

Promoting Positive School Discipline: Four Colorado School Case Studies

In March 2020, two Colorado state agencies – the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) – combined efforts to investigate ways to promote the increased use of **equitable, student-centered discipline** in Colorado schools. The Evaluation Center at the University of Colorado Denver was contracted to conduct a multi-phase study to support this initiative. As one component of the study, evaluators conducted brief case studies at four Colorado school districts/schools to learn from their experience in successfully implementing strategies to support positive school discipline and climate.



The four case study sites were selected as examples of schools working effectively to implement positive school discipline and climate. The focus of this study was to describe their journey to provide a positive learning environment for all students identifying both factors that support and challenge their work.

The sites reflect the diversity in Colorado public schools. Two sites are large urban districts – **Aurora Public Schools** and **Mesa County Valley Schools**. One site is a small school district with one school – **Norwood Public School** – and one site is a charter school – the **Downtown Denver Expeditionary Learning School**. Two are in the Denver Metro area and two on the Colorado western slope. Three are in urban areas while Norwood is in a rural county. They vary in size from one of the largest districts in Colorado to one of the smallest.



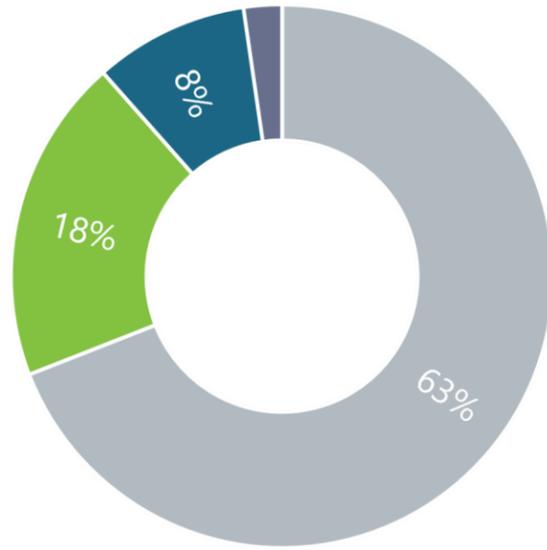
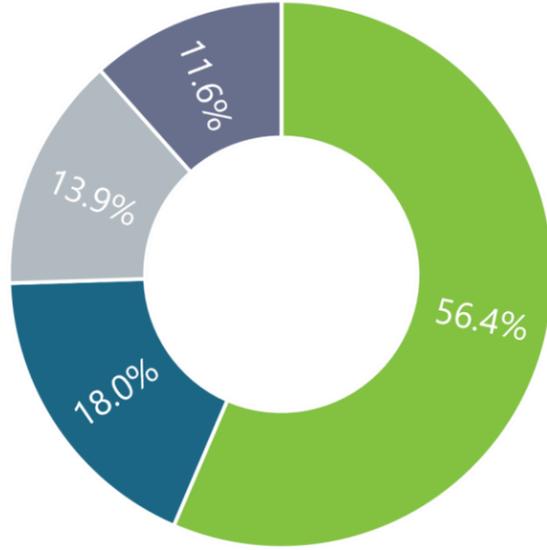
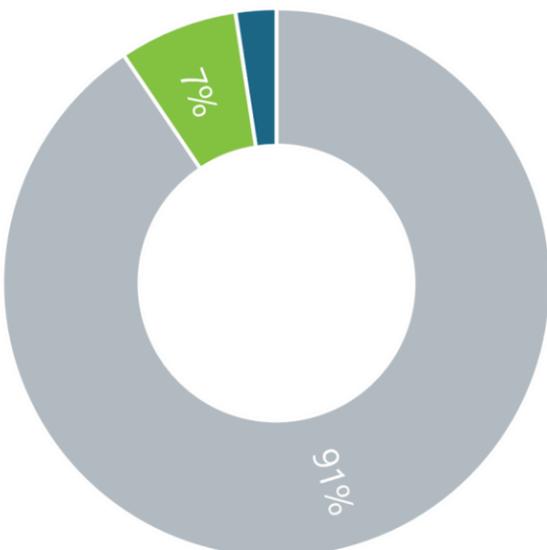
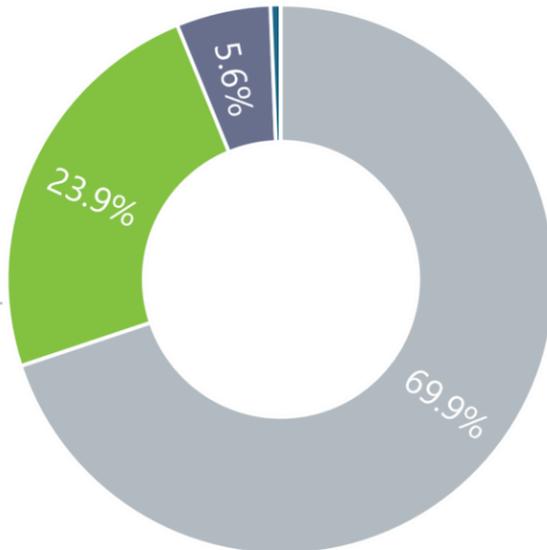


Four Case Sites – Demographic Information (2019-2020 data)



	Mesa School District	Norwood School District	Aurora School District	Downtown Denver Expeditionary Learning School
# of schools	48	1 (k-12)	64	1 (k-5)
# of teachers	1,355	22	2,267	14
# of students	21,098	171	37,146	344
% FRL eligible	44.2%	32.2%	76.8%	28.8%
% ELL	4.1%	4.1%	47.9%	3.2%
% on IEPs	12.7%	8.2%	12.8%	8.4%

- Hispanic
- Black
- White
- Additional identities



The support of leaders is essential for a school district to prioritize providing a positive school climate for all students. Guided by leaders who “know the value of community, relationships, safety, and belonging,” Mesa currently supports a district-wide program of socio-emotional learning and is working to implement restorative justice discipline practices.



Supports

Leadership

When state leaders and school administrators prioritize the development of a positive school climate, teachers feel more supported. When teachers understand they have the support of school leaders, they can focus on creating a positive classroom environment, which in turn increases student achievement.

Tailored professional development

Professional development is offered during the school day at the district and school level for teachers and administrators. The PD is designed to meet the needs of schools and individuals.

Flexible options and timelines

School leaders are given options for the focus of their school improvement work each year. It is important to phase in positive discipline practices as schools are ready to engage in the work.



Lessons Learned

Building and maintain relationships

It is important for school leaders to build partnerships at the state and community levels. Teachers continue to build relationships with students, parents, and their community.

Data analysis to inform decision making



Challenges

Funding

Mesa’s PBIS work experienced a set-back when budget cuts were implemented statewide from 2009 to 2011. Grant funding is essential.

Demands on teachers’ time

Devoting time to class meetings and relationship-building is sometimes viewed as less essential than a focus on addressing the required academic standards.

COVID-19

Professional development during the school day has been postponed, and many coaches and other specialists have been re-assigned to classroom due to teacher shortages.



Future Plans

Mesa plans to focus on equity through implementing social emotional learning and restorative justice practices. In addition, Mesa plans to expand their climate surveys to include families and teachers.

For more information on Mesa School District’s work, contact Cathy Ebel, Director of Social/Emotional Learning and Behavior Support at cathy.ebel@51schools.org

Norwood School District

Communicate your message!



The key message from the Norwood School District is to keep all stakeholders informed to support the development of a positive school climate.



Supports

Working with a dedicated core team

Having a team helps ensure teachers receive support when needed.

Communicating with stakeholders

They use several approaches to communicate the value of school climate work. A member of the team is present at every board meeting. They use social media and YouTube to engage parents and families.

Working to obtain buy-in from teachers and students

When they engaged with teachers during the staff meetings, teachers were more open to implementing PBIS practices in their classrooms. They have developed a student advisory group.

PBIS basic training

Training is provided to all teachers and staff at the start of each school year.

Systematically reviewing data

They have updated their behavior flowchart, which enables schools to track student behavior data and to make data-informed decisions about next steps for students.



Challenges

Misconception of PBIS

Parents had concerns that PBIS “rewards the bad students and just gives everyone a trophy.” Through intentional messaging and communication, they were able to help parents better understand and support the PBIS system.



Lessons Learned

Careful and intentional reflection, planning, and action

They found that it was important to work with others who have already implemented PBIS successfully.

Focus on one small goal at a time



Future Plans

While Norwood continues to implement PBIS, they are incorporating other related school climate practices. This includes restorative justice and trauma informed teaching.

For more information on Norwood's work, contact Shannon Dean, Co-Lead of Norwood's PBIS team at Shannon.dean@norwoodk-12.org

Aurora Public Schools

Integrate multiple approaches!



Aurora Public Schools is creating an innovative behavioral framework drawn from evidenced-based practices and approaches related to school climate and discipline. They are moving gradually to implement positive climate strategies across schools in the district to provide all students with a safe and welcoming learning environment.



Supports

Focus on equity

An explicit focus on equity is central to Aurora's progress in their work to implement positive school discipline and climate. Aurora uses disaggregated data at the district, school, and teacher-levels to inform instruction, discipline, and action planning.

Intentional focus on tier one supports

By shifting to focus on positive and equitable school climate for all students (tier one), they are gaining new understanding of the root causes of attendance problems. As opposed to developing individual intervention plans (tier 3) for students who are chronically absent.

Embedded coaches

Building-level coaches are able to tailor training and programming to meet the unique needs of each school and community.



Lessons Learned

Importance of building-level autonomy

Aurora is embracing a coaching model that uses school-level data to determine what supports are needed, rather than a "one-size fits all" approach.



Challenges

- **Pressure to quickly provide more intensive services**
 - While Aurora recognizes many students need interventions, they believe it is important to develop a foundation of positive school climate and culture at each school without undermining existing academic and behavior support services.
- **Communicating their integrated model**
 - They have found it challenging to clearly present a holistic model effectively in ways understandable for a variety of audiences.



Future Plans

Aurora envisions a system where multiple behavioral frameworks are blended seamlessly to support the development and maintenance of equitable and positive school climate and culture.

For more information on Aurora's work, contact Meghan Statton, System Support Specialist at mastatton@aurorak12.org

Downtown Denver Expeditionary School

Integrate socio-emotional learning everyday, all day!

The key to a positive and equitable school climate is providing socio-emotional learning that happens every day and is integrated throughout school day at the Downtown Denver Expeditionary School. This strategy has been effective in supporting the school to achieve its mission “to offer a diverse, caring, and collaborative learning environment while using the city as our campus.”



Supports

- Staff devoted to a positive learning environment**
Teachers have provided positive feedback on the changes in school climate that have been directed by the mental health team. Having a mental health person on staff five days a week is important to their progress.
- Whole school approach**
They involve all adults in the school in the professional learning and include climate and culture in their school improvement plan.
- Centered on inequity and racism**
This year they began their school year with four days of professional development centered on inequity and racism.
- Parent involvement**
Parents are viewed as critical to success and relationship building.



Challenges

Clearly communicating their approach to socio-emotional learning
They received negative feedback from parents when they began using the term “trauma-informed care,” which some parents interpreted as “acquiescing to bad behavior and not creating a safe environment.” This motivated the staff to shift to the neurosequential model in education.



Lessons Learned

Describing practices using positive phrases.
They found it was important to choose language related to school climate and discipline programs with care.



Future Plans

The Downtown Denver Expeditionary School plans to continue their work to increase their population of Students of Color. In June 2020, they sent a letter signed by all staff to their community both supporting anti-racism and explicitly describing their action plans to increase equity.

Implications for Next Steps

Advice from case study participants

While the progress in implementing positive and equitable discipline is evident at the case sites, similar work is likely occurring in many other Colorado schools. It is also likely that there are districts and schools that have not begun this journey.



Begin this journey by

- Starting with bringing school and districts leaders on board,
- Engaging a school-level team with the needed expertise to coordinate efforts,
- Providing tailored professional development for teachers and staff,
- Allowing schools to have autonomy,
- Using data and careful planning and reflection to make informed decisions,
- Communicating a clear message on a regular basis,
- Integrating multiple approaches into a holistic system, and
- Integrating socio-emotional learning throughout the curriculum.

Implications for Next Steps

External Support Suggestions (from case study participants)

With additional support and encouragement, more schools may engage in efforts to ensure they have positive and equitable discipline and a welcoming school climate and culture.



How other organizations can support schools in this work

Help schools and districts to **define and communicate their messaging** about the importance and value of socio-emotional learning and about the purpose of the strategies they propose to use.

While **district autonomy** is important (especially in Colorado where schools are locally controlled), the work currently underway in the School Climate Transformation Collaborative to **identify best practices in school climate** will greatly contribute to the ability of schools to communicate effective messages to their communities.

Provide additional **networking opportunities** for those working on school climate to connect with colleagues, experts, stakeholders, and funders. It would be important to build upon and support existing efforts such as conferences and webinars currently offered through CDE or other sources.

Connect district and school staff with **additional resources especially funding and training** opportunities.

Collaborate with the many other agencies, foundations, and non-profit organizations engaged in this important work.