

April 19, 2017

Office of the Chancellor

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Dear Teachers & Staff,

Providing students with a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment is our top priority. We have made tremendous strides in improving school climate because of your dedication and leadership, and are continuing to expand this work to support students and schools. Part of this ongoing work includes focusing on age-appropriate interventions to effectively address behavioral concerns, expanding restorative practices, mental health programs and social-emotional supports, and making significant updates to the DOE's Discipline Code. To support these changes, we're investing in more resources and expanding trainings for schools.

The changes to the Discipline Code include limiting the use of suspensions for students in grades K–2 to extremely rare cases, when a student repeatedly displays behavior that is violent or could cause serious harm, or a student violates the Gun Free Schools Act.

As a teacher, I learned quickly that every child is unique, and that I needed to tailor my response to meet their individual needs. I learned that in order to hold every child to a high standard of behavior, I had to support each child along their journey. As a principal, one of the most important responsibilities I had was providing coaching and support to my teachers as they honed their ability to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. As a superintendent, my job was to support principals along their journey. And as a parent and part of a family, I learned flexibility, unconditional love, support, and accountability.

Last year I had the opportunity to connect with a student who attended pre-K in the same building as my office. This student was less developed than her peers in terms of social and emotional skills. When she needed a cool down, she came to visit me in my office. We worked on behavior management skills, how to handle frustration and anger, and better ways to communicate. As the year progressed, her behavior improved and the number of times she came to my office decreased.

Would her behavior have changed if our intervention consisted only of sending her out of her classroom? No. If anything, [research](#) tells us that punitive consequences such as suspensions from school increase the likelihood of future instances of inappropriate behavior, and that exclusionary punishment doesn't benefit the other students in the class either.

We must get to the root of a child's behavior. What is causing a child to act out? Is it a lack of social and emotional skills? Is it something in the classroom environment that can be adjusted or changed such as a seating arrangement? We know that sending a child out of the classroom isn't a long term solution, it is a short-term fix. Especially for children in the youngest grades, we must work to implement better methods of addressing behavior disruptions. I understand that this work is hard and may cause some uneasiness at times, but know that it is better to address the underlying causes rather than the symptoms of a child's behavior.

As you reflect on your own practice and collaborate with others in your school and throughout the City, I would love to hear directly from you about what practices have worked for you. What breakthroughs have you had? When we share our successes, we empower others to follow us and learn with us. Email me and share your strong practices in this area.

Excellent educators constantly work to improve their expertise in teaching content and teaching children, and improvement is critical to achieving our vision of Equity and Excellence for All. Thank you for your dedication to and guidance of our 1.1 million students every day.

Warmly,



Chancellor
Department of Education