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**REDUCING SUSPENSION RATES IN CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY**

by  
Christina Fleming

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Special Education  
at  
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May 20, 2019

Thesis Advisor: Margaret Shuff, E.D.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to all professors in the College of Education for their help and guidance through this program. I have been challenged to the highest degree and for that I have been made a better educator. I am prepared to face the many challenges that await me in my professional career.

I would like to thank my children Sadie, Jeremiah, and Mariah for being my motivation to succeed. I would like to thank my mother and father for their endless faith in me. Most of all I would like to thank my husband for his endless support. Without him none of this would have been possible.

## Abstract

Christina Fleming  
REDUCING SUSPENSION RATES IN CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY  
2018-2019

Margaret Shuff, Ed.D.  
Master of Arts in Special Education

Researchers have found that being suspended is a strong indicator that a student will eventually drop out. Students who drop out are much more likely to end up in prison, becoming part of the “school to prison pipeline. This study will look to answer the question “Are Charter schools addressing the School to Prison Pipeline?” Camden, NJ a city riddled with poverty, high crime rates, and high rates of incarceration is now a City with an all but dismantled public school system. Can Charter schools be the answer?

Researchers have gathered enough evidence to support various solutions including but are not limited to parental involvement, restorative justice and increased teacher training. Continued research and practice on this matter will have great benefits for students, parents and teachers alike. This research integrates a mixed methodology using qualitative data and quantitative data. The setting was chosen because the school boasts a consistent suspension rate lower than its neighboring schools. The school is consistently working to lower the suspension and absentee rates on a year-to-year basis. In studying the school’s climate, discipline policies and practices, further best practices may be identified and utilized.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The school to prison pipeline is a recognized national issue. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2014), the school-to prison pipeline is a phenomenon occurring in the United States wherein students, through educational practices, are essentially funneled out of classrooms and schools and into the juvenile justice system – juvenile detention centers, residential treatment centers, placement in states’ custody, and youth prisons. Many urban schools have transformed from places of learning and hope to holding cells adorned with metal detectors and heavy police presence (Price, 2009; Reaves, 2011). That's especially true for racial justice in New Jersey's youth prisons, while there has been a significant reduction in the number of children incarcerated, shameful racial disparities persist. Despite numerous diversion and incarceration alternative programs in the New Jersey juvenile justice system, black children are less likely to be diverted, and more likely to be incarcerated. (Richardson Jones, 2017)

“Zero tolerance” rules or policies are predefined consequences for infractions to specific school policies. Research over the past twenty years has found “zero tolerance” measures ineffective in promoting and improving student behaviors, school safety, or juvenile justice outcomes. Youth who are suspended or expelled have an increased likelihood of not achieving academic success and increased contact with the juvenile justice system. Nationwide, suspensions and expulsions are higher for African American

students. In 2009-2010, one out of every four African American students in middle and high school was suspended at least one time (Losen, Hewett, & Toldson, 2014).

Research has shown that, in contrast to the negative consequences of incarcerating children, placing at-risk youth in community-based programs with comprehensive services lowers recidivism rates at a fraction of the cost of operating youth prisons.

The overrepresentation of ethnic minority students, particularly African American males, in the exclusionary discipline consequences of suspension and expulsion has been consistently documented during the past four decades (Skiba, 2001). In New Jersey, black kids are 24.3 times more likely to be committed to a secure juvenile facility than their white counterparts, leading New Jersey to have the third-highest black-white commitment disparity rate in the nation. In fact, of the 289 young people currently committed to a state juvenile facility, almost three-quarters of them are black. This is not because black youth commit more crimes than their white peers. Black and white youth commit offenses at about the same rate. (NJ ISJ)

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study, is to examine the discipline policies that have resulted in New Jersey being one of the leading states with high racial disparities in regards to juvenile incarceration. School policies will be examined to promote a reduction in these statistics. The call to create school-wide programs that involve primary prevention and encourage communication, conflict resolution, use praise and positive reinforcement, and encourage and model good classroom behavior and increase parental involvement will be examined.

Under the administration of Governor Chris Christie charter schools have more than doubled in the state of New Jersey. This study will look to answer many questions. Are Charter schools addressing the School to Prison Pipeline? In Camden, NJ a city riddled with poverty, high crime rates, and high rates of incarceration is now a City with an all but dismantled public school system. Can Charter schools be the answer? This study will attempt to resolve these questions.

The UCLA's Center for Civil Rights Remedies published a study that looked at discipline data for 5,250 charter schools and 95,000 public schools. The study, "Charter Schools, Civil Rights and School Discipline: A Comprehensive Review," focused on how often students were suspended during the 2011-12 academic year. In charter schools, black students and students with disabilities were suspended at higher percentages in all grades than their peers in traditional schools. In middle and high schools, 12 percent more students with disabilities and 2.5 percent more black students were suspended in charters compared with non-charters. Close to 50% of all black students at middle and high school charter schools went to one of the 270 schools that was highly segregated (80 percent black) and where the suspension rate for black students was extremely high: 25 percent. Researchers have found that being suspended is a strong indicator that a student will eventually drop out. And students who drop out are much more likely to end up in prison, becoming part of the "school to prison pipeline." This issue disproportionately affects black students who are suspended at a rate three times greater than white students.

According to the latest New Jersey Department of Education School Performance report. The number of suspensions at some Camden schools were staggering for the

2015-2016 school year. Brimm Medical Arts (27.9% suspension rate), KIPP-Cooper Norcross (34.2% suspension rate) and Freedom Prep (with a whopping 78.1% suspension rate) Camden High School and Woodrow Wilson are Camden's two remaining traditional high schools, Camden High suspension rate (53.1%) Woodrow Wilson suspension rate (55.3%). Strives are being made in some of the city schools. The Camden City School District announced it cut student suspension district-wide by 53 percent last school year, and reduced suspension-related absenteeism by 72 percent. (Courier Post) The goal of any effective disciplinary system must be to ensure a safe school climate while avoiding policies and practices that may reduce students' opportunity to learn.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Nationwide, data collected by our Office for Civil Rights show that youths of color and youths with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by suspensions and expulsions. For example, data shows that African-American students without disabilities are more than three times as likely as their white peers without disabilities to be expelled or suspended.

The United States Department of Education has taken advanced steps to launch a common culture and common language to improve school cultures and discipline throughout the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). They identified three principles: (1) create positive climates and focus on prevention; (2) develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors; and (3) ensure fairness, equity, and continuous improvement (The U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

#### Parental Involvement

The parent plays a vital role in student violence (Boulter, 2004). Parenting styles can dictate how well students adjust and handle conflict that leads to violent behavior and school disciplinary problems (Boulter, 2004). Parent perceptions and beliefs about their children's school and its staff, along with their outlook on their child's education are contributing factors toward student behavior (Smith, 2010). A decrease in parent

involvement seems to be connected to a student's increased negative behavior in schools as well as suspensions and expulsions

A parent's experience and inherent beliefs about their influence can determine their involvement. (Smith, 2010). The research contends that a lack of parent involvement in their child's school may increase a student's probability for arrests, in school infractions and increased dropout rates. Guy (2013) used a quantitative correlational study to examine relationships about parent knowledge and academic awareness. The study indicated that parents who were involved with their child's school would improve student outcomes. Parents who are not involved in their child's academics and are emotionally absent are at risk of losing their child to the school to prison pipeline due to a lack of understanding of how the school's implementation of safety policies and procedures apply and affect their child.

Children whose parents are involved in disciplinary matters, will receive less punitive outcomes for unwanted behavior or violating the school's discipline code, because their parents advocate and use their social connections or networking circles to influence better outcomes for their child. (Mowan, 2015). Parents who do not have these same social connections or network usually will not participate in the disciplinary process. The studies presented by Alessandri (2010), Sink (2010) and Smith (2010) on parent involvement, have all recognized that parents make a difference in the lives of their children.

Parent involvement can positively affect the impact of zero tolerance practices that are associated with the school to prison pipeline. The research presented on parent

involvement clearly found that parents who fail to learn the school's code of conduct and its application to their children have detrimental effects that can interrupt the lives of students and their families. Parental awareness of the code of conduct fosters greater parent partnerships with the school by increasing parental knowledge on the schools' expectations.

Parental involvement—a framework of six parental involvement typologies was developed by Joyce. L Epstein (1995), and the four that focus of the school and parent relationship are briefly described as follows:

1. Parenting—the parent engaging in responsibilities for the care and well-being of the child; workshops and trainings on parenting.
2. Volunteering—the school provisioning for parents to offer their assistance and expertise in various aspects of school activities.
3. Communicating—the school and parents engaging in two-way exchanges of information and ideas that are clear and ongoing via e-mail, phone, face-to-face meetings, or other means.
4. Decision making—the school creating opportunities for parents to assist in school governance activities.

The parental-involvement typology of communicating focuses on the two-way collaboration between home and school. Students whose parents attend school-based activities, such as Back to School Night, assemblies, parent-teacher conferences, and other school or classroom visits, have an increased sense of parent school connectedness (Epstein, 2001). When students feel that their parents are interested and take an active

role in their well-being and academic achievement, then they are more likely to comply with rules and regulations that will promote positive results in achievement and behavior.

### **Engaging Parents: The Full-Service Community Schools Model**

In his study of parent and community relationships in high schools, Sink (2010) adds to research by constructing his investigation around ways to improve parent and community relationships by making parents sincere partners within the school community. Community schools have the potential to create an environment in which students grow and thrive, supported by their families and the community at. Full-Service Community Schools strive for cultural as well as organizational change. In this model, parents and family members, as well as community organization members, become valued partners rather than simply recipients of services and are encouraged to take part in greater decision-making. Research and best practices demonstrate that schools working in partnership with parents can create to better outcomes for students. As such, a diverse group of parents should be included on the advisory board, representing different grade levels, backgrounds and socio-economic representations of the school/community. (Epstein, 2001).The components of the community school foundation are: Shared leadership, integrated learning, Shared vision, leveraged resources, Partnerships, Data-driven decision making, and broader opportunities Collaboration.

### **Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice (and positive behavior interventions) are other support services that should be used in a targeted way to focus on preventing students from becoming entangled in recurring disciplinary action. The American Civil Liberties Union (2012)



reported, that the rate of out of school suspensions in St. Louis was reduced 30% using PBIS support. PBIS is an effective method to battle behavior problems at school by replacing old, disruptive behavior with new behaviors and strategies.

Restorative practices (Mirsky, 2011) are one method administrators can use to effectively support students who violate the code of conduct. These practices should be strategically implemented to address student conflict. Restorative practices are effective in addressing harm that has been committed and has a healing component that allows the student an opportunity to correct wrongful action (Schiff, 2013). This would improve student communication skills by helping them articulate their needs and feelings when they are faced with difficult situations.

The study by Reinke, Herman, Stormont, evaluated the use of classroom-level behavior management strategies that align with School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS). Direct observations of universal classroom management strategies were conducted across 33 elementary classrooms in elementary schools implementing SW-PBIS with high fidelity. Findings indicate that teachers in classrooms with higher rates of disruptive behavior reported feeling less efficacious. In addition, teachers with lower rates of positive to negative interaction, and who used higher rates of harsh reprimands had higher rates of disruptions.

When students are perceived to be a major and disruption in their classrooms harsher discipline procedures ensue. According to PBIS.org (2009), if a school successfully implements social skills instruction to all students in all settings, specifically defining the behavioral expectations for each location, approximately 70% to 80% of

students will be supported. By specifically including PBIS lessons and expectations throughout the day, positive behavior becomes a part of school culture and is interwoven in the school dynamics (PBIS.org, 2012). Furthermore, when students are met with a system that positively reinforces their behavior, students are able to succeed consistently throughout the school environment (Halliburton, 2015). When students recognize behavioral expectations are for all students, they are more likely to adhere to these expectations with an increased connection to school, attendance percentages increase, aggressive behaviors decrease, and academic achievement increases (Halliburton, 2015). A growing number of schools are discovering the most effective way to reduce suspensions, expulsions, office referrals, and other similar actions is to emphasize a proactive approach to discipline (Halliburton, 2015).

### **Teacher Training**

The path towards social mobility is often dependent on what educators, as academic gatekeepers, do or don't do in their schools (Allen & White-Smith, 2014). Teacher training programs focused on student engagement can boost achievement and reduce discipline disparities. In a randomly controlled study a program designed to improve teacher-student relationships and student engagement "My Teacher Partner Secondary" student achievement increased and the frequency of suspensions and racial disparities in discipline decreased. Improving teacher effectiveness and teacher-student dialogue and supporting their mutual understanding of school rules have also demonstrated to be effective (Gregory, 2017).

Administrative staff and their teachers should receive professional development geared toward improving parent involvement and disciplinary practices and policies. Schools aim to improve staff understanding to not only the whole student but also the cultural elements of the parenting (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

A study by De Sa Maini (2011) was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of a brief teacher training program in proactive classroom management (PCM), on both teacher and student outcomes. The study demonstrated that student behavior can be improved by targeting teachers for intervention rather than directly targeting students or the entire school community. The teacher training program was conducted in a large, inner city public school and was designed as an efficient and cost-effective approach to assisting school personnel in the prevention of off-task and disruptive student behavior (De Sa Maini, 2011). Significant decreases in teacher reactive responses and reported levels of student inattention were also demonstrated. Student disruptive and off task behavior were significantly reduced. Despite several limitations, the results of the study demonstrated that student problem behavior can be efficiently and effectively managed in the classroom without the use of reactive strategies (De Sa Maini, 2011).

Proactive behavior management strategies are designed to prevent the onset of disruptive behaviors by focusing on building prosocial student behaviors rather than on terminating problem behavior (De Sa Maini, 2011). Research has consistently demonstrated that proactive classroom behavior management approaches result in reductions in classroom disruption.

## Summary

Although the school- to- prison pipeline is undeniable it does not have to remain ingrained in our society. Researchers have gathered enough evidence to support various solutions. Those solutions include but are not limited to parental involvement, restorative justice and more teacher training. Continued research and practice on this matter will have great benefits for students, parents and teachers alike. Parental involvement having the most research to validate its importance. Increasing attendance and more focus on prevention will help lead the way out of the “prison pipeline.”

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

This upcoming school year will result in three more traditional public schools closing in the city of Camden. Currently, more students are served in Charter/Renaissance schools than traditional public schools. City residents have blamed these closings on the expansion of charter and renaissance schools (Courier-Post). However, the Camden City School district has been struggling for decades with high rates or chronic absenteeism, poor academic performance, and budget constraints. The Charter schools claim to have the solution to many of these problems. In a city like Camden, the school to prison pipeline must be dismantled for advancement of the community as a whole. This study will focus on a Camden Charter School that has successfully managed to keep suspension rates low and steady. In lowering suspension rates and combating absenteeism, students are getting the education they deserve and staying away from the path of juvenile delinquency. Can this one charter school that has been going 20 years strong provide the framework for solutions the city needs?

### Design

This research will integrate a mixed methodology using qualitative data and quantitative data. The quantitative data will be a descriptive design that shows the suspension data in the city of Camden for four Charter/Renaissance schools. The data will span over the course of three years. A qualitative interview design will be incorporated with the use of a survey to gain an understanding of the reasons and motivations behind a student being sent to the Team Leader's office. Team leaders

determine what if any punitive consequences a student will receive for various behavior infractions. Through the survey teachers and students will explain their understanding of the current discipline policy. In doing so, the research will describe how implementation fair and consistent rules help students remain in school. This design will provide insight on the real-world achievable process of reducing absenteeism due to suspension rates.

### **Participants**

Participants in the study are teachers and students. The school currently employs 100 teachers and serves 720 students. The individuals taking the survey will receive an anonymous survey that gauges the reasons why students are likely to be absent from school, the motivations to stay in school, the reasons a student is sent to the office. The survey can be viewed in the attached Appendix A and Appendix B. Ten students and ten teachers will be asked to provide their input voluntarily. Participation will remain anonymous with no names being included in the results. By participating in the survey, participants are consenting to be included in the study anonymously.

### **Setting**

The study took place in typically sized middle school in Camden, New Jersey. Camden's Promise Charter School has a current enrollment of 720 students. The school is a part of Camden's Promise Charter Network. The Network itself serves Kindergarten to the twelfth grade. The total number of students served through all the Network is 2,083 for the school year 2017-2018 (NJ Dept. of Ed, 2018). Students are labeled economically disadvantaged make up 85.4. The special education population is about 9.1%. The enrollment by racial group is as follows, 0% white, 76.8% Hispanic, 22.8% Black, 0.3%

Asian, and 0.2% mixed race. Despite a high Hispanic enrollment only 5.6% percent of students are labeled English language learners. For the 18-19 school year, 46.1% of students met or exceeded expectations in PARRC testing for English Language Arts. Statewide, that percentage was 56.7%. Math scores for PARRC were 29.7% compared to the 45% average statewide (NJ Dept. of Ed, 2018).

According to the New Jersey School Performance report, students' absences provide important information about a school's culture and climate. Research shows that absences impact the student's ability to succeed in school (NJ Dept. of Ed, 2018). Chronic Absenteeism is defined as being absent for school for 10% or more of the days enrolled during the school year. Students in grades 5-8 had an average chronic absenteeism rate of 5.75% compared to the state average for those same grades of 9.25%. The suspension rate among all schools was 16.1% for 17-18 school year. The previous year the suspension rate for all schools was 18%. There is a stable decline in the suspension rates and, in comparison to other city schools, the rate is considerably less (NJ Dept. of Ed, 2018). The surveys will be given in the 3rd quarter of the school year when teachers have the opportunity to reflect on the cultural climate of the current school year and past school years.

The setting was chosen because the school boasts a consistent suspension rate lower than its neighboring schools. The school, however, is consistently working to lower the suspension and absentee rates on a year-to-year basis. In studying the school's climate, discipline policies and practices, further best practices may be identified and utilized. It is important to recognize that absenteeism and suspension go hand-in-hand in

dis-servicing our youth. It is important to identify how attitudes and perceptions can influence absenteeism.

### **Instruments**

In addition to the qualitative data acquired from the New Jersey Department of Education for “Camden’s Promise,” a qualitative short answer response piece will be used as well. A digital survey will be sent to willing participants. The survey will have both multiple- choice questions and short answer/ open-ended questions. They will be asked about their understanding of the school discipline policy, the absentee rate, and the support they receive when problems arise. The survey will provide insight to teachers’ and students’ roles in preventing absence either voluntarily or through involuntary suspension.

### **Procedures**

It is necessary to approach this study objectively. As a teacher, I do not want to add any of my personal opinions into my findings. I will be developing a grounded theory on what aspects of school climate encourage and discourage absenteeism through suspension, illness, or motivation. In order to maintain validity, the survey will be conducted anonymously. Rather than ask administration what they have done to reduce suspension rates, the study will focus on the teachers as the frontline and students as the recipients of the efforts. The goal of this research is to determine what is being done to decrease absenteeism and what more can be done. Reliability will be achieved by distributing identical surveys to all teachers, and identical surveys to all the students.



## Chapter 4

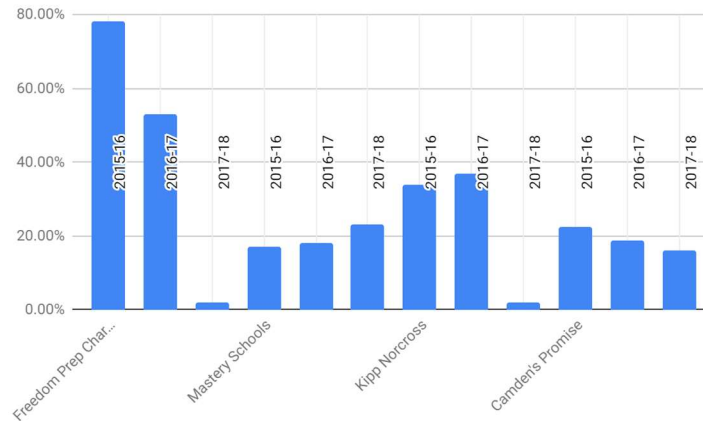
### Data Analysis

Suspension rates have long been an issue in inner city schools. Camden is no different. Camden continues to lose funding for traditional public schools turning to renaissance and charter schools to educate their youth. Though each choice school may have different missions, the common goal is to provide Camden's kids with a better education than the alternative public school. In order for students to receive that education, the consensus is that students have to be in school to receive this education. Absenteeism, through truancy or suspension, needs to be addressed.

To begin to postulate actions that schools can take in order to increase attendance, we will look at a school that has been doing the work for the past twenty years. Quantitative data was used to provide a comparison of the suspension rates at several Camden schools. Qualitative data was taken through a survey to analyze the common themes and perceptions surrounding student absences.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### Quantitative Data



*Figure 1.* Suspension rates for 2 years based on the information that was available on the New Jersey department of education school performance report. It is important to note that these suspension rates are self-reported by the schools.

After having 2 consecutive years with alarmingly high suspension rates both Freedom Prep Charter School and Kipp Cooper Norcross have suspension rates under 2%. These drastically lower rates need to be further examined in another study for both validity and efficiency. The data for the most recent year was released after the research for the thesis began. For Mastery schools the rate of suspension has maintained a steady increase in suspensions as evidenced in figure 1. Camden's Promise Charter School has been experiencing a steady decline for the past three years. This is evidenced in figure 1, for this reason the school was chosen to identify some best practices for reducing suspension rates for students.

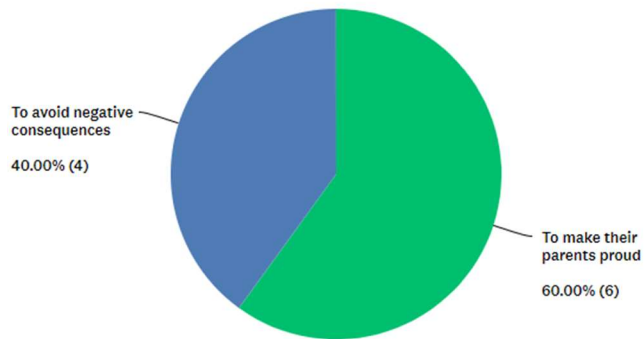


Figure 2. Teacher response to question “What do you feel motivates your students to succeed in school?”

When asked about student motivation, there were ten teacher respondents. Six respondents (60%) felt as though parental motivation was the leading factor in student motivation. The remaining four (40%) felt that students motivations lied to avoid negative consequences at school. No teachers believed that the motivation was to appease teachers or administration. It is unclear if teacher motivation is, in fact, lacking.

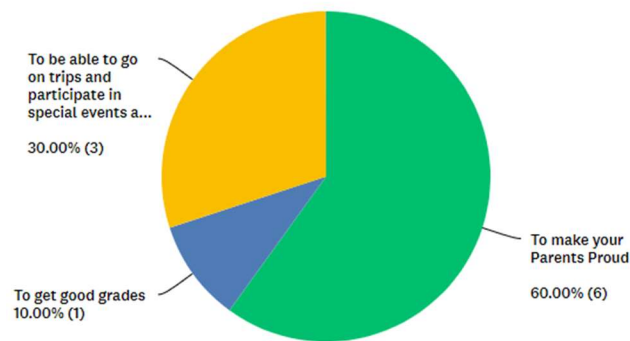
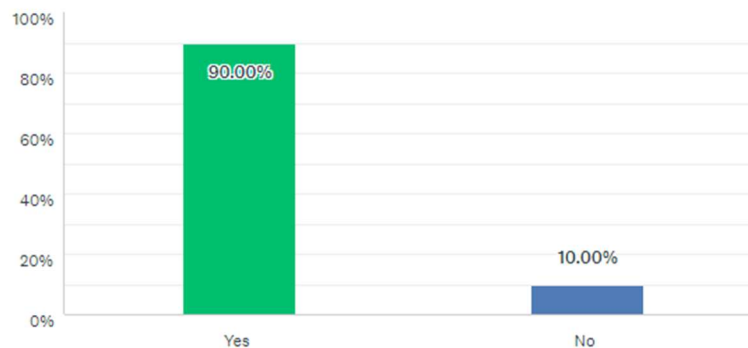


Figure 3. Student response to question: “What your biggest motivation for doing well in school (both academically and behaviorally)”

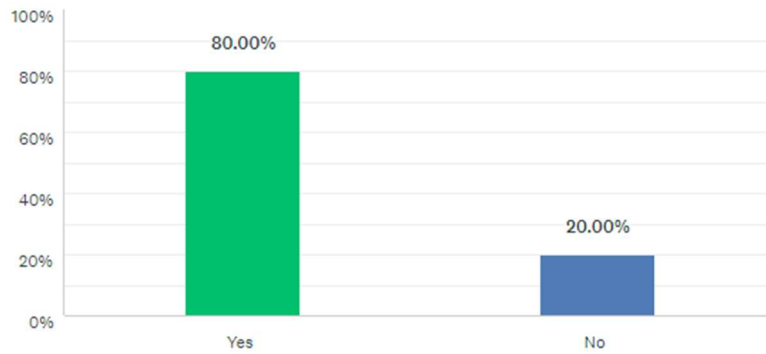
When the students were asked about their own motivation, six of the ten respondents (60%) chose parental motivation. This is the same number as the teachers,

and it shows that students and teachers are on the same page regarding the impact of parental motivation. No student chose punitive consequences; instead, they chose positive reinforcement (30%), such as going on trips and attending special events provided by the school. One student (10%) chose getting good grades for his or her motivation. This response was given to get a sense of the percentage of students that were in fact self-motivated.



*Figure 4.* Teacher response to question: “Do you feel that your student’s have a good overall understanding of the rules and expectations of the school?”

For the question regarding the school’s discipline policy, nine of the ten respondents feel as though their students have an understanding of the school’s code of conduct. It may be concluded that the rules are explicitly taught, given teachers this sense of assurance.



*Figure 5.* Student response to the question: “Do you feel like you have a good understanding of the rules and expectations at school?”

The question regarding the school discipline policy for the student respondents was similar to the teachers’ responses. Eight of the ten students agreed that they were well aware of the school’s discipline policy. This gives further evidence to the rules and expectations being explicitly taught.

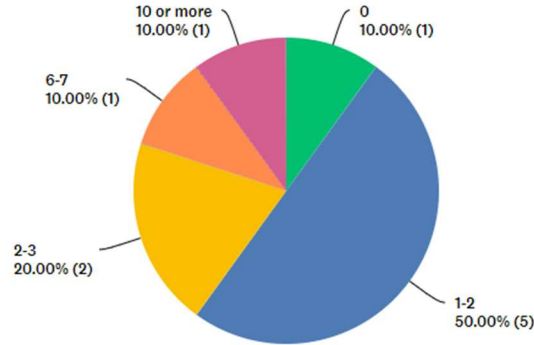


Figure 6. Student response to the question: “How many days have you been absent from school?”

Figure 6 deals specifically with absences. Only one student (10%) can be labeled as a chronic absentee. One student (10%) had zero absences. Most of the respondents (50%) had only 1-2 absences. The next highest response was 2-3 days with 20% of students choosing this. The last choice, between 6-7 absences, was chosen by only one student (10%).

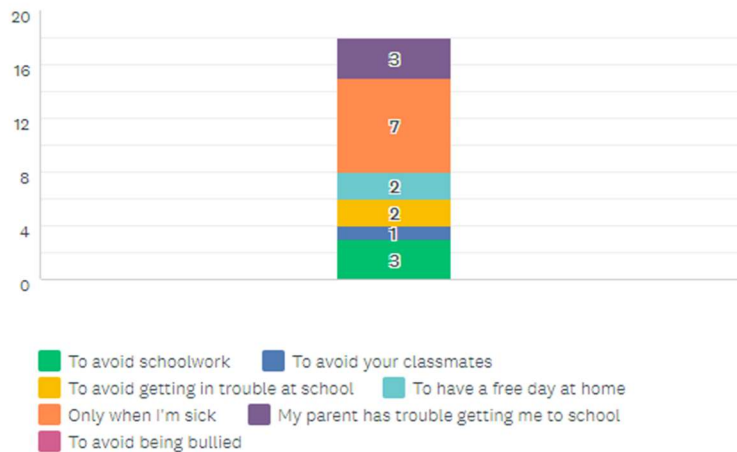
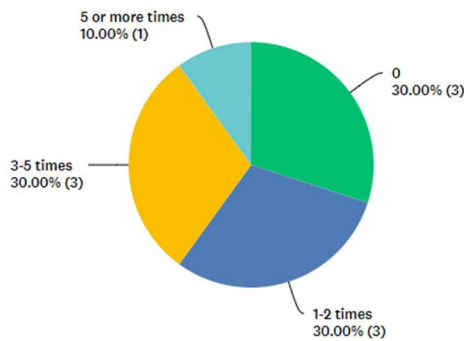


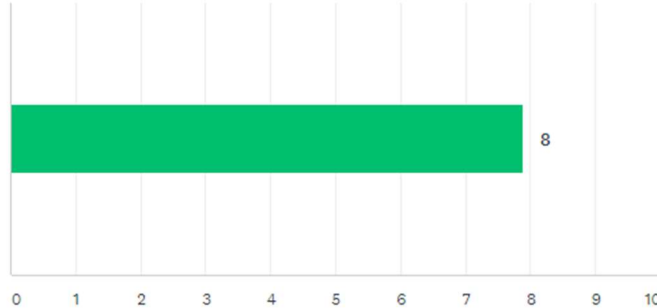
Figure 7. Student response to the question: “What are the reasons that you want to stay home from school? Check all that apply.”

The reasons for student absences are examined. The respondents were able to choose more than one item to express the reasons they missed school. For the response “to avoid being bullied,” zero students checked this box. This is a positive sign regarding school climate. The item “to avoid your classmates” was chosen by one student (10%). “To avoid getting in trouble at school” and “to have a free day at home” were chosen 20% of the time. “To avoid schoolwork” and “my parent has trouble getting me to school” were each chosen 30% of the time. The largest percentage came from the response “I only miss school when I’m sick;” 70% of respondents chose this answer.



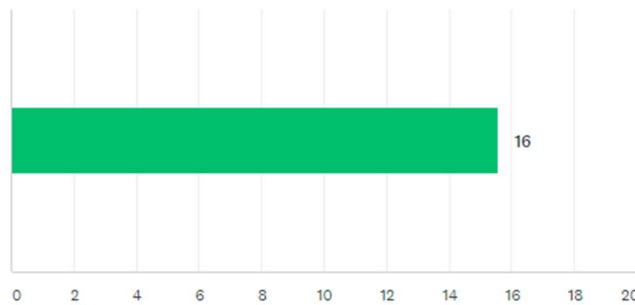
*Figure 8.* Student response to the question: “How many times this year have you been sent the team leader’s office? (For discipline)”

The team leader works as a traditional dean. They are the first line of discipline once a student is removed from a classroom. Three of the ten students (30%) reported not being sent to the team leader’s office at all for a discipline related reason. Three of the ten students (30%) reported being sent 1-2 times. Three of the ten students (30%) reported being sent to the office 3-5 times. Only one student (10%) was sent five or more times.



*Figure 9.* Teacher response to the question: “How many of your student’s have an attendance issue (Missing 10 or more days)?”

For the question of students’ absences, teachers’ average response given was 8. A total of 9 teachers responded to this question. The average number of total students is 100, making the approximation 8% of the student population.



*Figure 10.* Teacher response to the question: “How many of your student’s have been suspended at least once?”

Teachers were asked how many of their students have been suspended. Their average answer was 16. Since the teachers serve about 100 students that equals an approximate rate of 16%, which is around the same as the reported annual rate. This



suggests that teachers have a realistic perception regarding the suspensions in their school.

### **Qualitative Data**

In addition to the multiple-choice questions given, each survey had one open-ended response question to gauge the reason behind students being sent to the team leader's office. Teachers were asked "What are the reasons that students were sent to the team leader's office?" Eight of the ten teachers (80%) answered that the student was either instigating a fight, fighting, or making a threat regarding physical altercation. One teacher (10%) answered it was a last resort. Another teacher (10%) wrote: "I usually send students to the office if they are a constant distraction to the class or doing something inappropriate that is disrupting the learning environment in my classroom." The overwhelming response regarding sending students to the office to prevent a fight shows that it truly is a last resort and teachers feel comfortable handling many behavioral issue in class.

The student open-ended question was also centered on reasons why students were sent to the team leader's office. The students' responses were more varied than the teacher's responses. One of the students (10%) responded that he or she was sent for cheating on a quiz. Another student (10%) was sent for inappropriate technology use (Camden's Promise Middle School has a 1:1 technology program where every student is given a Chromebook for the school year). The largest response was 40% not being sent at all to the office. One student responded he or she was sent to the team leader to review

their grades. One student (10%) was sent to the team leader for disrupting the class. There were two students (20%) that were sent for arguing/instigating.

### **Results in Context**

In reviewing the open-ended responses from teachers and students, it can be concluded that avoiding a physical altercation is a leading cause for students to be sent to the team leader's office. In reviewing the data, teachers answered the question only focusing on disciplinary issues. However, it is clear that many students interact with the team leader for various other school-related concerns including grades and repeated infractions such as talking, inappropriate technology use, and cheating on assessments.

The data consistently shows that teachers are confident that students know behavioral expectations and students are confident that they are aware of those expectations as well. The data also shows that teachers are confident handling a wide array of infractions in class. The team leader's role is not always punitive, and students are in contact with their team leader for more than just behavioral issues.

Attendance is not a major issue at this school. However, some of the attendance issues are out of the hands of students, teachers, and the school as a whole. For example, 30% of students responded that, at one time or another, their parent had trouble getting them to school. This problem is somewhat unique to choice / private schools in Camden as students are bussed and this is not a neighborhood school which is usually within walking distance.

The school climate seems to be overall positive with no students reporting feeling bullied and only one respondent reported he or she wanted to avoid classmates. Students

seem to be more motivated by going on class trips and participating in special events than punitive consequences such as detentions and suspensions. It is clear that both teachers and students attribute behavioral motivation to parents. This leads me to believe that parental involvement is an important component of the school's focus.

### **Summary/Conclusion**

A qualitative case study was conducted to determine best practices for lower absenteeism, specifically suspensions. By conducting a survey of teachers and students, the characteristics of school climate that influence the attendance rates were identified. Analysis of the data can help to create a theory about the school climate that could increase student attendance. The data acquired from this research has opened the door to more questions. More questions can help provide more details in the long run. In order to develop a better understanding of what must be done, a study on specific implementation of a targeted action plan needs to be conducted.

## Chapter 5

### Results in Context

#### Recommendations and Lessons Learned

In New Jersey, suspension rates are used to measure school climate. This data is compiled along with many other factors to provide a school performance report. This report is intended to provide the public with transparency regarding the academic performance of the school and measurable aspects of the school climate. Suspension is used as one of the data points. Success is a mixture of academic achievements and lower suspension absentee rates. The correlation between suspensions and incarceration has been made. It is now the time to make progressive strides to lower those suspension rates and increase attendance.

#### Interpretation of Results

The purpose of this study was to find determining factors that keeps suspension rates on the decline. The results were not strongly conclusive, but there are some conclusions that can be drawn from the results of the study. Both the students and staff feel as though the discipline policy is well known by students. This lends to the idea that the rules and consequences are explicitly taught to students. The students have a team leader class once a week and this is one of the things that are touched upon. Overall, the students enjoy coming to school and very few seek absence as a means of escape from the demands or climate of the school.

The culture and climate of the school for students seems to be a positive one. In addition to not seeking out absences, students are motivated by several different aspects

of the school. One of the motivators is the provision of special events and trips. Every grade goes on a monthly trip in addition to a large scale end of the year trip. Attendance on this trip is dependent on students not being suspended within thirty days of the trip. Another factor was school events such as dances, pep rallies, and special performances. These events can be withheld for various behavioral infractions. It is clear that Camden's Promise has done a good job of making students want to be included in events and activities. Using student preferences to determine consequences can be an effective deterrent for behavioral problems.

The last correlation that can be made is that the parents are involved in the school. Teachers and students alike find parental involvement is a large part of student motivation. Teachers are expected to make frequent contact with parents and students expect it. Parental involvement was discussed in chapter two and has much research to support it.

When a discipline policy is understood by students and implemented by staff, it will be most effective. These findings are not surprising since the number of students suspended last year is almost identical to the average number given by the teachers. This supports the idea that teachers are well aware of the behavioral climate of the school. It can be assumed that the teachers are on the same page regarding discipline in their individual classrooms.

We cannot assume that the other schools mentioned do not have a well-known discipline policy. It can also be possible that the lower suspension rates are related to a lower number of overall behavior problems. It is shown that students were sent to the

team leader for various behavior problems, but the consequence for their removal from class was not given. It is possible that, more often than not, they are given another consequence besides suspension.

A positive behavior support system was not referenced in the study. Perhaps the lack of PBIS lends to no self-motivation from students. A positive behavior support system can help address some smaller behavioral infractions and keep students from being sent to the team leader's office. Also lacking is the use of in-school suspension that can be given to students instead of an out of school suspension. In-school suspension traditionally still removes students from their regular program but it does keep them "in school." The means to an end in the case of reducing suspension would be first reducing behaviors. Student behaviors need to be addressed on a continual basis.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Other studies found parental involvement to be a strong indicator for student success (e.g., Boulter, 2004). While it was found that parents were a strong motivator, the school's role in fostering that was not made clear in this study. In future studies, the intentional involvement of parents should be examined. The study was intended to determine the reason for a steadily decreasing suspension rate. The information gathered did not provide a definitive answer to that. Further studies on how parent contact effects disciplinary action will be better suited to find a conclusive answer.

The research was conducted using an online survey where respondents remained anonymous. Rapport was not established between the surveyor and the respondent. This was done to allow respondents comfort in answering honestly. However, when

conducting a study anonymously, it is unable to open up some of the questions to further investigation. Some questions could have been given more insight upon more questioning; however, due to the anonymity of it, that was not possible.

The study was limited to students and staff. This was done in order to draw conclusions about the perceptions and realities of the school's climate and culture. As the study concludes, it is evident it would be insightful to have perceptions from administrators and parents as well. Methods used in lieu of suspensions can be further explored. Future studies can explore the trends in suspension by examining all student records.

### **Limitations**

The study had several limitations. This study was only conducted at one school. To truly evaluate the reliability or potential generalizability of the findings, a comparison of other schools' policies should be utilized. Conducting the same study at several other schools can help rule out coincidence. For example, if multiple schools report high parental involvement but have different suspension rates, more data must be taken to determine the differing factors.

Limitations were also in participation. There were 10 students and 10 teachers who participated in the study. The study would have yielded greater reliability had there been more respondents. The more voices given a platform, the more accurate the data. The voice of administration was absent but could be provide a valuable insight on what measures were purposely taken to promote attendance.

The span of time was also a limitation. It would be beneficial to follow students through a span of years and see how the school policies have affected them for better or worse. To follow students who were suspended throughout their school career could help determine common factors that can determine whether or not that person will be incarcerated.

## **Conclusion**

The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons and jails — a 500% increase over the last forty years (Dept. of Justice,2018). Our country is plagued by the issue of mass incarceration. Now, more than ever, we need to be looking towards prevention. There is no “easy button” to end this social issue. However, the data has shown that suspension and chronic absenteeism are indicators of future incarceration. This study was done to find the factors that keep students in school. The major motivation that was found was parental involvement, followed by a discipline policy that is well-known by students and staff. Other things, such as school events and activities, were also motivator for students. Data is helpful in determining motivators, but it does not change attitudes or behaviors. Behavior must be addressed to reduce suspension and other negative outcomes. Behavior must be molded through consistent expectations and consistent consequences (both positive and negative). Though more research is needed to be done in this area to examine all possible aspects that lead from suspension to incarceration, it is possible to conclude that parental involvement and explicitly taught rules can mold a school climate where students want to come to school.



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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

What your biggest motivation for doing well in school (both academically and behaviorally)?

Do you feel like you have a good understanding of the rules and expectations at school?

How many days have you been absent this year?

How many were due to suspension?

What are reasons that you want to stay home from school?

What is a reason you come to school?

How many times this year have you been sent leader's office?

## Appendix B

### Teacher Survey

What do you feel is the main motivation for students to succeed in school (both academically and behaviorally)?

How many students have you sent to the team leader's office this year?

Do you feel that your student's have a good understanding of the rules and expectations of the school?

How many of your student's have an attendance issue?

How many of your students have been suspended at least once?

What do you think are students' main reasons for staying home from school?

What you feel are student's reasons to come to school daily?