



Obama Era Discipline Guidance is Gone, but We Can Still Fight Discrimination in the Classroom

By Shawnta S. Barnes – December 27, 2018

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos rescinded discipline guidance issued under the Obama administration that was meant to curb discrimination. This guidance was meant to decrease and address the disproportionate rates of discipline between black students and their white classmates. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education released data showing Indiana as one of

eleven states with higher gaps than the nation between the suspension rates of black male and female students versus their white counterparts. Indiana was also one of five states that reported higher suspension rates for every racial/ethnic group.

Although I wish the policy wasn't rescinded, this policy has had unintended consequences. The absence of this policy should not stop us from ensuring our black students are not facing discrimination. I've been in schools where the administration has received pressure from the district administrators to lower suspension rates and to keep students out of the office. In response, the principal offers alternative discipline methods to be implemented briefly at a beginning of the year staff meeting with little support for teachers and students throughout the year. This scenario has played out in schools across our nation.

In short, this is a recipe for disaster. In some of those cases, schools became unsafe for both teachers and students. This is not the answer. Those schools did not address the root cause: Why is the child getting in trouble? It could be the student's actions, the teacher's actions, or a combination.

Here's my advice for the stakeholders involved:

Administrators

Principals should look at discipline data. Who is being suspended or receiving referrals? Also, principals should identify who is writing the referrals. Last, principals should have a plan to help students who have behavior issues improve and administrators should support and help teachers who constantly write up students and send them out of class.

Parents

Parents need to know the school's discipline policies. Parents should know them before their children get into trouble. You can't fight for your child if you don't know the rules. I am certain if I weren't my children's mom, they would have probably been suspended by now. I know the rules. I know what the school has to do, and I don't let up until the school meets their end of the deal. Many parents aren't able to be good advocates for their children when they are struggling because they don't know what to ask or who to contact when trouble arises.

Teachers

Teachers need to have a relationship with each child they teach. Books like *Teach like a Champion* are helpful, but I have seen so many teachers blindly following books or coaching advice and still have trouble. You have to know your students. Teachers have to speak up when schools aren't supporting them. I know a talented teacher who quit her school because she essentially became in school suspension. Students from every grade were sent to her classroom. I was also that teacher, and I also left my school. Unfortunately, not only did she quit her school, but she also quit the teaching profession.

Students

Students get overlooked in these conversations. They shouldn't. Students need to speak up and advocate for themselves. They need to keep telling their story until someone listens. I've had students come to me about a colleague because no one would listen, not even the principal. Sometimes, I was able to help the student communicate in a way that helped him or her mend the situation with that teacher. Other times, that didn't help, but at least they had someone they could confide. We can't help students improve their behavior if we won't listen to how they got to the point of trouble in the first place.

Even though the Obama era guidance is no more, discrimination does not have to continue. We have an obligation to stay informed and demand change. We have an obligation to turn up the fire and expose schools when they are discriminating against black children. I don't need federal guidance to make sure I'm holding my son's school and other schools serving black children accountable.