

Relevant Relationships

*How Social Emotional Learning Impacts
Secondary Students*

By

Coralynne Carson

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Introduction

In the spring of 2021, I began an adventure to become a doctoral student. My co-worker and I took it upon ourselves to start the journey; however, we didn't take the traditional route (what fun would that have been?). Four years later, the journey was complete; during that time, I wrote my doctoral dissertation, which has been adapted into what you are currently reading. The information in this text is based on nine years of data, specifically examining the outcomes of having appropriately relevant relationships through a nationally recognized social-emotional learning program, and the impact on exclusionary disciplinary placements from Grade 6 through graduation in Grade 12.

Most educators understand that relationships are important in getting students to perform at school, and elementary teachers build strong relationships with their classes, so much so that I have seen seniors go back during senior walks and tell their elementary teachers how much having that teacher believing in them allowed them to get where they are today. Once students arrive in traditional middle or junior high school settings, responsibilities shift and fall more directly on students. What doesn't change is that the students need guidance and structure to learn how to manage new environments.

There is a lot of data out there on how to meet the needs of students who are economically disadvantaged, have learning gaps, and experience events at home that put them at risk of not graduating. Large quantities of historical data were collected regarding students' educational grades at the secondary level. In addition, gender, race/ethnicity, at risk status, and economic status. After that the numbers were crunched, and statistical probabilities shared. This

book examines one East Texas school district that checks several statistically significant boxes for student identifiers such as economically disadvantaged and at-risk. In the upcoming chapters, the discussion focuses on where the students were, the challenges the district faced at the secondary level, and the changes evident in the data when secondary schools began incorporating relevant relationships into their culture.

This book began as a doctoral dissertation examining the implementation of Capturing Kids' Hearts, a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program designed to provide classroom-level intervention between teachers and students. The purpose of this program being brought to Winsome ISD was partially due to Dr. Riles' previous experience with the program, but was also a way to help train teachers and staff how to meet the needs of the students in their rooms, and encourage these students to be able to learn skills to self-correct, self-reflect and minimize lost class time.

Where this book goes deeper than the dissertation is in comparison with the campuses. While I was limited on time and focused strictly on grade levels, for this book, I went back and reviewed the data to show the entire picture from the campus level at every checkpoint. While reading this you will first see how each grade level was impacted based on content topics, followed by how the campus fared data wise over the same specific topic.

Chapter 1

Welcome to “History” Class

The modern school system in the United States was created to meet the country's needs following the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) and was first proposed in the early 1900s. Workers were needed who could follow routines and structure, and understood the importance of completing specific tasks throughout the day. This is how the public school system was designed, as a way to help create productive citizens who could be employed in the growing factories (Warren, 1998).

With the foundational system in place for educating the general public, the need for an ideal curriculum arose next. The goal was for this to be a national curriculum that would be implemented and led to the “educational factory model” (Serafini, 2002, p. 67). Students who attended public school after this model was created were seen as the “product” and were expected to be able to perform specific skills that society had deemed beneficial for all (Serafini, 2002, p. 67).

Horace Mann was the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837-1848. He is commonly known as the “father of American Education” (Carlton, 2024). During his 11-year term he used his position to encourage business owners to help pay for public schooling, on the grounds that the schoolroom would create the new labor force needed to run factories. At the same time, Mann worked hard to convince the state's taxpayers that if public schools were effective, they would create more tax-paying citizens and reduce the need for taxpayer money to fund prisons and orphanages (Warren, 1998). Mann advocated for the creation of these “common

schools” so that everyone would have the ability to be educated, and that by having this opportunity, could avoid duplicating the rigid class system common in Europe (Carlton, 2024). Mann’s creation and establishment of what would become unified school systems, was designed to have a curriculum that not only offered a variety of skills and topics, but was free of sectarian instruction (Carlton, 2024).

With this blueprint for the modern schoolhouse in place, teachers were then hired to serve as trainers. The role of the teacher was to train students, and the curriculum provided to teachers was designed to prepare students for their future assembly-line jobs (Serafini, 2002). The model created in the 1900s to help train students in the skills they would need to be successful factory workers is the same model the United States educational system uses today in classrooms across the country. Parents send their students to schools expecting them to receive a state-defined curriculum. In Texas, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) statements guide the public education curriculum from Pre-K through Grade 12.

If Horace Mann walked into a traditional classroom today, he would recognize some similarities to the system he helped design. Students can be found sitting in rows, working on paper, waiting for the bell to ring, signaling that it is time to transition to the next task. Mr. Mann would not see or understand the rationale for teachers working with students to help them manage their emotions, engage in healthy ways with others, and become cognizant of their social and emotional well-being (Eklund et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2021). Given the time students spend in their school buildings each day, schools have evolved to support students not only academically but also socially and emotionally (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

In 2015, then-President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. This essentially replaced No Child Left

Behind (NCLB), which was signed into law by then-President George W. Bush. Both of these programs were designed to improve upon the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was enacted by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his war on poverty, advancing equity for school students and federal-level reform (McGuinn et al., 2018). Johnson identified and argued that too many schools across the country lacked the resources to provide students from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds with the necessary skills (McGuinn et al., 2018). This legislation eventually led to the Title I program, designed to assist school districts and communities with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students by increasing per-pupil expenditures (McGuinn et al., 2018).

With the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), school districts across the country had the opportunity to introduce and support students through Social Emotional Learning programs to help enhance their school experience (Wallace Foundation, n.d.). From here, districts could implement evidence-based programs for students. The passage of ESSA “does not explicitly reference SEL, [however] its policy language includes calls for improving school conditions for students’ learning, enhancing peer interactions... or instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills” (Wallace Foundation, n.d.).

How a school district implements educational practices can have a substantial effect on a student’s success. “School environments can dictate the academic experiences of minority students, whether they thrive or decline throughout their secondary school years” (Taylor, 2023, p. 8). Students who have been identified as being at-risk, including but not limited to having been identified as economically disadvantaged, have a higher likelihood of a lack of access to appropriate resources both at home and within their community.

Evidence is available showing that students who experience events that are outside of their control, such as abuse, neglect, high mobility, or other undisclosed disadvantages, are at a higher risk of receiving an exclusionary disciplinary assignment (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba & Losen, 2016; Taylor et al., 2023).

What is Exclusionary Discipline?

The term “Zero Tolerance” was first designated as a term in the late 1980’s to describe the punitive discipline and the level of severity that would be placed on ocean-going vessels bringing drugs into the United States from Mexico (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Eventually this term made its way into the jargon of public education, associated with handling serious campus infractions (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). The initial use of this term was reserved for the most grievous of offenses, such as bringing a weapon to campus. This attitude towards discipline eventually was morphed into routines that became the standard of how to do deal with behaviors on campus that were related to the use of drugs or participation in gang activity.

In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton, signed into law the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. With the signing of this act, students who were found to be in possession of a firearm on school grounds were referred to the juvenile justice system or the criminal justice system depending on their age. The Gun-Free Schools Act has a statement that says, “state law must authorize the chief administrative officer of each local school district to modify expulsions on a case-by-case basis” (Skiba & Knesting, 2001, p.19). Before the introduction of this act, students who had demonstrated behaviors that were considered disruptive enough to require removing the student from the classroom were either subject to suspension or expelled, as there were no other options available (Dvorak, 2007).

With the passage of the Gun-Free School Act of 1994, the creation of alternative educational placements was implemented to educate students who were determined to have violated local and/or state policies. Students who were given assignments to these alternative educational placements had been found to be disruptive enough to their fellow classmates that their classmates learning was in jeopardy. Students assigned to this alternative placement were also assigned there for “compulsory attendance for prescriptive periods that had been designated by the local school board” (Dvorak, 2007, p. 1).

The model of public education has been rooted in the need for structures and routines. The goal of asking students to move around from task to task when the bell rings is a way to help prepare them to be productive citizens from the times of the Industrial Revolution. During this period, workers knew what was expected of them from the whistle to start work, to the whistle that let them know their workday had concluded. Training students to follow routines, including working “bell to bell” from the minute they enter the school building until they leave at the end of the day, is an outdated model based on an old industry standard. This outdated method, still being instituted today, is one of the reasons that school districts have placed disciplinary consequences into the school environment

The State of Texas and the Texas Association of School Boards instituted the use of exclusionary discipline in the early 1990’s as a way of stepping back from Zero-Tolerance policies that had been in place. With the state school board association moving to define exclusionary discipline in this manner, where students would be removed from the traditional classroom setting, including interaction with their peers. The introduction of alternative educational placements afforded to students who had committed infractions in violation of the school board policies, the State of Texas began using

the addition of the Disciplinary Alternative Educational Placement (DAEP) program during the 1996-1997 school year (Dvorak, 2007).

The idea of exclusionary discipline is that a student must face a consequence for actions deemed unacceptable in the traditional classroom. Students who are assigned exclusionary discipline are expected to carry out their sentences, often isolated from their peers, sitting in silence, and moving minimally during the day. The term exclusionary discipline refers to any school action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting (Eddy et al., 2024; School Support Initiative, n.d.). These placements were created for students who had been determined by local educational agencies to have violated local and/or state policies. Students who were “determined to be disruptive to the education of other students in their assigned schools” were sent to disciplinary alternative education programs (Dvorak, 2007, p.1). The State of Texas, allowed for the establishment of “in district alternative education program placement[s] to have a way to educate [those] students” (Lopez, 2017, p. 4).

Students assigned to these programs were required to attend for a predetermined period set by the local school board (Dvorak, 2007). The lowest level is known as “In-School Suspension” (ISS) and is where students are assigned by a campus administrator to be removed from their instructional classes for a set amount of days, where they are still on campus but are removed from their peers and supervised (Austin et al., 2024; Lendermen and Hawkins, 2021). Within the State of Texas, this is the most common form of exclusionary discipline (Miller, 2021; White, 2019). In School Suspension is currently considered to be the least restrictive form of discipline that is currently tracked by the state of Texas (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021).

In most schools, this is a separate room in the building that may contain cameras. Students in this disciplinary setting are supervised but isolated (Austin et al., 2024; Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021; State of Texas Legislative Budget Board, 2013). Students spend the day here, not talking to one another and working by themselves, and are usually escorted to lunch and the restroom. If their teachers are aware they are there for the day, they can send work that they would be doing in class. Most of the time, students in ISS are still expected to do the work they would have done in class and be graded on it.

The second type of discipline is known as Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). As the name indicates, students who receive this disciplinary assignment are removed from the school campus. Students who receive a suspension of this nature have been found to have violated the district's approved code of conduct. These forms of suspension are usually reserved for students who have exhibited chronic behavior in violation of the code of conduct and whose actions require their administrator to remove them from campus for a few days (White, 2019).

This is the traditional form of suspension, in which students are sent home with a parent or guardian and may be kept out of school for up to 3 school days (Austin et al., 2024; Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021; State of Texas Legislative Budget Board, 2013). This type of suspension usually involves a parent/principal meeting and requires the student to have a "reset" meeting before returning to the school population. Depending on the regulations set forth by the local education agency, students who receive this discipline may be placed in ISS for a few days to transition back to campus and ensure their behavior is appropriate for the school environment.

The final type of discipline is known as the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP). This form of discipline involves

removing a student from the campus and sending them to an alternative campus for an extended period. Some districts have agreements with programs to share space, and students attending these disciplinary campuses can take classes alongside students from other campuses and districts. Another reason for them to receive this assignment is that they have been involved in some particular action that warrants keeping them away from other students and may be sent to a place while awaiting the results of legal matters.

Students who have been given this disciplinary action have not only violated the district's approved code of conduct but have either done so chronically or have committed a grievous infraction and are therefore not allowed to be educated with the rest of the student population. What sets this disciplinary assignment apart from out-of-school suspension are several key factors. Students are still entitled to free public education, where they are instructed with their peers. Local school districts are still required to allocate funding for running, staffing, material supplies and other identified needs agreed upon by the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program, whether the location be within the district or outside. The idea is that the funds that would normally be available to meet the needs of the students when they are on their home campus, should be available to them when they are on an alternative campus (Dvorak, 2007).

Students in DAEP placements are required to follow the state curriculum; a behavioral component is usually added to address the behavior that led to their placement in this setting. During the disciplinary placement, students' academic focus is towards English Language Arts (ELA) history, mathematics, science and self-discipline (Dvorak, 2007; Texas Education Code, n.d.). Prior to HB 114, students assigned to DAEP placements were required to serve a minimum of 10 days in Winsome ISD. While in DAEP, students could earn points

that could be used to reduce their assignments for good behavior and completing assigned work.

The State of Texas documented that the Texas Association of School Boards had already begun moving away from zero-tolerance policies in 1995, before then-President Clinton signed the bill into law. Under the Zero-Tolerance policy, a term used to describe serious campus or district-level infractions, students had no restorative opportunities. During this time, these students only had the option of expulsion, especially at the secondary school grade levels (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). The Texas Association of School Boards went on to state that “in-school suspension (ISS) and DAEP are alternative placements [and] not deprivation of education for students” (Texas Association of School Boards, 2022, p. 1). The State of Texas began using DAEP in public schools starting in the 1996-1997 school year (Dvorak, 2007).

Within the DAEP assignment, there is an offshoot known as the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP). Students assigned to a JJAEP program have violated Texas Education Code Chapter 37, with offenses that require them to be expelled from a school district (Region 20 ESC, n.d.). This means that these students were subject to mandatory expulsion from their home campus due to the severity of their infractions or were involved in serious off-campus infractions, which could lead to legal issues (Texas Juvenile Justice Dept., 2026). According to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (2026), chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code (TEC) authorizes JJAEP programs to help assist students with completing grade-level assignments and appropriate educational interventions.

History of Exclusionary Discipline: based on specific identifiers

Over the years, the use of exclusionary discipline has become a standard approach for campuses and school districts to address unwanted student behaviors. Students who are assigned exclusionary discipline miss instructional class time, which can create a long-term environment in which they are likely to struggle (or may already be struggling) academically. This can lead to gaps in academic achievement or exacerbating existing ones (Erickson & Pearson, 2022). Students attending public schools during the 2020-2021 school year, who received at least one OSS assignment, are estimated to have missed at least 2 million school days during that year (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2023).

Texas public schools are responsible for educating roughly 1:10 students when accounted for public schools nationwide (Fabelo et al, 2011). Within the State of Texas, is the “second largest public school system in the nation” in which the ethnicity/race of the children served are nonwhite and make up nearly 66% of the student population (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. ix). Over the last decade, the number of students enrolled in Texas public schools has increased by nearly 9% according to the Texas Education Agency (2023b).

During the 2022-2023 school year, public schools within the State of Texas served over 5.5 million students (Texas Education Agency, 2023b). The State of Texas releases an annual report that shows the status of exclusionary disciplinary placements for students across the state. According to the Texas Education Agency, over one million In-School suspensions were assigned to students, which accounts for 8.4% of the student population. Students who received an ISS placement received an average of 2.1 disciplinary assignments.

During the same school year, nearly 446,000 out-of-school suspensions were issued and almost 125,000 Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs assignments were given to students. Texas students who were given the most severe form of disciplinary placement, were assigned to DAEP, and accounted for over 1.8% of the state student population, leading to an average of 1.2 disciplinary placements. According to the Texas Education Agency (2023a), for the same school year, 253,000 students received an out of school suspension, which accounts for nearly 4.5% of the student population.

Gender

Data has been collected over the years that verifies boys are overrepresented in exclusionary disciplinary placements when compared to their female counterparts (Anderson, 2023; Erickson & Pearson, 2022; Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021; Harkrider, 2020, Segura, 2022, Skiba et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2021; White, 2019). Male students receive exclusionary disciplinary assignments at a higher rate than female students and are more likely to receive out-of-school suspension assignments than their female counterparts (Erickson & Pearson, 2022). Boys are more likely to be referred to the administrator's office for perceived infractions at a rate higher than their female counterparts for a "host of misbehaviors ranging from minor offenses to [severe] offenses" (Skiba et al, 2002, p. 334).

Male students who receive at least one out-of-school suspension are seven times more likely than their peers who do not receive an out-of-school suspension to drop out of public education, by the time they reach Grade 12 (Ericsson & Pearson, 2022). Male students tend to be referred for exclusionary disciplinary assignments for a variety of infractions- both minor and major. The variation in exclusionary disciplinary assignments suggests that higher rates of such

assignments are disproportionate due to higher rates of disruptive behavior in boys compared to girls (Skiba et al., 2000).

The Texas Education Agency (n.d.-c) during the 2022-2023 school year documented that male students compromised 51% of the student population. During this same school year, over 10% of male students received an In School Suspension, with each student receiving an average of two assignments during the school year. Just over 5.5% of males received out of school suspensions across the state, while averaging nearly 2 assignments per year. Just over 2.25% of males received a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement during the 2022-2023 school year and had an average of 1.2 assignments.

Females assigned exclusionary disciplinary consequences are affected in a different way than their male counterparts. Female secondary students who received an exclusionary disciplinary assignment, “showed no significant difference than their counterparts...with regards to dropping out” and not continuing their education (Erickson & Pearson 2022, p.413). With the knowledge that female students receive less exclusionary disciplinary assignments than their male counterparts, both in frequency and severity, perceptions can arise around female students. One perception may be that female students who received an exclusionary disciplinary assignment may find that they are more likely to want to change the perceived image that others see of them and move forward with having that perception be positive (Pesta, 2023).

For the 2022-2023 school year, the Texas Education Agency (n.d.-c), identified females as accounting for just over 49% of the state’s school age population. During this school year, nearly 6% of female students received an In School Suspension, with an average of 2 assignments. Regarding out-of-school suspensions, 3.3% of the female population