

# *Shifting from Zero-Tolerance Policies to Address Substance Use among Black High School Students: Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline Using a Whole-Child Approach*

by Varsha Penumalee

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Because Black high school students are significantly more likely to be incarcerated as adults than their White counterparts, it's important to investigate how current policies in public schools may increase the racial disparities of the school-to-prison pipeline. To understand how to mitigate future incarceration of Black high school students, this comprehensive literature review investigates how zero-tolerance policies and whole-child policies may impact substance use and racially disproportionate suspension rates in high schools in the United States. Unlike whole-child policies, zero-tolerance policies fail to address reasons for maladaptive behavior, often weaken student-teacher relationships, and neglect academic success. Zero-tolerance policies often inadvertently increase substance use and academic disengagement rather than ameliorate these issues. Zero-tolerance approaches increase suspension rates while whole-child approaches decrease the incidence of suspension, indicating that the inclusion of whole-child policies and decreased use of zero-tolerance policies may reduce youth incarceration rates. Black students who use substances are also more likely to be suspended than their non-Black counterparts and those who have been suspended have a higher likelihood of being incarcerated, signifying that a reduction in suspension rates in high schools may decrease racial disparities among incarcerated young adults. Thus, the use of whole-child policies may mitigate the incidence of substance use and racially disproportionate suspension practices among Black students, reducing incarceration through the school-to-prison pipeline.

*Keywords:* zero-tolerance policies, whole-child policies, substance use, incarceration, school-to-prison pipeline, Black students, school policies

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## **Introduction**

Zero-tolerance policies, which are known to reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline, are defined as “school or district polic[ies] mandating predetermined consequences for various student offenses” (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). These policies have been present in public schools for decades and are often used to address substance use among students. In 1996 and 1997, 87% and 88% of public school principals, respectively, agreed that their schools enforced zero-tolerance drug and alcohol policies (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Additionally, 62% of public schools in 1996 and 1997 responded with out-of-school suspensions of at least 5 days to students possessing, distributing, or using alcohol and/or drugs (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Notably, these policies continue to persist today: in a more recent survey of 1,080 public school principals nationwide in 2021, 62% were found to use zero-tolerance policies in administrative decision-making (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). More specifically, 85% of principals who used

zero-tolerance approaches utilized such policies to address student possession of illegal substances (Perera & Diliberti, 2023).

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model emphasizes viewing students holistically to understand how external factors may be leading to student malpractice (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The WSCC model uses whole-child approaches and highlights ten components in relation to student outcomes:

1. Physical education and physical activity,
2. Nutrition, environment, and services,
3. Health education,
4. Social and emotional climate,
5. Physical environment,
6. Health services,
7. Counseling, psychological, and social services,
8. Employee wellness,
9. Community involvement, and
10. Family engagement (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

These ten components enable schools to identify barriers students are facing that may be contributing to malpractices and use restorative discipline approaches to address student behavior (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). For example, when students showcase aggressive tendencies, teachers using whole-child policies may be able to respond with patient explanations and display how to appropriately respond to conflict, as well as identify whether family members or peers may be modeling overly-aggressive behaviors (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). In doing so, students may be more likely to exhibit improved relationships, self-esteem, control, and academic performance (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Notable examples of whole-child approaches in-practice are integrated student support (ISS) programs. City Connects is an example of an ISS program initially implemented in public schools in Boston, Massachusetts in 2001 and now serves 47,976 students in over 150 elementary and middle schools across the United States. In each school, a City Connects Coordinator reviews students' individual needs with teachers and generates a personalized plan to support the student, including use of school and community resources. The City Connects Coordinator then works closely with families and community partners to confirm students' needs are met and, if they are not, ensures necessary changes are made to the support plan. As a result of City Connects, students were more likely to enroll in post-secondary education, achieve higher scores on standardized English Language Arts and Math exams, and less likely to drop out of high school (Boston College, 2023). Communities in Schools (CIS) of Chicago is a similar integrated student support program that, as of 2016, was present in 122 Chicago public schools. In 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 respectively, schools that implemented CIS of Chicago had a 5% higher average reading and 5.7% higher average math score on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) as compared to non-CIS schools (Communities in Schools of Chicago, 2016).

School climate may be defined as a culmination of positive student-teacher relationships, order and safety, academic engagement, and overall school satisfaction (Daily et al., 2020). In 2020, only 37% of students believed their school's discipline practices were fair and equal (YouthTruth, 2020).

Additionally, in 2022, a mere 59% of students felt safe at their school, and in 2018, 29% and 24% of students reported being "not engaged" and "actively disengaged," respectively, at school (YouthTruth, 2022; Hodges, 2018). Overall, these factors may contribute to an overall dissatisfaction of school climate among students, evidenced by 60% of high school students reporting feeling negative emotions (such as exhaustion, boredom, and anxiety) at school in 2020 (Moeller et al., 2020). This suggests that improving school climate should be a priority for school administrations to improve overall enjoyment at school and student mental health.

Among high school seniors, 61.5% reported abusing alcohol and 43.7% reported using marijuana in their lifetimes (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2023). Moreover, 2.4%, 1.2%, and 0.3% of high school seniors have used oxycontin, Vicodin, and heroin, respectively—signifying that the use of alcohol, marijuana, opioids, and other illicit substances is a prevalent issue among high school students (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 2023). Among Black/African-American adolescents aged 12-17 in 2019, 17.3%, 14.7%, and 12.7% had used illicit drugs (including marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, methamphetamine, pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives), alcohol, and marijuana, respectively within one year (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2021). This suggests that school policies may disproportionately impact Black students, as they are more apt to use substances and may be subject to more extreme disciplinary repercussions.

In addition, suspension practices in the United States are racially disproportionate, impacting Black high school students more often than their non-Black counterparts. In 2018, the out-of-school suspension rate among Black students in K-12 schools was 11.9%, which was significantly higher than that of Native American (6.6%), Latinx (3.8%), White (3.3%), and Asian/Pacific Islander students (1.3%) (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). These statistics suggest that Black students may be affected by zero-tolerance policy consequences—such as out-of-school suspension—more often than students of other racial groups.

Consequences like out-of-school suspensions may increase the likelihood of future incarceration through the school-to-prison pipeline, which is

defined as “a process by which youth who experience punitive punishment in schools are increasingly enmeshed within the criminal justice system” (Hemez et al., 2019). Due to the school-to-prison pipeline, racially disproportionate suspension rates may be linked to the rampant racial disparities in incarceration, as Black adults are incarcerated in state prisons at approximately five times the rate of White adults (The Sentencing Project, 2021).

Zero-tolerance policies, including those relating to substance use, disproportionately impact Black high school students, which has led school administrations to explore alternative school policies. Contrary to discriminatory zero-tolerance policies, whole-child policies consider reasons for substance use, establish positive student-teacher relationships, and encourage academic engagement and success while decreasing the incidence of suspension—which may altogether decrease racially disproportionate suspension rates impacting Black youth. Thus, the use of whole-child policies may mitigate the incidence of substance use and racially disproportionate suspension practices among Black students, reducing incarceration through the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **School Policies and Substance Use**

In a survey of 2,097 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from 2015-2017 in 16 West Virginian regional schools, Daily et al. (2020) identified how school climate (student substance use, relationships with teachers, order and safety of schools, and academic engagement in school) impacted substance use initiation. Daily et al. (2020) found that a positive school climate may prevent substance use initiation ( $\beta = -0.07$  to  $-0.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that school policies which establish a favorable environment may greatly impact substance use rates among students in public schools. Unlike whole-child policies which may establish a positive school climate, zero-tolerance policies do not address underlying causes of maladaptive behavior, build strong student-teacher relationships, or promote academic success. In turn, whole-child approaches may decrease substance use occurrence.

McElrath et al. (2013) used data from 34,850 high school seniors from 130 schools nationwide collected through the Monitoring the Future (MTF) study to identify reasons for adolescents

simultaneously using alcohol and marijuana. In this study, McElrath et al. (2013) asked students how many times they had used alcohol, marijuana, and/or hashish (on 0, 1-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10-19, 20-39, or 40 or more occasions), how many times they had used marijuana and/or hashish while also using alcohol (on a scale of 1 [never] to 5 [every time]), and what their primary reasons for using alcohol, marijuana, hashish, and/or simultaneously using substances were. McElrath et al. (2013) then determined that 27.0% (standard deviation = 0.003) of 12-month marijuana users simultaneously used alcohol “to get away from [their] problems or troubles” and 50.0% (standard deviation = 0.004) used marijuana “to relax or relieve tension” (p. 73). However, zero-tolerance policies do not consider such root causes for substance use prior to assigning consequences. Teske (2011) studied juvenile justice system referrals in Clayton County, GA, a county with school districts which relied on zero-tolerance policies from the mid-1990s to 2004. This study reported that in the mid-1990s (when zero-tolerance approaches were implemented), referrals to the juvenile justice system increased by 1,248%. Teske (2011) clarified that this increase in juvenile justice system admissions was not due to an increase in major felonies by students, but rather more minor misbehaviors, which would have previously been addressed by schools, such as “school fights, disorderly conduct, and disrupting public school” (p. 93). This signifies that schools using zero-tolerance policies may respond to minor offenses in a similar manner to more dangerous malpractices, referring all students to the juvenile justice system. In turn, schools using zero-tolerance approaches may not be concerned with identifying the specific reasons for student malpractice, such as excessive stressors leading to substance use. Consequently, schools employing these policies may be unable to provide students with assistance or resources for substance use treatment before suspending or directing students to the juvenile justice system.

Sibley et al. (2017) conducted a case study of City Connects—an ISS program in Boston, Massachusetts—and surveyed 162 and 189 teachers from 16 Boston public schools in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, respectively. Sibley et al. (2017) reported that in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, 69% and 68% of surveyed teachers, respectively,

agreed that “As a result of knowing more about the non-academic aspects of students' lives, [they] think about the factors influencing student behavior before [they] react to the behavior” (p. 151). Contrary to zero-tolerance policies which respond to misconduct without considering external factors, whole-child policies may enable teachers and administrators to approach each student from a more well-informed perspective. For example, schools using the WSCC model conduct consultations to identify social, emotional, and physical barriers and provide students with community resources to aid their educational experiences (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Similarly, Sibley et al. (2017) found that in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, 93% and 89% of surveyed teachers, respectively, agreed that the City Connects Coordinators helped them connect students with “family counseling, tutoring, food donations, before-school care, and extracurricular activities” (pp. 148-153). In turn, a whole-child approach may provide schools with the background needed to provide high school students with community-based resources that may mitigate substance use occurrence.

After analyzing the relationship between positive student-teacher relationships and substance use initiation, Daily et al. (2020) reported the cross-lagged  $\beta$ s as a range of  $\beta = -0.07$  to  $-0.25$  ( $SE = 0.01-0.04$ , all  $ps < .01$ ), indicating that positive relationships with teachers may prevent substance use initiation among students. Similarly, Forster et al. (2017) analyzed 2013 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) data and identified how positive student-teacher relationships impacted use of substances among 8th, 9th, and 11th graders. Forster et al. (2017) found the odds ratios between positive student-teacher relationships and stimulant use ( $OR = 0.56$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), medication for ADHD/ADD use ( $OR = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), pain reliever use ( $OR = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), tranquilizer use ( $OR = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and polyprescription use ( $OR = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (p. 32). This showcases that students' positive relationships with teachers may significantly decrease the likelihood of high school students using various prescription drugs for non-medical uses.

In a survey of 3264 students in 7th and 9th grade and their respective school principals in Washington, U.S. and Victoria, Australia in 2002 and 2003, Evans-Whipp et al. (2015) identified how perceptions of

school drug policies impacted student marijuana use rates. Evans-Whipp et al. (2015) asked adolescents “If a student was found using marijuana at school, which of the following would most likely happen? (Circle all that apply) ... (1) he or she would be talked to by a teacher about the dangers of using marijuana, (2) he or she would be suspended, (3) he or she would be expelled, and (4) the police would be called” (p. 995). This study found that students who reported going to schools that used teacher counseling—in which teachers spoke to students about the dangers of marijuana use—in 2002 were 48% less likely to use marijuana in 2003 than those who went to schools that did not use teacher counseling. This suggests that teachers who were more patient with students and were willing to explain the dangers of marijuana use (as opposed to responding with predetermined repercussions) may have been more effective at addressing substance use. Moreover, Sibley et al. (2017) posited that in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 in surveyed schools using City Connects, 81% and 79% of teachers, respectively, stated that the whole-child approach made them more empathetic towards their students, and 62% and 68% of teachers, respectively, concurred that they were “more patient” with their students in the classroom as well (pp. 151-152). The increased empathy and patience established through whole-child approaches may enhance student support and improve personal relationships with teachers, reducing incidence of adolescent substance use.

In addition, Daily et al. (2020) found opportunities for student engagement and substance use initiation cross-lagged  $\beta$ s as a range of  $-0.07$  to  $-0.15$  ( $SE = 0.01-0.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that student engagement may delay substance use initiation. Likewise, Moon et al. (2020) studied data from 12,884 participants nationwide between the ages of 12 and 17 from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to determine how academic engagement impacted use of substances. In their analysis, Moon et al. (2020) reported comparable findings: the standardized regression model estimate of the relationship between school academic engagement and substance use was  $-0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.066$  ( $p < .001$ ). In a similar study, Cox et al. (2007) used the 2003 Mississippi Youth Risk Behavior Survey to record data from 1,488 9th-12th graders to determine how academic performance impacted substance use initiation. Cox et al. (2007) found

significant odds ratios of 2.5, 1.2, and 1.9 between students having low grades and frequently smoking, binge drinking, and using marijuana, respectively. As a result, increased learning engagement and academic success may make students feel more supported in their school environment, decreasing likelihood of substance use.

Yaluma et al. (2020) retrieved data from 2011-2012, 2013-2014, and 2015-2016 in Ohio schools from the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core Data, and the Ohio Department of Education school report cards to ascertain how zero-tolerance policies impacted academic achievement in schools in relation to student race. Yaluma et al. (2020) found that, after the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, reading proficiency rates among Asian students was 85.37% of its pre-policy level, compared to 77.35% for White students, 61.38% for Hispanic students, and 53.74% for Black students. This indicates that zero-tolerance policies fail to cultivate academic success, especially among Black students. In turn, zero-tolerance approaches may lead Black students to feel discouraged at school and may consequently result in substance use.

Sibley et al. (2017) found that because of the whole-child approaches used in City Connects, 67% and 53% of surveyed teachers in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, respectively, agreed with the statement "I provide more differentiated instruction to meet the various learning styles of my students (e.g., small group work, visuals, movement)" (p. 152). By using differentiated teaching methods, whole-child policies address individual student needs and may increase academic engagement and success among adolescents. In fact, Moore et al. (2017) studied changes in GPA, grade progression, math and ELA grades, math and ELA test scores, and attendance following the implementation of integrated student support programs. In their analysis, Moore et al. (2017) studied academic data from three schools in Boston, MA and discovered that following the implementation of City Connects, there was a significant increase in average ELA grades in 2010 and average mathematics grades in 2008-2009, 2010, and 2012. In turn, whole-child policies promoting learning engagement and academic success among high school students may improve students' perceptions of school climate and make students feel more supported, reducing substance use.

### **School Policies and Suspension Rates**

Because zero-tolerance policies increase suspension rates and whole-child approaches in high schools decrease the incidence of suspension, the inclusion of whole-child policies and decreased use of zero-tolerance approaches may reduce racially disproportionate suspension rates. Huang and Cornell (2021) used the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey to collect data from 118,839 students between 6th and 8th grade and 11,276 teachers in Virginia middle schools to identify how zero-tolerance policy implementation impacted suspension rates. In this study, Huang and Cornell (2021) asked teachers to rank their agreement with the statement "I support the use of zero tolerance discipline at this school (Zero tolerance is defined as the practice of imposing an automatic and severe punishment for any violation of a certain rule)" on a scale of 1-6 and used school administrative records to identify respective suspension rates (p. 393). Huang and Cornell (2021) determined that increased teacher support for zero-tolerance policies was associated with increased student suspensions ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), indicating that zero-tolerance policies may lead to a rise in out-of-school suspension rates. This suggests that the structure of zero-tolerance policies contributes to more frequent use of exclusionary discipline.

Conversely, Koffman et al. (2009) studied the Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (JIPP)—a whole-child-based gang prevention and intervention program in Belmont High School in Los Angeles, California—where administrators sent students to be exposed to holistic, positive discipline and behavior practices as an alternative to suspension. Koffman et al. (2009) discovered that upon implementation of whole-child approaches, the number of suspension days among students decreased by 50 percent and suspension incidence decreased by more than 90 percent. Dorado et al. (2016) conducted a similar study of four elementary schools in the San Francisco School District that implemented Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS)—a whole-child program—to determine how viewing students holistically may have impacted staff knowledge of trauma-sensitivity, academic engagement, behavioral issues, and student trauma responses. Dorado et al. (2016) specifically examined how out-

of-school suspensions in one surveyed elementary school (School A) changed from 2008-2009 (before HEARTS was implemented) to 2013-2014 (five years after the implementation of HEARTS). From this study, Dorado et al. (2016) reported that the number of out-of-school suspensions in School A decreased from 56 in the 2008-2009 school year to 3 in the 2013-2014 school year, resulting in a significant Cohen's *d* effect size of 4.09. Overall, this indicates that whole-child policies in schools may reduce out-of-school suspension rates.

### **Student Perceptions of Disciplinary Inequity**

To ascertain how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, and family structure impacted student perceptions of school climate, suspension, and relationships with teachers, Pena-Shaff et al. (2018) conducted a study of 407 ninth graders, 342 tenth graders, 355 eleventh graders, and 320 twelfth graders (a total of 1,444 participants) from three central New York high schools in two school districts (school district A and school district B) in 2009-2010. Pena-Shaff et al. (2018) asked students "Do you think students from your racial/ethnic group are more likely to be suspended than other students for engaging in the same type of behavior?" (p. 273) and found that Black students were more likely to perceive racially disproportionate suspension practices in their district than their White (OR = 10.28,  $p < .001$ ), Asian American (OR = 12.79),  $p < .001$ ), and Multiracial (OR = 2.61,  $p < .01$ ) counterparts (p. 275). Hoffman (2014) also surveyed 14,120 and 13,280 high school students in 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, respectively, before zero-tolerance policy implementation in a mid-sized urban school district. In 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, Hoffman (2014) surveyed 13,077 and 12,790 high school students, respectively, after zero-tolerance policies were implemented in the same school district. Like Pena-Shaff et al. (2018), Hoffman (2014) reported that the incident ratio rate (IRR) of the number of days Black students were suspended was 7.96 [95% CI: 7.08, 9.94] indicating that Black students were significantly more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts. Hoffman (2014) also found that the incident ratio rate (IRR) between Black student suspension rates and zero-tolerance policy implementation was 1.30 [95% CI: 1.00, 1.67], suggesting that following establishment of zero-

tolerance policies, suspensions among Black students significantly increased. In turn, zero-tolerance policies may bolster already racially disproportionate suspension rates, which may especially impact Black high school students.

In addition, Pena-Shaff et al. (2018) asked students "Do you think teachers at your school treat students from your racial/ethnic group better, worse, or the same as students from other racial/ethnic groups?" and found that Black students had more negative perceptions of their teachers' treatment of students than their White (OR = 8.80,  $p < .001$ ), Asian (OR = 5.83,  $p < .001$ ), and Multiracial (OR = 7.18,  $p < .001$ ) counterparts (p. 274). McNeal and Dunbar (2010) surveyed ninety 11th and 12th graders from fifteen urban, Midwestern high schools with zero-tolerance policies to qualitatively understand how African-American and Hispanic students perceived zero-tolerance approaches. In this study, McNeal and Dunbar (2010) found that surveyed students reported feeling that staff members (such as teachers, security guards, and school administrators) were unable to be unbiased. For example, McNeal and Dunbar (2010) noted that one student stated, "The staff in school show favoritism most of the time. If they like a student, they let the student get away with everything. If they don't like the student, they suspend the student every chance they get," and another stated, "when students do something to break the zero policy rules, a staff member might let it slide because of the relationship the student and staff member have. But if another student breaks that same rule, the staff member would punish that student" (p. 305). While these findings do not, on their own, demonstrate that disciplinary policies are applied in a systematically biased manner, they highlight that Black students experience school discipline as inequitable. Such perceptions are critical, as they may negatively affect student-teacher relationships, reduce trust in school authorities, and contribute to disengagement from the school environment.

Sibley et al. (2017) stated that in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, 81% and 79% of teachers, respectively, agreed that the implementation of whole-child policies through City Connects increased their empathy towards students (pp. 151-152). This increased empathy among teachers may reduce the likelihood of students facing severe consequences,

such as out-of-school suspension. Okonofua et al. (2016) recruited 31 participating math teachers at five middle schools and randomly assigned each teacher to either receive an empathetic-mindset intervention or a punitive-mindset intervention through two online sessions within a two-week period. From this study, Okonofua et al. (2016) reported that the suspension rates of Black and Latinx students with math teachers who received the empathetic-mindset intervention were 6.3% lower than schools with students who had the teachers with a punitive-mindset, indicating that teacher empathy significantly decreased racially disproportionate suspension rates. Thus, schools emphasizing positive, empathetic student-teacher relationships through whole-child approaches may make Black students feel more supported, reducing rates of suspension. In turn, whole-child policies may mitigate racially disproportionate suspension rates.

### **Suspensions and Racially Disproportionate Incarceration**

Because Black students who use substances are more likely to be suspended than their non-Black counterparts and those who have been suspended have a higher likelihood of being incarcerated, reducing substance use rates in high schools may decrease racially disproportionate incarceration rates. In a study to identify if adolescents who were suspended were more likely to be incarcerated between the ages of 18-26, Hemez et al. (2019) included responses from 8,984 individuals aged 12-16 nationwide from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) and interviewed them annually from 1997-2011 and biennially after 2011. Hemez et al. (2019) reported that in a mixed-effects model with socioeconomic and contextual statuses controlled, students who were suspended at least once in 7th-12th grade were 288% more likely to be incarcerated in young adulthood. Wolf et al. (2017) confirmed these findings when they analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health, which included 7,858 7th-12th graders from 80 high schools nationwide in 1994-1995, 1996, 2001-2002, and 2007-2008 to identify how suspensions in adolescence impacted future incarceration. Wolf et al. (2017) reported that students who were suspended by the first survey in 1994-1995 were 72% more likely to be incarcerated

by the fourth survey (fourteen years later). These studies together suggest that high school suspension is correlated with adult incarceration, indicating that suspensions are prominent contributors to the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **Evidence of Differential Enforcement**

While the studies above demonstrate that Black students are suspended at disproportionately high rates, these findings are primarily correlational and do not establish whether such disparities result from differences in behavior or inequities in disciplinary enforcement. To better understand this distinction, research that controls for student behavior and socioeconomic factors must be examined when assessing disciplinary outcomes. Hemez et al. (2019) reported that when demographics, criminal and delinquent status, and socioeconomic and contextual status were controlled, respondents who experienced a suspension and were non-Hispanic Black were 1.52 times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Hispanic White counterparts ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that Black adolescents who were suspended were more likely to be incarcerated as adults (p. 245). In a similar study, Welch et al. (2022) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health, which included 14,484 adolescents in 7th-12th grade in 129 middle and high schools nationwide in the 1994-1995, 1995-1996, 2001-2002, 2007-2008, and 2016-2018 school years (p. 585). Welch et al. (2022) noted respondent racial demographics and whether participants had experienced any arrest, incarceration (defined as at least one month in jail since the participant's 18th birthday), or long-term incarceration (defined as at least one year in jail since the participant's 18th birthday). This study found that Black students who were suspended ( $b=1.06$ ,  $Exp(b)=2.89$ ,  $p<.05$ ) or expelled ( $b=1.10$ ,  $Exp(b)=3.00$ ,  $p<.05$ ) were significantly more at-risk for long-term incarceration (p. 595). This suggests that suspension of Black high school students may be linked to racially disproportionate incarcerations, which may specifically impact Black adults.

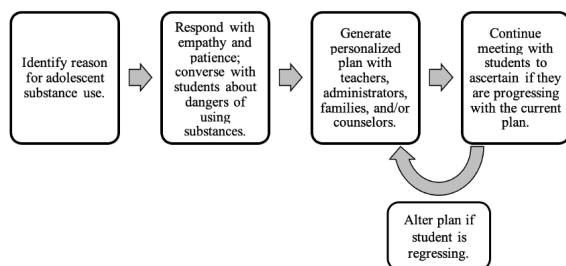
### **Conclusion**

In contrast to whole-child approaches, zero-tolerance policies contribute to increased substance use and academic disengagement—ultimately elevating suspension rates. In turn, incorporating

comprehensive whole-child policies and minimizing the reliance on zero-tolerance measures could potentially lower rates of youth incarceration through the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, Black students who have experienced suspension have an elevated risk of incarceration, which underscores the significance of reducing suspension rates in high schools to alleviate racial disparities in the incarceration of young adults. Implementing the WSCC model into school administrations may serve to mitigate substance use incidence and address racially disproportionate suspension practices among Black students, contributing to a reduction in incarceration rates associated with the school-to-prison pipeline.

Upon noticing students using substances, schools should use the WSCC model to first identify the reason for adolescent substance use. Analyzed sources in this literature review indicated that adolescents may turn to substances because of anxiety, peer pressure, a desire to experiment, and a multitude of other reasons. Knowing the causality of each student's use of substances may enable teachers to respond with increased empathy and patience and personally converse with students about the dangers of using substances. Additionally, teachers, administrators, families, and/or counselors should work together to generate a personal plan for each student—which may include professional counseling and addiction treatment, if necessary—to ensure adolescents are healthy and recovering. Most importantly, staff members should continue to meet with students and note whether students are progressing towards sobriety. If they are regressing, changes should be made to the student's individualized plan.

School Policy Proposal to Address Substance Use among High School Students.



Further research could be conducted to identify the specific impacts of whole-child approaches on substance use and suspension rates among high school students. Additionally, further studies regarding long-term impacts on future incarceration rates of students who attended high schools with whole-child policies should be conducted. Specifically, an exploration of how the WSCC model may impact incarceration rates among Black young adults may help to inform high schools on how to reduce associated suspension rates.

The adoption of whole-child policies, with a focus on fostering positive student-teacher relationships, promoting academic engagement, and addressing the root causes of maladaptive behavior, emerges as a crucial strategy to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. The evidence presented in this literature review strongly advocates for a reevaluation of current school policies, favoring approaches that prioritize the overall well-being and success of all students—irrespective of their racial backgrounds.

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