

Overcoming Disparities in Disciplinary Practices in Rural Schools

by

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A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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Abstract

Suspensions have been shown to harm the success of students (Wolf, 2016), especially suspension of students of color (Hammond, 2020). This study aims to examine the attitudes and biases of rural middle and high school administrators toward office discipline referrals (ODRs) and resulting disciplinary strategies. It also will examine the receptivity these administrators would have to future training on alternative disciplinary strategies that would contribute to positive outcomes for students. My first hypothesis is that since prior literature shows the prevalence of suspensions especially among students of color, administrators surveyed will show a propensity to suspend and expel (especially among students of color) and will have little knowledge of alternative strategies. A second hypothesis is that administrators aware of the problems associated with suspensions will be open to further education on alternative disciplinary practices.

Introduction

School office discipline referrals (ODRs) are a common disciplinary strategy in schools in the USA. ODRs involve removing a child exhibiting challenging behavior from the classroom and attempting to resolve the behavioral incident in the school office. This strategy often ends in the child's suspension. This leads to negative consequences for the child and the classroom. Research points to suspensions being a major component of the school-to-prison pipeline (Fabello, 2011). Strategies are needed to redirect a child's behavior to prevent cycles of trauma and abuse and to bring about success in the classroom for all children.

Purpose

The present study is the first part of a larger project that aims to provide evidence-based alternatives to suspensions and expulsions in training to rural school administrators. The evidence available shows that the high prevalence of suspensions and expulsions leads to more disciplinary issues and is a factor in creating the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald, 2003). Suspension removes students from the classroom and potentially puts them in socioemotional dangerous environments, perpetuating cycles of harm (Fabello, 2011). For students to succeed, new ways of correcting negative behavior must be applied by all school faculty, from teachers to administrators.

Literature Review

Suspensions are a common disciplinary tool in American high schools. It is used disproportionately toward students of color (SOC) (Darling-Hammond, 2020). One Texas report showed that 3 in 4 students enrolled in special education are suspended at least once between the 7th and 12th grade. This is a contributing factor in negative student outcomes, such as seen in the

school-to-prison pipeline. Two out of 3 first-time 9th graders who have been incarcerated will drop out of high school (Wald, 2003). 33% of the juvenile justice population read below the fourth-grade level (Wald, 2003). Students who are suspended are more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice department due to policies like zero tolerance. (Fabello, 2011). Despite this, increased suspensions do not increase school safety (Gerlinger, 2022).

Zero tolerance policies send students who commit certain disciplinary infractions directly to law enforcement as opposed to addressing the behavior within the school. These policies require certain disciplinary measures for infractions without taking into account situational realities. This is disproportionately harmful towards students of color (Lea, 2020). Infractions formerly handled within the school are now sent directly to the justice department (Fabello, 2011). This contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fabello, 2011). This term describes the policies and procedures in the American school system that contribute to at-risk students falling into incarceration.

Students are taken out of a needed educational environment and placed back in a potentially traumatic environment (Fabello, 2011). Exclusionary school discipline policies such as suspension can increase social isolation of students (Morgan, 2021). This places children on a path towards a life of struggle with behavior and with law enforcement. Administrators must consider the impact disciplinary measures have on every student. Disciplinary practices should motivate students to behave appropriately rather than simply removing them from the school or classroom. Students who are suspended are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to be incarcerated (Darling-Hammond, 2020) (Wald, 2003).

There is some existing research on the perceptions school administrators have on disciplinary practices in their schools. In the Disciplinary Practices Survey (Skiba, 2004), 51% of

respondents agreed that “Suspension and expulsion do not really solve discipline problems.”

50% of respondents also agreed that “Suspension makes students less likely to misbehave in the future.” This shows that the perception of school administrators surveyed is divided on suspensions. With the prevalence of suspensions in the American school system, it is concerning that such a common disciplinary tool seems so controversial. This shows that administrators are concerned about the lack of effectiveness of suspension as a disciplinary measure. Perhaps more concerning is the 25% of respondents who agree that “Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option in disciplining disruptive students.”

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that the majority (more than 50%) of administrators will agree that suspension does not provide benefits for the receiving student and that >25% of administrators will rate suspension as being their only realistic option for discipline after an ODR. We additionally hypothesize that the percentage of respondents who rate themselves as receptive to additional training will be greater than or equal to the percentage of respondents who perceive suspension as not providing benefits.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Administrators in high schools in Greene, Lenoir, Pasquotank, and Washington counties. These are rural Eastern North Carolina counties. According to the US Census Bureau, the percentage of residents in these counties under the poverty line ranges from 11.6% in Pasquotank County to 22.6% in Greene County. The total North Carolina percentage of residents under the poverty line is 12.8%. The population density ranges from 31.7 per square mile in Washington

County to 178.7 per square mile in Pasquotank County. The minority population ranges from 45.6% in Pasquotank County to 56.2% in Washington County.

Measure

This study will use a 54-question online survey with 4 questions being a demographics section (Appendix A) using the Likert scale to examine the perceptions and biases school administrators at rural schools in North Carolina may have regarding discipline, especially toward students of color. It will ask questions regarding the decision-making process behind suspensions and expulsions, knowledge of disciplinary practices, and receptivity to receive further education on alternative disciplinary practices. At the end of the survey portion, there will be a short demographics questionnaire which will ask the participant what type of school they work for, what their role is, and their sex/gender and race/ethnicity.

Procedure

The survey will be administered through email to participating school districts. The survey administrator will use existing relationships between East Carolina University and these school districts to receive permission to send out this survey (Appendix B and C). The survey administrator will email the survey through a central office administrator or directly to administrators. The email will explain the survey with informed consent and contain a link to the survey. After finishing the online survey, participating administrators will have the opportunity to email the test administrator to receive a gift card. The participant will then be sent an e-gift card through email by the test administrator. The data from the survey will be used to determine if an educational program on alternative disciplinary practices in these counties will be viable.

Discussion

The results of this survey will be used to inform the education program for administrators on alternative disciplinary practices. It will give insight into the biases and knowledge current administrators in North Carolina have. This will allow the education effort to be more impactful for participants.

Through this study, we aim to benefit at-risk students by lowering the likelihood of suspension or expulsion for disciplinary infractions not just by lowering the number, but by working to promote good behavior, thereby lifting the burden the school-to-prison pipeline puts on our communities.

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Appendix A

Disciplinary practices

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Thank you for taking our Disciplinary Practices Survey. This Survey was adapted from The Disciplinary Practices Survey by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy. This is a 50 question survey followed by a short demographics portion.

Q1 1. I feel that getting to know students individually is an important part of discipline.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
-

Q3 2. I believe that teachers at my school are aware of school disciplinary policies.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
-

Q2 3. Disciplinary consequences should be scaled in proportion to the severity of the problem behavior.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
-

Q4 4. I believe students at my school are aware of school disciplinary policies.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
-

Q5 5. Teachers ought to be able to manage the majority of students' misbehavior in their classroom.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q6 6. My school keeps detailed records regarding student suspension and expulsion.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q7 7. Conversations with students referred to the office are important, and should be factored into most decisions about disciplinary consequences.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q8 8. Repeat offenders should receive more severe disciplinary consequences than first-time offenders.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q9 9. Out-of-school suspension is used at this school only as a last resort.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q10 10. Disciplinary policies are strictly enforced in my school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q11 11. I believe that putting in place prevention programs can reduce the need for suspension and expulsion.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q12 12. Schools cannot afford to tolerate students who disrupt the learning environment.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q13 13. Schools must take some responsibility for teaching students how to get along and behave appropriately in school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q14 14. In-school suspension is a viable alternative disciplinary practice to suspension and expulsion.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q15 15. I feel it is critical to work with parents before suspending a student from school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q16 16. The primary purpose of discipline is to teach appropriate skills to the disciplined student.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q17 17. Disciplining disruptive students is time consuming and interferes with other important functions in the school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q18 18. Out-of-school suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining school order.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q19 19. Students should receive recognition or reward for appropriate behavior.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q20 20. Suspensions and expulsions hurt students by removing them from academic learning time.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q21 21. The primary responsibility for teaching students how to behave appropriately in school belongs to the parents.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q22 22. Certain students are not gaining anything from school and disrupt the learning environment for others. In such cases, the use of suspension and expulsion is justified to preserve

the learning environment for students who wish to learn.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q23 23. I have noticed that time spent in developing and implementing prevention programs pays off in terms of decreased disruption and disciplinary incidents.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q24 24. I need additional resources to increase my school's capacity to reduce and prevent troublesome behaviors.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q25 25. Students with disabilities who engage in disruptive behavior need a different approach to discipline than students in general education.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q26 26. There is really nothing a school can do if students are not willing to take responsibility for their behavior.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q27 27. Disadvantaged students require a different approach to discipline than other students.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q28 28. Most, if not all, discipline problems come from inadequacies in the student's home situation.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q29 29. Suspension and expulsion do not really solve discipline problems.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q30 30. Suspension makes students less likely to misbehave in the future.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q31 31. Zero tolerance increases the number of students being suspended or expelled.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q32 32. Please select "Neither agree nor disagree."

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q33 33. Regardless of the severity of a student's behavior, my objective is to keep all students in school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q34 34. Students who are suspended or expelled are only getting more time on the streets that will enable them to get in more trouble.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q35 35. The majority of this school's discipline problems could be solved if we could only remove the most persistent troublemakers.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q36 36. It is sad but true that, in order to meet increasingly high standards of academic accountability, some students will probably have to be removed from school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q37 37. Students from different ethnic backgrounds have different emotional and behavioral needs.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q38 38. Zero tolerance sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behaviors in school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q39 39. Prevention programs would be a useful addition at our school, but there is simply not enough time in the day.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q40 40. I believe suspension and expulsion allow students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q41 41. Disciplinary regulations for students with disabilities create a separate system of discipline that makes it more difficult to enforce discipline at this school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q42 42. Students with disabilities account for a disproportionate amount of the time spent on discipline at this school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q43 43. Although it would be nice to get to know students on an individual basis, especially those who need help, my duties simply don't allow me the time.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q44 44. Zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q45 45. I believe suspension is unnecessary if we provide a positive school climate and challenging instruction.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q46 46. Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option in disciplining disruptive students.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q47 47. A student's academic record should be taken into account in assigning disciplinary consequences.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q48 48. Suspension and expulsion are unfair to minority students.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q49 49. I am aware of effective disciplinary alternatives to suspensions that I can use.

- ☐ Strongly disagree (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat disagree (2)
 - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat agree (4)
 - ☐ Strongly agree (5)
-

Q50 50. I would be open to receiving additional training on alternative disciplinary methods.

- ☐ Definitely not (1)
- ☐ Probably not (2)
- ☐ Might or might not (3)
- ☐ Probably yes (4)
- ☐ Definitely yes (5)

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 1

You have now completed the questionnaire part of this survey. Before you finish, there are a few demographic questions.

Page

Break

Q51 What type of school?

☐ Middle (2)

☐ High (3)

Q52 What is your role?

☐ Principal (1)

☐ Assistant Principal (2)

Q53 Sex/Gender

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Non-Binary (3)

☐ Other (4) _____

☐ Prefer not to answer (5)

Q54 Race/Ethnicity

- ☐ White (1)
- ☐ Black or African-American (2)
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino (3)
- ☐ Asian (4)
- ☐ Native American/Alaska Native/American Indian (5)
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer (7)

End of Block: Block 1

Greetings (insert school district),

We are conducting a survey study entitled Overcoming Disparities in Disciplinary Practices in Rural Schools. This survey will assess the perceptions of administrators toward school disciplinary practices. The goal of this survey is to assess what assumptions and difficulties administrators in secondary schools face in enforcing school disciplinary policies. The survey would be administered online and from start to finish would take approximately 5-10 minutes. The goal is to form a relationship with school administrators to provide evidence-based restorative disciplinary training. Administrators who participate would be eligible for a \$20 dollar gift card.

We are looking for school districts to partner with us in this study. This survey will provide valuable information on the state of disciplinary practices in secondary schools. We hope to provide valuable training for administrators in your district to bolster positive student outcomes. If you are interested in partnering with us on this study, we ask that you write a letter of support to be sent to the Institutional Review Board to start the process of approval for the study. I am attaching a template letter that you may review and send back. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to forming a valuable partnership.

Best Regards,

Dr. Jeannie Golden

Principal Investigator

Institutional Review Board

East Carolina University

April 12, 2024

Dear Board Members,

Disruptive behavior in schools presents a significant challenge in school administration. Often, administrators have a limited amount of resources in dealing with these behaviors once they result in an office disciplinary referral (ODR).

Dr. Golden and her undergraduate students would like to conduct a study in [school district] that would provide teachers, administrators, and other student support staff the opportunity to participate in a survey. The survey would ask participants to report their knowledge and perceptions on the state of disciplinary practices in their schools and rate their willingness to undergo training on alternative disciplinary practices. These results would allow the researchers to draw conclusions about the level of understanding school personnel have about student behavioral issues and resources for behavioral correction. Additionally, Dr. Golden and her undergraduate students will be able to use this information to create formal training with the pre-existing knowledge of administrators in mind.

I am writing in support of these project activities that Dr. Golden and her undergraduate students want to administer as I believe they will benefit the students, teachers, administrators, and student support staff of [school district].

Sincerely,

[school district]