... [It's been] around five or six times this year...It's honestly stressful because now I feel like I can't really get enough school time done, I'm always getting out of school and suspended."

– AJ, 8th grade student

Students also shared that they felt the discipline they experienced was unnecessarily strict in middle school:

"They take things completely out of context. They need to die down on their discipline and understand they are dealing with younger kids... The discipline level, I did not agree with at all, it was very especially draining for 11-14 years old. I feel like the same discipline I was given in middle school, I would understand it more if that given in high school."

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

The Urban vs. Suburban Divide and the METCO Program

Nagida, one of the students we interviewed, is a member of the METCO program⁴⁴ – where students of color from Boston enroll in predominantly white school districts outside of the city – and shared her perspective on discipline when switching from an urban school in Boston that was primarily attended by students of color, compared to her experience in high school at a primarily white suburban school. Reflecting on the disciplinary practices of the Boston charter school she attended in middle school, Nagida feels that *“[The discipline level] needs to go down. We are still young kids learning and growing. I know you want to prepare us for the real world but that is not the way to go about it.”* One day, Nagida forgot to wear the correct shoes for her school uniform, and she was unable to “go to class all day.” As she explained, *“I have to sit in a room like I have in-school suspension...You guys aren’t letting me go to class because I don’t have my shoes. Why am I missing out on my education because I don’t have my shoes?...The shoe situation was so small but then I got such a big consequence for it.”* This stricter style of discipline in middle school greatly contrasts with Nagida’s experience now as a 12th grade METCO student in Swampscott, Massachusetts. In her current, primarily white environment, for most students, *“If you do something, [they say] just don’t do it again, or it’s just a conversation instead of action. Kids don’t necessarily learn because you guys are just given a slap on the wrist. Talking is one thing but taking action is showing that what I did was not ok.”* As a Black student in this environment though, Nagida doesn’t feel like she gets this same treatment. Evaluating this very clear disparity between her two schools, Nagida came away with the conclusion that, *“For schools in general, especially being in the same state, I feel there shouldn’t be any type of difference [in discipline] whatsoever.”*⁴⁵ While Nagida’s story only represents one student’s perspective of the METCO program, the disparities she details suggest an area for further research.

2017-2018 School Year

In Boston Public Schools, Black girls were 5.82 times more likely to be disciplined than their white female counterparts (accounting for 31.6% of the female student body but 48.6% of the disciplined female students). In the Swampscott District, Black girls were 25.83 times more likely to be disciplined than their white female counterparts (accounting for 3% of the female student body but 40% of the disciplined female students).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ The Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity,

⁴⁵ Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

⁴⁶ Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

What Is Happening in the Classroom that Is Leading to the Disproportionate Discipline that Girls of Color Face?

Sometimes girls of color are being **disciplined for things they didn't do**, paralleling inequities within our criminal justice system:

"I always used to get in trouble for things I didn't do...It makes me feel disgusted. We can't do anything without being racially profiled or put in prison for something that we didn't do."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"Some random kid wanted to start a food fight in the cafeteria. Everybody started throwing food... A carton of milk hit me in the head...That's when the Deans all came into the lunchroom. They looked at me and suspended me and a whole bunch of people. They looked at me, but I didn't do anything."

– Anonymous 8th grade student

Many girls interviewed for this report spoke about the inequitable application of **dress codes** leading to discipline, reflective of existing **evidence-based research**⁴⁷ on this topic:

"[When] white people in the school [have] issues with dress code they get passes, the teachers say just don't do it next time. But when it's POC they say you are being ghetto and they call your parents and make a whole scene or take them out of class, but if it's a white student, 'I'm just going to write you up but don't do it next time.'"

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"If I was to wear braids, teachers would treat me different because I'm wearing a certain hairstyle that makes me look unprofessional, or unfit, or unsuccessful even though a hairstyle shouldn't judge a way that you are."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

47 Alexandra Brodsky et al., *Dress Coded*

“When we have dress down days, [girls are] not allowed to wear outfits that are revealing. For women of color or women in general it’s different for boys, [there are] more lenient rules for [boys] rather than us in my opinion.”

– Imani

These types of dress code inequities are particularly prevalent for girls of color with different **body types**:

“I had a friend, I am more of wider hips, she is skinnier. We wore the same matching outfits. I got dress coded because I was showing too much or it was too short even though we had the same outfit, and when it came to her my teachers said they liked her outfit and they didn’t dress code her. I feel like they dress coded me because I had more curves, and I was showing too much and that it’s a distraction, while they didn’t do anything for my friend.”

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

“One girl I know, she almost got disciplined for wearing stretchy pants to school because she couldn’t find pants that would fit her that day. I feel like that was not okay...Dress code varies based on the way you look...We’re not allowed to wear leggings so finding pants that fit are kind of hard and you will get disciplined for not wearing the correct clothing, and I feel like that is not fair.”

– Imani

“Girls of Black backgrounds that have a shaped body and stuff, they get dress coded for wearing the same thing somebody of a different race and different body would be fine wearing it. Girls of color get dress coded and get in trouble for wearing it...

There will be white girls wearing really short skirts and crop tops...They get to go through the day without being apprehended or anything...Black girls with more of a body, they are being dress coded...It makes me feel uncomfortable because there are other people wearing the same thing but there’s only certain people getting in trouble for it.”

– AJ, 8th grade student

*"[I want to] have a reasonable dress code, that won't make females with a different body feel like they are being discriminated against."
– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district*

While no students sharing these dress code disparities above provided an explicit explanation for this body-related discrimination, such realities reflect how **adultification** – a form of age compression where Black girls are seen more like adult women than children, resulting in different perceptions of their behavior and different treatment than their white, same-aged female peers – impacts girls of color in Massachusetts schools.⁴⁸

A large majority of the girls interviewed for this report explained that the discipline they received in class stemmed directly from **feeling disrespected or mistreated by teachers**. This behavior is **reactive**, highlighting that many girls of color are not inciting incidents worthy of disciplinary action but instead are contending with the inappropriate behavior of adults:

*"Teachers are disrespectful, students don't take that and that is where the punishment comes in and it gets toxic going back and forth... You can't disrespect me and expect me not to do something."
– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district*

*"I got in trouble for speaking out against what my teacher was doing. The situation could have been handled better but at the moment I was not feeling ok because I felt disrespected and had an outburst."
– Imani*

*"I got [an in-school suspension] because I was having cramps and they weren't taking anyone to the nurse that day because she wasn't there. I couldn't do my work, and the teacher sent me out because of that. I did tell [the teacher] the reason, but they said, 'Just deal with it' so I guess they didn't believe me... Why wouldn't you believe someone?... I'm telling you what's going on and you can't tell me 'No, it's not happening.'"
– Anonymous 10th grade student*

⁴⁸ Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, Thalia González. *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020.

“One day in 5th grade my class was writing on our Chromebooks. I was finishing my last sentence and my teacher was like ‘Everybody shut your Chromebook’ but I was just finishing my last sentence. She slammed the Chromebook on my hand. In my brain I was like ‘Why did she do that?’ and then I replied back like ‘Don’t do that again b-word’. She...asked for security immediately to get me, she forced it...I went to the office, they asked for my side of the story, and I told them exactly what happened and I didn’t lie about anything...They said I was suspended I was like ‘What, she slammed a computer on my hand?!’ And I know that reaction wasn’t great, calling her a b-word is not something somebody wants to be called, but it was slammed really hard, and it hurt.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“I said something not to the teacher [but] she took it as if it was to her. [We] went back and forth... I got almost kicked out for kicking the teacher after the teacher spit on me. I’m not sure if it was intentional but I feel like it was intentional.”

– Danny

Many students interviewed shared that they were **disciplined for sharing out an opinion** in class that the teacher did not receive well, revealing the consequences female students of color may face should their views differ from that of their teachers:

“[I was] talking back to one of the teachers. I had an opinion about Black history month. I had an opinion on why were we only learning about Black men and not Black women. I guess I got too rowdy they said, they suspended me for two days.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

"[In elementary school] the teacher said we were going to share our comments and ideas afterwards, and when I shared my ideas the teacher found that offensive. I don't remember what I said. She asked me to step out of the class. She said it was disrespectful...I didn't say anything bad I just remember sharing out my ideas and my opinion. The teacher said, 'I don't agree.' She called the Dean to pull me out of class because she thought I was going to be a distraction. I had to stay the whole period/class in the dean's office doing work from her class...I didn't feel too good because no kid wants to share their ideas and hear that your idea is wrong, your opinion doesn't matter. Everyone wants to be heard. When you feel like that at a young age, you feel like, 'Wow I'm doing something wrong.'"

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"I didn't agree with what the teacher was saying in a lecture. I went to a predominantly white school at this time, only 5% Latinx. We were talking about the election. She didn't say who she voted for but gave an idea. I disagreed with that... and [was] supporting my side of the story. She called the principal and the vice-principal, and said I was being 'disruptive' and I got pulled out of the class and my parents had to come the next day, we had a whole meeting."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

In addition to reacting negatively to teacher disrespect or misconduct, sometimes girls of color get in trouble in school when they **react to offensive or inappropriate behavior from another student**. Again though, it is important to highlight that a majority of girls who shared these stories were not inciting these incidents, but instead reacting to another student's behavior that was outside their control:

"It was 3rd grade. Someone was bothering me. I tried to move away, I tried to stop them from bothering me, but they got hurt in the process and I got suspended. At the time I was fine with it but reflecting I could have handled that situation better and maybe told the teacher so they would have been the one to get in trouble instead of me. After I got in trouble, I tried to tell the teacher that person was bothering me, but they didn't really listen, and I was the only one who faced a problem. [The boy who was bothering me] was white/Hispanic."

– Imani

"I don't know how this makes sense, but a girl called me a Black b-word. I responded back in a rude way, and then I was the one put in the office. I don't know how they let it slide with her, but they took it so far with me. At the time I felt like it was my fault that people treated me differently, but I don't feel that way anymore. At the time I thought that I was the problem, but now I know that they are the problem."
– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"I experienced a suspension in 5th grade. Another student (her aunt was the Dean of the school), during gym, we both exchanged words. She told the Dean, the Dean brought me into her office and told me I was going to get suspended, but really that energy from the other student was reciprocated back to me. She didn't suspend her niece. It was control of power because that was a family member."
– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

"When I was in 4th grade, I got into a fight with someone who called me out of my name. [They] called me the b-word. I got upset. We went back and forth. They hit me and I hit them. It made me upset, made me feel like I was out of control even though it was for my emotional safety. I didn't want to get emotionally abused and called the b-word. Teachers ended up looking at me like I was violent."
– Anonymous 8th grade student

"I got suspended for arguing with one of the kids because they almost put their hands on me. They suspended me because I guess I said something first, but it wasn't like that."
– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

Out of all the examples of discipline that the girls interviewed for this report shared, **only three** girls were excluded from school for behavior that was primarily a result of their own initial actions:

"My school gave me and my friend a detention for the fighting at another school, just for being there."
– Anonymous 8th grade student

"I was caught with a dab pen with four other girls, only three of us got suspended [the other two girls were white]. One was suspended for nine days because she had a boxcutter, and other substances. Another girl had nicotine [and was suspended for three days]. [My suspension] was three days out-of-school suspension, seven sessions of in-school therapy like check-ups, and I was required to do community service. I was given [the dab pen] from my friend cause she was going to get caught at home. She had bad anxiety about it, so she gave it to me, but I had bad anxiety about it and didn't want to keep it in my house, so I kept it in my bag cause nobody is going to check my bag at school. My friends were all in the bathroom during lunch. We're all standing in the stall, and I tried the pen. Our police officer, she walked in. [She] asked why [we] were all in one stall. I grabbed stuff and ran which was not a good look, and they ended up catching me later. Also another girl, my Jamaican friend. She followed me into the bathroom because she was new to the school. She wasn't in the same stall, just using the bathroom. They were still having an eye out on her. I said she didn't do anything, but they still thought she was a part of it. I wrote a statement explaining why she wasn't involved."

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

"One of [the times I was suspended]...I re-posted a video on Tik-Tok that was going around... Basically, the whole school was posting it, but when I posted it I was the only one who got in trouble for it...and one of [the times I was suspended] was for arguing with people online and that got me suspended...It wasn't even school related...[I was arguing with] a kid who had recently went to the school but they had gotten kicked out of the school for arguing with us, and so then the student was still arguing with me and then he got his mom involved so I was arguing with the student's mom, and the student's mom was coming at me with a lot of homophobic slurs, so I was sticking up for myself and that got me suspended for 45 days...My mom tried to shorten the suspension but they didn't want to shorten it."

– AJ, 8th grade student

Regardless of whether a student got in trouble for something they didn't do, for responding to disrespect from a teacher or student, or for their own actions, many girls shared that they were frequently **unable to explain their side of the story** before they were disciplined, something they desperately wanted to do:

"They should talk to students, figure out their side of the story or what is going on with them to be acting out. Figure them out before they discipline them. One arrest or sending someone to prison or jail can ruin their life. They should figure them out before that happens."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"You guys run to kicking people out and suspending them instead of talking to them and actually being there for them. They just fight with the children instead of fighting for the children."

– Danny

"It was a bit hypocritical as white teachers [were] teaching us, telling us to speak up when something is wrong, 'Know that you have a voice as a Black kid in America.' But when it comes to us actually getting in trouble with you guys, we can't talk back to you. Why can't I state how I am feeling within the moment? You guys are silencing Black students. It was very hypocritical, very unfair, very degrading."

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

"One time a kid told the principal that I was bullying him. It might have been my way of expressing myself. I was forced into detention and I had to write an apology letter...They didn't hear my side of the story."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“Instead of interrupting the class to send someone out, the teacher could ask, or the student could apologize for their actions, and the teacher and student could have a meeting after the class to discuss what happened, instead of having multiple send-outs during the day. The teacher can ask what’s wrong instead of jumping to conclusions... Instead of suspending for a small thing like a phone, they could have the phone for the day and give it back to the student at the end of the day, or they can ask why [the student] need[s] the phone and ask the child to explain their actions instead of jumping to conclusions and sending them to people who right away are giving them repercussions.”

– Imani

“Someone I know reacted by saying a bad word to a teacher. She was suspended before she got to say her side of the story. They told her what she did wasn’t reasonable.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“[In middle school] discipline was mostly whoever reported what they reported. It was their side of the story they would only hear. If you were the person in the wrong, they didn’t hear your side of the story.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

Many students spoke about the harmful impact of students receiving differing punishments for the same actions – often due to their race, gender, or both – and their **desire for equity** when it came to **consequences** at school, particularly with an explanation or transparency about how the consequence they are receiving related to the actions they were getting in trouble for:

“It’s really unfair and it affects me negatively because then I don’t get to go to school and I don’t get to get my education... Every month or two [I’m in a suspension hearing or the disciplinary office] ...Other students, they mainly get sent to...a disciplinary teacher, they just got to sit in her office. But me, I’ll end up getting suspended.”

– AJ, 8th grade student

“I got into an altercation with another student. They said we couldn’t be in the same space, so one person needs to be out of the classroom. I don’t feel like that’s fair because you are taking one person out of the classroom and the other person can be with their peers, teachers, and actually learn in the classroom compared to the other student...In the moment I felt frustrated and confused because I knew it was unfair for the simple fact that I’m receiving a worse consequence than another student. Why do they get to be in the class? Why did I get suspended? I questioned it a lot, within myself, I also questioned the teachers, and looking back on it I think they knew it was unfair. You can’t even give me a direct answer as to why our consequences were different.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

Some students felt a significant ***difference in the ways that boys and girls were disciplined*** both in and outside of the classroom:

“At times girls come in and say they have a headache or something and they put their head down. Most teachers usually pick on them because they are not doing their work even after they say they have a headache. This happens to me most times. [When boys] start talking in class [teachers] will ask them to lower their voice, [teachers] will just be a little bit softer on them.”

– Anonymous 10th grade student

“Whenever girls get in a fight, they immediately get suspended. Even if they don’t physically touch each other yet, security grabs them and they are suspending them. But I feel like if it was a boy, they would just pull them in and see what happened. I feel like that is what is going on behind closed doors. Most girls in my school are fighting and recently they have been getting suspended a tremendous amount of times, and with boys, they act like nothing happened.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

In the Chelsea School District during the 2017-2018 school year, Black girls made up 5.1% of the female population but accounted for 12.7% of disciplined female students.

The same year, Black boys in the Chelsea School District made up 5.3% of the male population and only 5.7% of all disciplined male students.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

Many girls shared about the **racial and ethnic disparities** they experienced related to discipline:

“Compared to white students, if they do something it’s a slap on the wrist and back to class, with a Black student it’s go to the office. You guys aren’t treating us the same and you know that... [There are] situations where students are caught with something, Black student gets a phone call home and in-school suspension, the white student it’s just like don’t do it again.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

During the 2017-2018 school year, all Black students in the Swampscott School District were 4.72 times more likely to experience discipline than white students.⁵⁰

“I have a group of [five] friends. We all did something that we were not supposed to. We each had different consequences. Some got in-school suspension, some got detention after school, some got lunch detention, some of us had to be in lower classes (3rd, 4th grade) for a week, some of us do things around the school and be their assistant. I think it was because my friend group is more diverse. We have a Chinese student, Black, white, Asian, Hispanic. We should all have had the same discipline. They were segregating us into categories which doesn’t seem fair.”

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

“It’s different for swearing. If you say the n-word they get at your neck more because they think it’s very very very offensive, especially ten times more if it’s a Black student saying it. When white students say anything teachers just stare. [It’s] kind of annoying. If I say the n-word a teacher says watch your language, if a kid next to me says f-bomb they don’t say anything. They switch up with different students.”

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

“It’s really unfair because it’s not just with the adults, it’s with the students too. Some white kids say disrespectful things and laugh about it, and a student of color who is offended, they are going to get into it. Even though the white kid hit him first the Black student will get suspended while the white kid is at school.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

⁵⁰ Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

Importantly, many girls reflected on how the discipline they experienced was unique given the **intersection of their race and gender**:

“Black girls most definitely get suspended more than white girls. It gives me a bad look at the school, it makes me think so bad about the school...the way I see it now before I walked in is a whole different.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

In Boston Public Schools, during the 2017-2018 school year Black girls were 5.82 times more likely to be disciplined than their white female counterparts (accounting for 31.6% of the female student body but 48.6% of the disciplined female students).⁵¹

“If there has been fights with two Black girls then throughout the whole entire day they say you can’t go to that room because that person is in there. It’s kind of like they are scared what might happen, but I’m trying to go about my day. Compared to white students, they just say don’t do that again.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“My cousin was twerking on the table. They got more in trouble with that than if a white girl was doing something like that. First of all, they shouldn’t have been doing that, but it would have been disciplined differently.”

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

“There was this time they were giving people detention if they walked out the classroom talking with their friends or didn’t ask for permission and walked out. One of the Black girls walked out to use the bathroom and they didn’t let her go, but the day before a white [boy] walked out the classroom and nothing was done. No detention was served, no consequence. The next day when it was a girl of color was doing that [and] it was consequences, and it wasn’t fair.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

“Whenever I went up to security or the principal to tell them what is going on with my friends, they would ask me if I was a part of it immediately. They treated us differently because I’m a Black girl, it’s very real.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

⁵¹ Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

When students returned from in-person learning after the pandemic, some have found that school discipline increased as students found difficulty adjusting. Similarly, teachers understandably found difficulty in adjusting to new types of student behavior and disruption that they had never experienced before. Unfortunately though, as teachers often did their best when trying to return to a sense of normalcy in-person, the students we spoke to observed an increase in disciplinary practices as a result:

“Before it was like a talk or a sit down with someone, figure things out. Now they are really quick to punish. A kid snatched their friend’s mask off as a joke, the school said they were going to suspend or expel them.”

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

“They are just a lot more strict. [I feel like this is because of the pandemic because] when students came back, they had to learn to readjust, and school administrators just became really strict.”

– AJ, 8th grade student

This increase in discipline that some girls interviewed for this report identified can be corroborated by the increase in school discipline related helpline calls the organization [Massachusetts Advocates for Children](#)⁵² started receiving once in-person learning returned to the Commonwealth.

The type of discipline that students can receive has changed as well, as remote schooling as a form of punishment is now another tool in an administrator’s toolbox. It’s too early to tell whether this new type of discipline will be used often, but this concern has been [noted by other advocates](#),⁵³ as sending students to remote learning as punishment could be a violation of students’ civil rights, and will likely more directly impact students of color and students with disabilities.

⁵² Kevin Murray. [MAC Fall Newsletter](#), Massachusetts Advocates for Children, October 27, 2021.

⁵³ Erin Einhorn. [“Schools are sending kids to virtual classes as punishment. Advocates say that could violate their rights.”](#) NBC News, May 4, 2021.

III. THE SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM IMPACT OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Many girls interviewed for this report spoke about how the impact of exclusionary discipline on them at such a young age didn't end the day after they were suspended, or even that year, but that **years later their removal from the classroom still has an impact on them.**

In the short-term, many students spoke about how after they experienced exclusionary discipline, **school staff held a negative opinion of them** – thinking of them as “disruptive,” “abusive,” or “violent” after they returned from their suspension or expulsion:

“Once I realized, I felt so sad for my younger self. She didn't have support or anyone to be there for her...It changed the way people viewed me. The teachers viewed me as a disruptive student, everyone started to treat me differently once I came back from my suspension, even my family members. Everyone said I was so rude.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“[In 4th grade] teachers ended up looking at me like I was violent.”

– Anonymous 8th grade student

“[In] 6th grade [my] math teacher [was a] new teacher, he was white. I was upset, I might have said something to him that offended him, so I was sent to the office. He started telling the other teachers I was not a good kid...He never saw me as the person I was. I was just that kid, that bad kid...He never paid attention to me or provided the support he knew I needed, I was just there. I was that student.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“[My teacher] looked at me as if I was someone abusive. Other teachers looked at me like we need another adult in the classroom. I'm not going to do that, it's not something I would ever do again.”

– Danny

“Low-key after [my first suspension,] that’s when...some teachers would come up to me and ask me if I was getting in trouble recently, but they didn’t ask in a good way, they were trying to ask negatively...It made me feel...I wasn’t really a troubled kid. I was always a good kid with good grades and stuff, so it made me feel bad.”
– AJ, 8th grade student

This bias and negativity placed on girls of color after they experienced exclusionary discipline showed itself not only in the classroom, but from administrators, police, and security officers continually **surveilling** them:

“For Black students, if we do one thing – where it’s like yes it was a mistake, yes we were in the wrong, we know that – it’s pinned on us for the rest of our school career compared to a white student, which is like make sure you are watching them but not as extremely heavy as you would watch a Black student. It’s kind of like, what preconceptions do you have of me? Yes, I know it’s wrong, but you guys are watching me like hawks, they literally watch us Black students as hawks if an incident or noise complaint had happened.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“The school, they have an extra eye on you for two weeks and through your years in high school [after you get in trouble]. They will always have an eye on you. If you do one thing at that school, you are a major red flag now...it’s harder to go through the school without having eyes on you.”

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district



"I didn't talk to [the police officers]. Whenever I see them, it is uncomfortable. At least they are Black though, it makes them a little more comfortable because it feels like they are not going to hurt you...The security in the school, they are different from the police. They are a lot harsher, [they] have a lot of attitude. It's like they don't care. They are really rude, [and say] 'Why are you in the hallway?' They follow you down and force you to go to class. They don't want to know why you don't want to go to class. I've seen the way the officers interact with kids on social media, and it's like that could happen to me. I would want to have security there actually to protect [us]. The security is enough. We don't need the police. It's making the kids afraid, [but] security should be more compassionate, with more love. That one interaction with a student can be life-changing, good or bad."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

As teachers, faculty, and security continue to assume the worst of these girls after their first time being suspended or expelled, many girls explained they felt the need to **take up less space, quiet themselves, and withdraw their outgoing personalities for fear of being disciplined again**. As a result of discipline in the early grades, our girls are diminishing their own personality, which extends into who they become in high school and beyond:

"After [my] suspension, that is when I started isolating myself and staying to myself more. I didn't like it, it was uncomfortable."

– Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

"I started not showing my emotions or expressing my opinions to teachers. I started being more conservative with my thoughts and ideas and thought that if I shared this it would be bad or [I would be] pulled out of the class and miss another lecture."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"[After my suspension] at first, I was like whatever. People are going to think and they already have my name in their mouth. But now I'm like, it's just not a good look for a freshman, a female freshman, a person of color who is a freshman, so it was embarrassing and set me back on wanting to put myself out there to people because that would be their first thing, 'Oh she was suspended for this and that.'"

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district

*"[My in-school suspension], it's always in the back of my mind."
– Anonymous 10th grade student*

"After [I was kicked out of the classroom] I became more reserved and more quiet. I didn't want to be seen as a kid who acted out and be treated differently because of these situations."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

Importantly, it must be remembered that the type of discipline these girls are experiencing **impacts** not only their inner life, but their **educational life** and that **of their peers** as well. Despite the disruptive nature of student misbehaviors or outbursts that teachers are expected to swiftly manage in the classroom to ensure their lessons remain on track, the procedural and administrative requirements of using exclusionary discipline to address student dysregulation can in actuality be equally disruptive for both the student in question and their classmates:

"Ask the child to explain their actions instead of jumping to conclusions and sending them to people who right away are giving them repercussions...This would give back more learning time instead of taking away from it... Some students have more outbursts than others, so the teachers send them out and try to reset the class, but that's not going to work out all the time...You don't get a chance to talk to the teacher that was in class with you because they are busy teaching. It could be done more efficiently and better. When a teacher has a send-out, it's interrupting my time to get the lesson done and get my work finished. The teacher has to sometimes do a write-up to the hall monitor so it's taking away learning time."

– Imani

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S LONG-TERM IMPACT ON LEARNING LOSS AND STUDENT TRAUMA



When students exhibit behavioral challenges in the classroom, it is understandable why some teachers may look to removing that student as a necessary means of getting the rest of the class back on track. Yet should this occur by bypassing an opportunity for the student to process their behavior and explain their actions, the act itself of immediately removing any student from the classroom often impacts all of the other students in that lesson by exacerbating the behavior, distracting the class, and limiting their time focused on their lesson. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a similar effect on a macro level, as online learning significantly limited the amount of educational content students could take in, and the ability of students to retain that content. According to parent surveys conducted by the [MassINC Polling Group](#),⁵⁴ a majority of parents (55%) expressed that their child will need to catch up academically; however, disparities were apparent for students of color as Asian (62%) and Black parents (59%) were more likely to say their child needs to catch up.

Yet the long-term impact of COVID-19 on students, and in particular students of color, goes far beyond [the learning loss emphasized often by policymakers and parents](#)⁵⁵ and instead lies in loss, grief, and the trauma of isolation students have experienced over the past few years. As Boston educator [Neema Avashia explained](#)⁵⁶ in September of 2021, right as students began to start in-person learning again, “Our state has seen over 750,000 COVID-19 cases since March 2020. We’ve lost more than 18,000 residents to this virus. Every single one of those cases touched at least one student. And when we look further, to the national level, or even the international level, it’s clear that the young people of our state have been immersed in 18 months of collective trauma that they will bring with them on the first day of school... Where policymakers fret about learning loss, my students are preoccupied by more palpable losses.” As the nation, and the state of Massachusetts, comes to a close on the first year of in-person learning since the start of COVID-19, we must be sure to support our students on both an educational and emotional level if we truly want to help our students grow and heal.

54 Maeve Duggan [Student transitions and school recovery: Findings from a survey of K-12 parents in Massachusetts](#), The Mass Inc. Polling Group, 2021.

55 Larry Ferlazzo. [“Students Respond to Adults’ Fixation on ‘Learning Loss’”](#) Education Week, February 2, 2021.

56 Neema Avashia. [“What’s Missing From Back To School This Year? The Time To Heal”](#) WBUR, September 13, 2021.

IV. WHAT ARE FEMALE STUDENTS OF COLOR DOING ABOUT THE DISCRIMINATION THEY FACE IN SCHOOLS, AND WHAT ELSE DO THEY WANT TO SEE CHANGED?

Many students shared stories of their own, or of their friends, **standing up against the discrimination** they are experiencing in school by having meetings with school leaders or petitioning against faculty engaging in racist behavior, sometimes successfully leading to change:

“My sister wrote a letter to the superintendent addressing non-Black students saying the n-word. It shouldn’t have to come to that point where a student has to go out of their way to do something to help. It should be a priority for teachers and staff to notice what is going on in the school environment.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“[Me and another student] sat down with a group of teachers. We’d talk about our experiences being in this community, and the response that we got back from [teachers] was ‘I feel sad’ [and] pity. They kind of downplay the emotions I feel as a student. If you are with faculty and I’m telling you how I feel, I don’t want your pity. I want you to be able to speak up that it needs to change...You may not be higher-higher ups, but you are still in that whole faculty and you guys can all speak up and say something...Why not talk about dealing with situations like this with your students, especially if you want us to be comfortable within your school.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“[We are now] trying to get a meeting with the superintendent [and] the town’s leaders for the school system about their racial discrimination policy in the Handbook. We wanted to see ways they can implement changes. In trying to set that meeting we got bypassed two times. Now we are blowing up their email and asking why is this being put off to the side. You guys said that we should talk about this 2-3 weeks ago and it still hasn’t been dealt with.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“Me and my friends are in a group and talking on school property [after the school day ended] ... One of the teachers taps on my shoulder. I walk to her because she wants me to follow her. The teacher says I need to tell my friends they need to get off of school property. I was around males and females who were Black [and] I was probably the lightest skin of all of them [being a mixed-race person]. The teacher said you need to tell your friends we need to leave or are being unprofessional because they were having people coming into the building. The teacher said we don’t want ‘this’ type of group to determine our school. In response I said things I shouldn’t have said, but they are people and human beings, and she could say something else instead of ‘this’ type of group – she pointed at them and gave them a look. I could see that I was a different shade than my friends in that moment...I used curse words, the b-word came out, I was so frustrated, [the teacher was] being racist so I’m going to stick up for my friends. The next morning, I told the principal that the teacher was being racist. We searched for the teacher and I identified her. The teacher acted so different, she said ‘I wasn’t like that, they are lying. I didn’t want them to be a disruption’ making me seem like I’m a crazy type, when I’m just trying to explain how the teacher treated me and my friends. I told my friends to bring out their parents and they agreed with us. We had a school petition to terminate the teacher’s position, and everyone signed the form... More people came out that teacher was racist...The school board had a meeting about the teacher. She had to go to court...She was eventually fired.”

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

While some **female students of color** have begun to take matters into their own hands, they **have a lot of ideas for larger systemic ways to improve equity and reform discipline** in schools across Massachusetts.

Students expressed a strong desire to have a more **diverse teacher and administrative workforce** that they can connect with better:

“[We should] have more diverse teachers. All I see when I go to school is mainly white teachers, white male and female teachers, and some Latin American teachers, but barely any Black teachers...I’ve never seen a Black teacher before.”

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

“The people that work [at my school] are Hispanic, so the kids who go in there and are Hispanic too, they can connect with them. But when a Black kid comes in, it’s like ‘Oh they cause trouble, and I should do my job.’ Black kids getting in the office it’s like ‘whatever’ because they didn’t like us in the first place. They don’t see us the same way. They have similar experiences to us but treat us worse than the white men himself, they elevate themselves but making Black people feel inferior to them. With that mindset placed in their minds by white men they will never be set free from the shackles placed on them as whole, they need more love and compassion in the way they treat people.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

*“I think a different person should be in charge of the disciplinary acts...
a person of color.”*

– AJ, 8th grade student

“[I want] a fair amount of diverse staff. Hispanic, Black, white... I want the environment to not only look safe but feel safe. I want diverse students and staff. It’s important that we have people that look like us and other people of color to have people to look like them so that we can feel welcomed whenever we are at school, and safe and comforted.”

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

The female students of color interviewed for this report also expressed an overwhelming desire for the **student voice** to be prioritized, for an opportunity to speak up and have their opinions valued within the school hierarchy itself, and for their perspectives to be understood by their teachers and school administration:

“There’s a lot of kids that have something to say about the [school] environment but they don’t feel like they have any person to say it to in school. [We] could have more student voice and more student input.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

*“[I want] more of a safe space for people who don’t normally speak up...
So that we feel comfortable.”*

– Imani

"[I] feel unheard, because my voice is never heard as a student or as a person. You always have stereotypes about people instead of listening to what they say or who they are as a person. That's very discouraging, they never get to hear who I am or what are my thoughts about stuff, they just assume based on the way I look or talk."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"I used to get a lot of referrals and would be put in the office a lot because of my 'behavior.' I feel like my behavior came from not being understood as a person, everybody else got the benefit of the doubt but I never did."

– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

"[Students should be] treated like they have a voice. I know some students of color who feel like they don't have a voice and are not being heard, we should have a club talking about that for Black students."

– Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district

"The school needs to come together as a community because honestly there is a lot of tension at the school...We have an auditorium where we usually host community meetings, a meeting could be held in there and people could talk about how they feel so their voice can be heard."

– AJ, 8th grade student

"I want to see people being kinder, being understanding that we are teenagers that we are all trying to navigate the world, be more compassionate."

– Mya, 9th grade student in the Oak Bluffs school district



Alongside a desire for opportunities to share their perspective and be more greatly understood by a diverse set of teachers, students expressed strong support for **greater mental health supports and services**:

"[We need] time to use our phone or unwind and have free time to not worry about work, and school or exams and tests. A separate time to relax and prepare mentally and physically for the next class. A few times during the school day would be amazing, so people are not as stressed out, or as tired, or frustrated, or angry, so there are less send-outs, less problems with teachers and everyone."

– Imani

"The mental health of many of the students is not that healthy and they need a better system to discipline because a strict discipline system is not helping anyone. Being more lenient and more understanding would benefit everyone."

– Imani

"I would definitely add more counselors."

– Anonymous 10th grade student

"[I want] more mindful moments throughout the day, more mental health clubs that happen within the school and that compassionately address what kids deal with at home. Mindful moments are when we talk about something we may have experienced throughout the school day that we wanted to see differently [and] work with the teachers to see what they can do to improve how they dealt with a situation."

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

One student shared her desire for at least three mental health days that every student should be able to take if they need:

“They shouldn’t be targeting our grades because we choose to have an unexcused absence. Absences are the number of unknown stories of everyday student life. I took a mental health day out of the 180 days in the school year. I expected a mental health day would be a valid excuse to miss school but it went as unexcused. I know that one day at least to recharge and take care of yourself as a human should be a student right we deserve as hard working students. If students’ mental health isn’t a priority don’t expect any changes in the schools you see now, it’s beyond what money can fix.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

Importantly, almost all girls interviewed for this report said that they wanted students to be **held accountable for their actions**, but stressed that this should be in a **meaningful** and **equitable** way that allowed students to learn from their actions while not harming their education by removing them from the classroom. Multiple students framed this perspective by explaining that they knew whatever they did to be suspended or expelled may not have been right:

“It was in middle school. I will say for my actions, I was still a growing and learning child, but there were things that I did do that were not ok and I can admit to that.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

“I’ve had in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions. I guess those are justified for my actions, I guess it could have been handled better, it could have been less strict and both parties should have been held responsible for their actions, but I understand where the disciplinary people are coming from...I don’t blame myself for what happened. I know I could have tried to do things differently but that’s in the past and that’s where it’s going to stay.”

– Imani

Yet the students interviewed took care to explain that while students must be held accountable for their actions and learn from their mistakes, this must be done in a way that allows students to **meaningfully engage with their actions** and should be proportionate to their behavior:

*"I wouldn't say fair, but [discipline] is mostly justified. Certain actions deserve those consequences, but if it was fair it wouldn't be that extreme, it wouldn't be a suspension."
– Imani*

*"In-school-suspensions or detentions can be necessary depending on the action, but you shouldn't have the student sit down and do nothing. They should reflect on their actions and be able to say sorry genuinely for their actions."
– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district*

Nagida, a 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district, also reflected on the way in which white students in her school were receiving minimal punishments for their inappropriate behavior, leading them to simply continue their actions: "You are not teaching students anything if there is not a consequence for their action...When you have slaps on the wrist so many times the same action is going to reoccur over and over again because that student is not learning from their actions."

*"Deans are taking bigger [disciplinary] steps than they need to take."
– Danny*

*"I understand why some of the rules are like that, but it's not fair at all times because sometimes it doesn't make sense... Most decisions are made by [teachers] and we don't understand why, and they don't give us a reason."
– Anonymous 10th grade student*

*While in school, young students may struggle to realize if the discipline they receive is proportionate to their actions: "No one was there for me...No one tried to hear me out. I was a child. I was so young. I didn't know what good discipline was and what bad discipline was, so I saw it as just discipline. But I always knew it was wrong."
– Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district*

Many girls interviewed for this project identified solutions like **restorative practices** or **conflict mediation** – when done correctly – as an opportunity for students to engage with their actions in a healthy and meaningful way that will keep them in the classroom where they belong.

Importantly, restorative practices/circles or conflict mediation must have long-term buy-in from both students and teachers. These must be integrated community practices to obtain their intended effect, as opposed to one-off events when a student engages in troubling behavior. As one student, Nagida, shared, when not integrated properly restorative justice can sometimes feel hollow:

“We have a couple of restorative circles if a white student says something racial to another student. We would sit down and have a discussion and talk about it. Those were OK, but towards the end I still didn’t feel content with the whole situation. I don’t feel like they have learned anything or why it was not ok. I feel they heard it, but it wasn’t really instilled in them.”

– Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district

Yet when restorative practices and other forms of interpersonal relationship management tools are genuinely integrated into both the classroom and the larger school environment, students feel strongly about the benefits:

“[I want] less suspensions, more conflict resolution instead of their resolution of keeping kids out of school and letting them miss out on their education.”

– Anonymous 8th grade student

“Restorative justice circles [are] something that benefits both the student and teacher or whoever was impacted. The teacher can say why he or she was offended, the student can say why they acted that way, they can find some way they can meet in the middle and be more accepting of each other.”

– Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

“If I ever had to [do restorative justice] I would do it without hesitation, because if it’s going to solve the problem then I’m open to it.”

– AJ, 8th grade student

“One time a week a kid should be able to mediate with the teacher, let them know things are going on, if they need support. [This should be] at least once a week with every student...maybe they just want a hug.”

– Danny

Existing research on the effectiveness of restorative justice in schools has shown overwhelmingly that when implemented effectively, schools consistently see a decrease in both incidents of misbehavior/harmful behavior and in the use of exclusionary discipline.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Trevor Fronius, Sean Darling-Hammond, Hannah Persson, Sarah Guckenburg, Nancy Hurley, Anthony Petrosino. *Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: An Updated Research Review*, March 2019, p.24-29.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The girls of color interviewed for this project have strong ideas about how they would like their school environments to be changed for the better, in support of their own life goals and passions they wish to pursue. The female students of color we spoke to are interested in becoming businesswomen,⁵⁸ lawyers,⁵⁹ artists and writers,⁶⁰ surgeons,⁶¹ and firefighters.⁶² Let's support them, encourage them, and listen to them.

AT THE STATEWIDE LEVEL

The Massachusetts Legislature should:

Ban the Suspension and Expulsion of Students for Dress Code Violations.

Students interviewed for this report confirmed **prior research**⁶³ that girls of color are frequently subject to the inequitable provision of dress code policies in school compared to their white female counterparts. In particular, female students of color with “shaped” bodies, as described by one student interviewed for this report,⁶⁴ are particularly vulnerable to discipline related to dress codes. Massachusetts is hopefully on its way (at the time of writing) to passing legislation known as the Massachusetts CROWN Act (H.4554)⁶⁵ that would ban discrimination based on natural hairstyle in school and in other settings – legislation prohibiting exclusionary discipline based on dress codes is the next logical step towards keeping girls of color in the classroom and from entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Ban the Suspension and Expulsion of Young Students.

This report identified that almost 65% of the girls interviewed for this study were first suspended or expelled in 3rd, 4th or 5th grade.⁶⁶ This apparent prevalence of in-school and out-of-school suspension and expulsion among young students aligns with statewide data showing that during the 2018-2019 school year in Massachusetts, students in Pre-K through 5th grade

58 Imani; Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district

59 Imani

60 Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district, Anonymous 9th grade student in the Boston school district

61 Anonymous 8th grade student

62 AJ, 8th grade student

63 Alexandra Brodsky et al., *Dress Coded*

64 AJ, 8th grade student

65 **An Act Prohibiting Discrimination Based on Natural and Protective Hairstyle**, H.4554, 192nd General Court.

66 Imani; Laisha, 10th grade student in the Boston school district; Nagida, 12th grade METCO student in the Swampscott school district; Anne, 9th grade student in the Chelsea school district; Danny; Anonymous 8th grade student; Anonymous 11th grade student in the Chelsea school district

missed in total 11,320 days of school due to out-of-school exclusion.⁶⁷ Early grade school exclusion has been found to predict expulsion or suspension in later grades and contributes to students' poor academic performance and failure to graduate on time. For young students it is especially important they get as much class time as possible as they are building their educational foundation and learning to read.⁶⁸ The Massachusetts legislature should follow the lead of the eleven other states – and the Boston Public Schools – who have already implemented similar policies to eliminate the suspension and expulsion of young students by passing legislation such as the Young Student Exclusion Ban Act (H.3876),⁶⁹ which at the time of writing had just been reported favorably out of the Education Committee.

Enact Comprehensive Discipline Reform Legislation.

Legislation should be passed that: requires the use of documented alternatives before any attempt at suspension or expulsion, narrows the definitions of “assault” and “deadly weapon” in the school context, requires publicly available school discipline data to be disaggregated in a way that can be easily cross-tabulated (so for example, we will be able to see not only how many boys or girls were suspended or how many Black or white students were suspended, but how many *Black girls* were suspended) to identify the populations in most need of support in schools, and provides greater due process protections for students facing potential juvenile justice system involvement. Legislation such as the RAISE Act (H.4646)⁷⁰ which incorporates all of these provisions should be swiftly passed and implemented in our schools.

Create a System to Encourage and Retain Diverse Teachers in Massachusetts.

Almost all students interviewed for this report mentioned their desire to have more teachers who looked like them. The Teacher Diversity Act (H.4539)⁷¹ is a Massachusetts bill intend to increase the presence of diverse educators in schools across Massachusetts and would also create a statewide dashboard to monitor educator diversity data. This bill is an essential step for Massachusetts, where 43% of K-12 students are nonwhite but only 8% of teachers are people of color.⁷²

67 DESE 2018-2019/2019-2020 Total Number of Days Missed Due to an OSS or Emergency Removal (obtained via public records request)

68 H.3876 Fact-Sheet, Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2021.

69 An Act Enhancing Learning In the Early School Years Through a Ban on School Exclusion in Pre-Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade, H.3876, 192nd General Court.

70 An Act Requiring Accountability for Inequities in Suspension and Expulsion – The RAISE Act, H.4646, 192nd General Court.

71 An Act Relative to Educator Diversity, H.4539, 192nd General Court.

72 Makeeba McCreary, Jesse Solomon. “Time for action to increase teacher diversity in Mass.”

Reform and/or Limit the use of School Resources Officers (SROs) and School Police.

While not all students interviewed for this report or all members of the Community Advisory Board conducting this research study agreed about the ideal solution when it comes to police in school, everyone agreed the ways police and SROs exist in schools in their current form are unacceptable. For schools and school districts that are interested in removing police and SROs from schools altogether, legislation such as An Act Relative to Safer Schools (S.286) should be passed – providing funding to schools that would like to opt-out of police in schools and instead increase the presence of counselors and social workers along with instituting “practices that support the creation of healthy relationships and counter sexual harassment, sexual assault, and harassment based on other identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.”⁷³ For schools and districts that intended to maintain some police presence, greater data on student interaction with police should be mandated, and more frequent and rigorous anti-bias and anti-harassment training for school police or SROs should be required.

Establish a Taskforce/Commission or Designate Funding to Further Explore the Relationship Between Girls of Colors’ Experiences of Abuse, Sexual Assault, and Sexual Harassment in Relation to School Discipline and Juvenile Justice System Involvement.

Despite this study’s intent to explore such research, we were unsuccessful in obtaining consent from any students to speak about this element of their pasts. Yet **national research** cited earlier in this report⁷⁴ highly suggests there is an important relationship here that we simply have yet to explore in Massachusetts. The legislature should prioritize this gap as an area of research and ensure that domestic violence advocates and peer advocates are leading such efforts or are at least integral partners in this work.

⁷³ An Act Relative to Safer Schools, S.286, 192nd General Court.

⁷⁴ Malika Saada Saar et al., *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline*

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should:

Establish a Culture Shift Away from Punitive and Exclusionary Discipline and Instead Towards Alternatives That Keep Students in the Classroom.

DESE has already released [guidance](#) to Massachusetts schools that “Exclusionary discipline should only be used as a measure of last resort, after alternatives to suspension have been tried, and only after ... making efforts to address the student’s needs.”⁷⁵ The Department should continue to encourage the use of resources and professional development/training opportunities and issue guidance supporting alternatives to school discipline like restorative justice and conflict mediation, and better advertise to school districts that exclusionary discipline should only be used as a last resort, if at all.

Diversify the Massachusetts Curriculum to Reflect the History and Experiences of Non-White Histories and Cultures.

Multiple students interviewed for this report felt disconnected from much of what they learn in school and wanted their studies to more deeply reflect their own ancestries and cultures. Nationwide, teachers feel the same. Educators For Excellence conducted a survey, *Voices from the Classroom 2021: A Survey of America’s Educators*, which found that 65% of teachers nationwide believe that “their curricula are [not] relevant for their student population,” and only 19% report that “‘all’ teachers [in their school] use culturally relevant pedagogy and materials.”⁷⁶ The Department should take all steps in its power to examine and update the existing Massachusetts curriculum to reflect the diversity of students within the Commonwealth.

Require and Provide More Rigorous Training for Teachers and All Educational Staff on Anti-Racist Practices, Cultural Competency, and Trauma-Informed Learning.

The students interviewed in this report noted examples of microaggressions – being viewed as disruptive, loud, or rude, or being called “ghetto” – directly from their teachers or other educational staff. While DESE has engaged in efforts to support training on this topic, this training is often taken on by individual teachers or school staff after-hours, on top of their many existing responsibilities. Particularly for teachers, DESE should take steps to expand their existing training efforts on racial bias, anti-racism and cultural competency in the classroom

⁷⁵ [Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety School Year 2021-22](#), Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021.

⁷⁶ [Voices From the Classroom: A Survey of America’s Educators](#), Educators for Excellence, 2021.

and seek innovative ways to prioritize and systematize such education for teachers not as an add-on, but as an integrated element of their teaching practice. Furthermore, training on instituting trauma-informed learning in schools is also necessary to bridge the disconnect between students and school staff, and ensure that students' range of experiences are not only taken into account but actively acknowledged and addressed.

Place a Greater Investment in Recruitment and Retention of a Diverse Teaching Force.

The Department has already begun to prioritize such work through [grant programs](#), [fellowships](#), [learning networks](#), and [more](#).⁷⁷ DESE should continue these efforts and expand them further. Increasing educator diversity is one of the primary tools available to more greatly support students of color and limit the disproportionate school discipline they currently face with a majority-white teaching force across the Commonwealth.

AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

School Committees and Superintendents Should:

Support the Mental Health of Students by Hiring More Social Workers and School Counselors (Especially Those of Color, of Varying Backgrounds, and Preferably Who Have Experience Working with Students of Color).

Our findings revealed that a vast majority of the students interviewed for this report found school counselors and social workers to be their greatest support system. Likely uncoincidentally, many students also noted significant mental health concerns they or their peers have been experiencing, which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hiring more social workers and counselors – a feasible reality with the increase in federal funding from the pandemic in conjunction with funding from the Student Opportunity Act – makes now the perfect time to invest in this type of support system for students in schools, particularly prioritizing social workers and counselors of color who may be able to support students of color in the way the primarily white teaching force currently cannot.

⁷⁷ [Diverse and Culturally Responsive Workforce](#), Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, June 16, 2021.

Support the Mental Health of Students by Allowing Students Multiple Mental Health Days Throughout the Year and Having Daytime Breaks for Students While in School.

Students interviewed for this report spoke frequently about the pressure and stress they experience in school. Identifying brief times throughout the school day to take breaks, or opportunities to step away from school for a day or two if need be, would greatly allow students to take the time they need to stay mentally healthy and able to focus during the time they spend in the classroom itself. Both of these suggestions come directly from student interviewees who were able to clearly identify that these solutions are the types of solutions they want and need to succeed.

Invest Funding into the Training and Implementation of Restorative Justice or Similar Alternatives.

As mentioned above, increases in federal funding from the pandemic in conjunction with funding from the Student Opportunity Act have created a scenario in which districts have received substantial increases in their budget to invest with significant discretion. A portion of these funds should be dedicated to training teachers on the implementation of initiatives such as restorative justice, conflict mediation, or similar alternatives not simply as alternatives to school discipline, but rather as culture-shifting tools established in both the entire school and individual classroom culture. These tools can be used to address immediate incidents like a verbal altercation, or to address larger school climate realities, such as when students return from a significant time away from school due to a long-term suspension or juvenile justice involvement and need to be intentionally integrated back into the community with care and compassion. To implement such measures most effectively, districts should consider a 3-5 year transition period with a three-tiered approach to implementation: 1. Prevention and skill building implemented by the entire school staff into day-to-day practices (i.e., community circles and restorative conversations), 2. Early intervention (i.e., having trained staff or an outsourced professional implement restorative practices as alternatives to minor disciplinary offenses) and 3. Intensive intervention (i.e., utilizing highly trained RJ experts to address more serious disciplinary infractions, like a re-entry circle after a physical fight). Ideally, the goal with restorative justice at its height of implementation in a given school system is for students themselves to be trained on elements of these practices and conduct peer-to-peer mediation when appropriate.

Implement Systems Where Students Can Provide Anonymous Feedback and/or Report on Inappropriate Behavior from Teachers and Faculty.

Many students mentioned situations in which their teacher acted in a way that was discriminatory or simply unsafe, yet struggled to share their side of the story and/or bring this type of behavior to the attention of school administrators. Implementing a system for anonymous reporting using either a reporting system on an ongoing basis, or something close to the university level where students give evaluations of their professors at the end of the year could be implemented at the middle school/high school level where once or twice a year students give feedback on their teachers anonymously. Such feedback should be reviewed not only by individual teachers, but also by their supervisors and administrators as well. Either way, there needs to be the promotion and legitimization (attitude/culture-wise) of anonymous feedback given from students. We must get rid of the stigma that students are simply complaining so that faculty take feedback about their teaching and discipline more seriously.

Create Pathways for Student Support Outside of the School, and Outside of Mandatory Reporting Requirements.

Many students noted that they didn't feel comfortable speaking to teachers due to their lack of confidentiality, and school social workers often face similar challenges. Fundamentally, the school system cannot be the singular locus of support for all students. One way to address this issue is to facilitate local partnerships between the school and community-based organizations that provide mentorship and support to students. In addition, particularly to support younger survivors of sexual assault and dating violence, schools could facilitate partnerships between schools and attorneys who work in community-based legal services (such as the Victim Rights Law Center) that could serve as a non-reporting first point of contact for survivors under 18. Attorneys, with guidance, could be a very helpful intermediary to help younger survivors access the resources they need and make choices about how they proceed with seeking help and from whom. Ultimately, school districts have a significant amount of potential influence to connect students with outside supports to fulfill needs that school personnel may be unable to do.

Encourage Students and Parents to Attend School Committee Meetings, and Conduct Listening Sessions with Parents and Students at Least Annually.

The easiest way to ensure that students and parents are supported is to listen to them, to establish trustworthy and meaningful relationships with them and for school committee members to actively solicit and incorporate student and parent feedback into their decision-making processes. Not all students or parents have the time or capacity to attend regular school committee meetings however; steps should be taken to hold listening sessions at various times of the day in partnership with students, parents, and school committees to institutionalize this type of relationship and communication.

AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Teachers and Administrators Should:

Allow Students the Opportunity to Explain their Side of the Story Before Subjecting Them to Discipline.

One of the key themes that came up again and again during our interviews for this study was students' desire to explain their actions that may lead to disciplinary action before any decisions are made. Students expressed feeling unheard and voiceless time and time again. They expressed a desire to be allowed to provide background on what may have led to an outburst with another student or a teacher and for teachers and administrators to use that information to consider an alternative way they could be held accountable for their actions, apologize, and heal without having to lose valuable class time.

Institute Periodic Check-Ins Between Teachers and Students.

Many students interviewed for this report explained feeling disconnected or isolated from their teachers (instead relying on social workers or counselors for support in school). Part of this appears to stem from a lack of understanding that some teachers have about a given student's background or family life. Instituting regular one-on-one or small group check-ins could allow teachers and students the opportunity to build that understanding outside of the pressures of a regular teaching session. Administrators should work with teachers to identify when such opportunities might best be placed within their pre-existing teaching and prep-time schedules to allow such check-ins during the school day, and ensure these responsibilities are reflected accordingly in their collective bargaining agreements.

Encourage the Creation of Affinity Groups, Especially in Schools Where Certain Identities are in the Minority.

Multiple students spoken to for this report mentioned the value of affinity groups (for example, organizations like the Black Student Union, AAPI Association, Hispanic Culture Group, etc.) they were involved in – helping them to feel seen and understood in a school environment which they might otherwise be disconnected from. Similarly, students who attended schools where such affinity clubs or groups were lacking directly noted them as practices they would like instituted in their ideal school environment.

Collaborate with Students – and In Particular Girls of Color – on Student Voice Opportunities such as Forums, Meetings, etc.

There was an overall desire from the students who were interviewed for more opportunities to speak up to school leadership about their experiences in school, and to share the ideas they had to support the student body and school culture for the better. There is not a lack of desire to share their opinions; there is simply a lack of space/time devoted to hearing student opinions. Whether it be through school or grade-wide forums, community discussions or meetings, meeting directly with the affinity groups mentioned above, or the creation of a student voice group (inside or outside of student council, depending on student preference) that can survey and serve as the voice of the student body, students have ideas that they can't wait to share with school leadership, if only they had the outlets to do so. Creating these spaces will not only allow for open dialogue about the school environment from the students themselves, but also encourage students to hone their public speaking skills, advocacy skills, and overall encourage their self-esteem and sense of self.

Students and Parents Should:

Explore Know-Your-Rights Resources and Opportunities on School Discipline.

Despite the need for increased protections within Massachusetts law as it currently stands when it comes to school discipline, students and parents in many situations still have clear rights to notices, hearings, and appeals when faced with suspensions and expulsions. By actively seeking out and sharing know-your-rights resources in relation to school discipline with one another, we can ensure that students are not subject to unlawful punishment. Some resources on school discipline in Massachusetts include:

- › [KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: Suspensions and Expulsions](#)⁷⁸
- › [When My Child Is Disciplined at School](#)⁷⁹ – also available in [Spanish](#),⁸⁰ [Portuguese](#),⁸¹ and [Haitian-Creole](#)⁸²
- › [Measuring Up: How to make sure your school complies with Massachusetts’ student discipline laws](#)⁸³
- › For help with questions about a particular disciplinary case, you can contact the Massachusetts Advocates for Children Helpline: 617-357-8431 or [MAC’s online Helpline form](#)⁸⁴
- › For help with a short-term suspension in Boston (and beginning in 2023 Haverhill/Lawrence), call the Center for Law and Education’s Lay Advocacy Project: 617-451-0855

Continue to Speak Up When Students Experience Discrimination in School by Setting Up Meetings with School and District Leadership, Using Petitions, etc.

As this report shows, when students and parents work together to address discrimination in school, change can be made. For younger students, parent groups could organize on their behalf and meet regularly with school principals, the superintendent, or the school committee, while older students – as we saw from the Finding section of this report – can use their own power individually or in league with parents to push for necessary change.

78 [KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: Suspensions and Expulsions](#), School to Prison Pipeline Intervention Project of Greater Boston Legal Services, 2018.

79 [WHEN MY CHILD IS DISCIPLINED AT SCHOOL: A Guide for Massachusetts Families](#), Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2015.

80 [DISCIPLINA EN LA ESCUELA: Una guía para las familias de Massachusetts](#), Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2015.

81 [DISCIPLINA NA ESCOLA: Um guia para as famílias em Massachusetts](#), Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2015.

82 [LÈ PITIT MWEN JWENN DISIPLIN NAN LEKÒL: Yon Gid pou Fanmi Massachusetts yo](#), Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2015.

83 [Measuring Up: How to make sure your school complies with Massachusetts’ student discipline laws](#), The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice, The Boston Student Advisory Council, LaShanda Chirunga, The Graphic Advocacy Project, 2017.

84 [Massachusetts Advocates for Children Helpline Form](#), Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Leverage the Data Within this Report and the Interactive Dashboard⁸⁵ to Set Up Meetings with Local School Leadership to Discuss How They Plan to Address These Disparities in Your Own School and District.

This dashboard created by Edgeworth Analytics is intended to be used as a tool not only for advocates and policymakers, but for individual parents and students too. Parents and students should find the disciplinary data from their own districts and set up meetings with their teachers, school administrators, and superintendents to discuss with them any discrimination that may be occurring in their schools, and what they want to do about it. All students and parents have the power to make school leadership face what's really happening to students in their school.

⁸⁵ *Racial Disparities and School Discipline in Massachusetts: Understanding Racial Disparities for the Number of Students Disciplined in Massachusetts in the 2017-2018 School Year*, Edgeworth Analytics, 2022.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT FLYER



elevated thought
I AM ART I AM CHANGE.

FREE

jdi



NAACP
New Bedford
Branch

YOUTH
WISDOM
boston

F.Y.R.E. INITIATIVE
Fierce Youth Reigniting Excellence

RESEARCH STUDY TO LEARN WHY GIRLS OF COLOR IN MASSACHUSETTS ARE PUSHED OUT OF THE CLASSROOM AT HIGHER RATES THAN WHITE GIRLS

The [Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice](#) released a report in 2020 entitled [Protecting Girls of Color from the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#), which found that Black girls in Massachusetts public schools are 4x more likely to be disciplined than white girls. We have now brought together a Community Advisory Board – made up of students, teachers, and advocates across the state – to conduct a new study that will explore the stories behind these statistics, provide explanations for these disparities, and amplify how we can change current discipline practices.

TO SHARE YOUR STORY WITH US, YOU MUST:

- Be a female/female-identifying student, or a student assigned female at birth, that goes to a Massachusetts public school (including charter schools);
- Be in 7th – 12th grade;
- Identify as a person of color;
- Have at least one experience with exclusionary school discipline at a Massachusetts public school (in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or school-related arrest).

WHAT DOES SHARING MY STORY WITH MASSACHUSETTS APPLESEED LOOK LIKE?

- Participating in a virtual interview between 1-2 hours long, conducted by a member of Massachusetts Appleseed's Community Advisory Board, alongside a member of Massachusetts Appleseed's research team;
- During the interview you will answer questions about your experiences in the classroom, and experiences with school discipline;
- You will not have to answer any questions that you don't want to;
- You can choose if you want our research to include your name, if you want to share your story anonymously (we wouldn't use your real name), and/or if you want to identify your grade or the town where you go to school;
- You will receive \$25 per hour for this interview to compensate you for your time.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

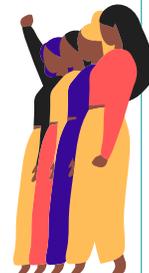
- [Use the QR Code](#) or [CLICK HERE to complete a short survey!](#) If you qualify to be a participant in this study, you will be contacted by Massachusetts Appleseed to sign-up for an interview slot.



SCAN ME!

QUESTIONS?

Contact Melanie Rush at
melanie@massappleseed.org
or 617-482-8686.



APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Version 1 (No Questions about DV/SA)

Pre-Recording: Led by MA Appleseed Researcher

1. MA Appleseed Researcher and Community Advisory Board (CAB) Member introduce themselves.
2. Researcher explains confidentially and obtains consent for the interview and video/audio recording:

“The primary purpose of this interview is to learn more about how girls of color experience school discipline in Massachusetts. In this interview, we want to know more about your own experiences with school discipline. This is an informal conversation where we just want to hear your opinions and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and your responses and identity will remain confidential. At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to decide how you would like any elements of your story attributed to you in our final public report. You can decide if you want our research to include your real first name, a fake name, no name, or if you want to identify your grade or the town where you currently go to school. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can stop your participation at any time by asking us to stop. Do we have your permission to conduct and record this interview?

[Insert name of CAB member] will be leading this interview, and I am mainly here for support. Would you prefer it if I kept my camera on or off during this interview?”

Post-Recording: Led by Community Advisory Board (CAB) Member

“I'd like to start off our interview by talking about your racial and ethnic background. For example, people may identify racially as Black but consider their ethnic identity Dominican.” [CAB member conducting the interview also has option to share how they self-identify]

1. Can you describe your racial and ethnic background?
2. What characteristics would you use to describe your family that are connected to your ethnic background?
3. Can you talk about how, if at all, your family life impacts your school life?
 - a. Are there any cultural expectations in your family about school?
 - b. Are there any family responsibilities you have that impact your school life?
4. How is your family's ethnic background viewed at your entire school?
5. How would you describe the ethnic diversity of your school?
 - a. What about the diversity of the classes you are in?
6. In school, does it seem like the faculty know about your ethnic background?
7. Do students or faculty make any assumptions about you based on your ethnic or racial background?

- a. If they answer “yes”: What kind of assumptions?
- 8. Can you describe the culture or climate of your school? By school climate I mean the quality and character of school life, including things like safety, community, and the overall social and educational environment at your school.
- 9. How comfortable are you expressing yourself in school?
 - a. Do you feel like you can be yourself?
 - b. Do you feel a sense of belonging?
- 10. Can you talk about any support systems you have at your school?
 - a. Are there people in school that you feel you can confide in?
 - i. Are there adults in school that you feel you can confide in, or who positively impact you?
 - ii. Are there any adults in school that you feel you can’t confide in, or who negatively impact you?
- 11. Have you noticed any changes in student behavior at your school since coming back to in-person learning after the pandemic?
 - a. Have school administrators been responding to student behavior differently in your school since coming back to in-person learning after the pandemic?

[Offer an optional 5-minute break since we are at the halfway point of the interview]

“Now I’d like to move our conversation to talk about school discipline.”

- 12. Can you describe how discipline works in your school?
- 13. If you had to describe your school’s discipline practices to a new female student, what would you tell them?
 - a. Would your description be different if she was a student of color or a white student?
 - i. If “yes”: Why?
- 14. In your experience, do girls of different racial or ethnic backgrounds experience discipline differently at school?
 - a. [If not mentioned directly] Do you think white girls experience discipline differently than girls of color?
 - i. If “yes”: How does that make you feel?

“Now I’d like to talk specifically about exclusionary discipline in your school. When I say exclusionary discipline, I mean discipline that removes you from the classroom, like an in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, being expelled, or school-related arrest or referral to law enforcement.”

- 15. When was the first time you ever experienced exclusionary discipline in school?
 - a. What grade were you in?
 - b. Can you describe the situation?
 - i. [If not giving a lot of details] Can you tell us more about that?
 - ii. How did that make you feel?
 - iii. Did that change your experience in school afterward?

16. How many times do you think you have experienced exclusionary discipline in school?
17. Can you describe any of those other times when you experienced exclusionary discipline in school?
 - a. Are there additional times when you experienced exclusionary discipline that you would like to share?

“We are nearing the end of this interview, and I have some final questions about your school and school discipline.”

18. Do you think discipline is fair at your school?
 - a. Why or why not?
19. Is there anything you want to see changed in the way disciplinary practices are conducted in schools?
20. What would you want to tell school administrators about your experiences with discipline at school?
21. What would your dream school environment look like?
 - a. In that environment, how do the adults address challenges or harm?
 - b. How does the community hold each other accountable, or keep each other safe and healthy?
 - c. What does the future for students of color look like there?
 - d. What are the first steps you think we should take to get there?
22. What are you most passionate about in school?
23. Is there anything else you haven't mentioned about school or school discipline that you would like us to know?
24. How would you like the information you shared with us attributed to you in the final report?
 - a. First name? Fake name? Fully anonymous?
 - b. Grade?
 - c. Town where your school is in?

Interview Version 2 (Includes Questions About DV/SA)

Pre-Recording: Led by MA Appleseed Researcher

1. MA Appleseed Researcher and Community Advisory Board (CAB) Member introduce themselves.
2. Researcher explains confidentially and obtains consent for the interview and video/audio recording:

“The primary purpose of this interview is to learn more about how girls of color experience school discipline in Massachusetts. In this interview, we want to know more about your own experiences with school discipline. This is an informal conversation where we just want to hear your opinions and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and your responses and identity will remain confidential. At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to decide how you would like any elements of your story attributed to you in our final public report. You can decide if you want our research to include your real first name, a fake name, no name, or if you want to identify your grade or the town where you currently go to school. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can stop your participation at any time by asking us to stop. Do we have your permission to conduct and record this interview?

Before we begin recording, you also shared in the online survey you filled out that you would be interested in speaking during this interview on how your experiences with either sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence or family violence may have impacted your schooling. Do we have your consent to ask about how this experience has impacted your education, either today or in a follow-up interview? You can decide towards the end of the interview which option you are interested in. If you say yes, you do not have to share any details about your story with us, we are only interested in the impact of this experience on your education. It is also ok to change your mind now, or at any time during the interview.

Lastly, [Insert name of CAB member] will be leading this interview, and I am mainly here for support. Would you prefer it if I kept my camera on or off during this interview?”

Post-Recording: Led by Community Advisory Board (CAB) Member

“I'd like to start off our interview by talking about your racial and ethnic background. For example, people may identify racially as Black but consider their ethnic identity Dominican.” [CAB member conducting the interview also has option to share how they self-identify]

1. Can you describe your racial and ethnic background?

2. What characteristics would you use to describe your family that come from your ethnic background?
3. Can you talk about how, if at all, your family life impacts your school life?
 - a. Are there any cultural expectations in your family about school?
 - b. Are there any family responsibilities you have that impact your school life?
4. How is your family's ethnic background viewed at school?
5. How would you describe the ethnic diversity of your school?
 - a. What about the diversity of the classes you are in?
6. In school, does it seem like the faculty know about your ethnic background?
7. Do students or faculty make any assumptions about you based on your ethnic background?
 - a. If they answer "yes": What kind of assumptions?
8. Can you describe the culture or climate of your school? By school climate I mean the quality and character of school life, including things like safety, community, and the overall social and educational environment at your school.
9. How comfortable are you expressing yourself in school?
 - a. Do you feel like you can be yourself?
 - b. Do you feel a sense of belonging?
10. Can you talk about any support systems you have at your school?
 - a. Are there people in school that you feel you can confide in?
 - i. Are there adults in school that you feel you can confide in, or who positively impact you?
 - ii. Are there any adults in school that you feel you can't confide in, or who negatively impact you?
11. Have you noticed any changes in student behavior at your school since coming back to in-person learning after the pandemic?
 - a. Have school administrators been responding to student behavior differently in your school since coming back to in-person learning after the pandemic?

[Offer an optional 5-minute break since we are at the halfway point of the interview]

“Now I'd like to move our conversation to talk about school discipline.”

12. Can you describe how discipline works in your school?
13. If you had to describe your school's discipline practices to a new female student, what would you tell them?
 - a. Would your description be different if she was a student of color or a white student?
 - i. If "yes": Why?
14. In your experience, do girls of different racial or ethnic backgrounds experience discipline differently at school?
 - a. [If not mentioned directly] Do you think white girls experience discipline differently than girls of color?
 - i. If "yes": How does that make you feel?

“Now I’d like to talk specifically about exclusionary discipline in your school. When I say exclusionary discipline, I am referring to discipline that explicitly removes someone from the classroom, like an in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or school-related arrest or referral to law enforcement.

15. When was the first time you ever experienced exclusionary discipline in school?
 - a. What grade were you in?
 - b. Can you describe the situation?
 - i. [If not giving a lot of details] Can you tell us more about that?
 - ii. How did that make you feel?
 - iii. Did that change your experience in school afterward?
16. Can you describe any other times when you experienced exclusionary discipline in school?
 - a. Are there additional times when you experienced exclusionary discipline that you would like to share?

“This is the point in the interview where we plan to ask you questions about how your experiences with sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence or family violence have impacted your education. Are you still interested in answering these questions now, or would you prefer to plan a follow-up interview for another day? You will not be asked to disclose or share any details of your story. If you would prefer, we can go straight to the final questions of the interview instead.

[If they would like to go immediately to the final questions, go to question 21]

[If they would like to schedule a follow-up interview] “[Researcher] will be in touch to find another day that works for you after this interview is over. We will now go to the final questions of the interview” [Go to question 21].

[If they would like to continue with these questions now] “You do not or stop have to answer any questions you don’t want to, and you do not have to share the details of your story.”

17. To confirm for our records, have you experienced sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence or family violence?
18. Has this experience impacted your education?
 - a. If “yes”: How?
 - i. Do you think your behavior in school changed at all after this experience?
19. Have you shared your experiences with anyone?
 - a. If “yes”: Did you receive support?
 - i. Have you shared this experience with your school?
 1. If “yes”: Did your school offer any resources or services?
20. How are you coping with this experience?

21. How have you been taking care of yourself after this experience?

“Thank you for sharing this information. For more support, we have a few resources that we will be placing in the chat right now. Feel free to take a moment to yourself if you would like – you can mute or turn off your camera, and come back when you are ready.”

[Researcher place this information in the chat] “You can look to Jane Doe Inc.’s Find Help Page: https://www.janedoe.org/find_help/#:~:text=2.,%2D877%2D785%2D2020. You can also call SafeLink, Massachusetts’ statewide 24/7 toll-free domestic violence hotline at (877) 785-2020 or chat with an advocate from RAINN through the National Sexual Assault Hotline: https://hotline.rainn.org/online?_ga=2.5987447.575529911.1588279510-400327490.1586802518.”

[When interviewee is ready to continue] “Now we are nearing the end of this interview, and I have some final questions about your school and school discipline.”

22. Do you think discipline is fair at your school?
 - a. Why or why not?
23. Is there anything you want to see changed in the way disciplinary practices are conducted in schools?
24. What would you want to tell school administrators about your experiences with discipline at school?
25. What would your dream school environment look like?
 - a. In that environment, how do the adults address challenges or harm?
 - b. How does the community hold each other accountable, or keep each other safe and healthy?
 - c. What does the future for students of color look like there?
 - d. What are the first steps you think we should take to get there?
26. What are you most passionate about in school?
27. Is there anything else you haven’t mentioned about school or school discipline that you would like us to know?
28. How would you like the information you shared with us attributed to you in the final report?
 - a. First name? Fake name? Fully anonymous?
 - b. Grade?
 - c. Town where your school is in?

APPENDIX C: RESOURCE TOOLKIT



RESOURCE TOOLKIT

MASSACHUSETTS SPECIFIC RESOURCES/PROGRAMS

- **Boston Centers for Youth & Families (BCYF) G.I.R.L.S. programs** focus on Growth, Intervention, Respect, Leadership, and Service for Girls (erika.butler@boston.gov, 617-635-4920 X2314)
- **Elevated Thought** is an art and social justice 501(c)(3) organization based in Lawrence, MA. They develop spaces for BIPOC youth and communities to engage and understand art's liberating power. Through creative youth development, beautification projects, public outreach, and paid opportunities for BIPOC creatives, ET actively addresses forms of systemic injustice. (info@elevatedthought.org, 978-552-3439)
- **I Have A Future** is a statewide community of youth organizers and allies, on a power building mission to win youth jobs and end mass incarceration through transformational leadership, direct public action, and policy change. (ihafma@gmail.com, 857-333-8985)
- **Jane Doe Inc.** works with 59 community-based coalition members and a host of public and private partners to create policies and explore innovative solutions that improve the lives of survivors. They seek to prevent gender-based violence by changing the lens through which people view the experiences of survivors and by promoting equity and justice for everyone. You can use their **Find Help** function to locate the nearest sexual or domestic violence service provider near you.
- **Love Your Magic** (LYM) is a grassroots organization committed to the healthy development of Black and Brown gxrils, and engages in, curates, and designs strategic programs and initiatives with the sole aim of empowering Black and Brown gxrils through community and school partnerships, the Love Your Magic Conference, and the Love Your Magic Summer Camp.
- **My Life My Choice** has a mission to harness the strength and power of survivors along with creating a network of allies to fight commercial sexual exploitation of children. (mlmcinfo@jri.org, 617-396-7807)
- **REACH Beyond Domestic Violence** works to promote healthy relationships and end domestic violence. REACH focuses on four key areas of intervention: Safety & Shelter, Community-Based Advocacy, Education & Prevention, and Community Engagement. (info@reachma.org, Hotline: 800-899-4000, Office: 781-891-0724)
- **The Victim Rights Law Center's** mission is to provide legal representation to survivors of rape and sexual assault to help rebuild their lives, and to promote a national movement committed to seeking justice for every rape and sexual assault survivor. Massachusetts contact information: <https://victimrights.org/contact/>
 - Boston/Statewide
 - Local: (617) 399-6720 x19
 - Local (Español): (617) 399-6720 x35
 - Toll Free: (877) 758-8132 x19
 - Toll Free (Español): (877) 758-8132 x35

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

- Belchertown (Western MA)
 - (413) 842-4020
- Southeastern MA/Cape and Islands
 - (508) 669-7020
- Worcester (Central MA)
 - (508) 669-7020

NATIONAL RESOURCES/PROGRAMS:

- [Alex Elle](#) is an author who focuses on meditation, breathwork, and affirmation work. ([@Alex_elle](#) / hey, girl podcast)
- [Black Girls Can Heal](#) is a Black-owned and woman led community organization dedicated to supporting Women and Girls of Color on their journey to the other side of healing. As a healing collective, they bring a holistic approach to their work by integrating spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional forms of well-being. They help their members by providing them with mentoring, workshops, and more. [@blackgirlscanheal](#)
- [Brown Girl Therapy](#) is a mental health community for children of immigrants ([@browngirltherapy](#))
- [Immigrants Rising](#) empowers undocumented young people to achieve educational and career goals through personal, institutional, and policy transformation. Their [Mental Health Connector](#) provides undocumented young people with psychological support, allowing you to access your strengths and resiliency in order to achieve your personal goals and healing.
- [RAINN](#) (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE, [online.rainn.org](#) y [rainn.org/es](#)) in partnership with more than 1,000 local sexual assault service providers across the country. RAINN also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
- [Therapy for Black Girls Podcast](#) is a weekly chat about all things mental health, personal development, and all the small decisions we can make to become the best possible versions of ourselves.

QUESTIONS?

Contact Melanie Rush at melanie@massappleseed.org or 617-482-8686.





**Massachusetts
Appleseed**
Center for Law & Justice

www.massappleseed.org