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## A Content Analysis of Catholic School Written Discipline Policies

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## A Content Analysis of Catholic School Written Discipline Policies

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*School discipline has traditionally endorsed the use of exclusionary practices (i.e. suspension and expulsion). Such practices can have a negative short- and long-term impact on student lives, and tend to be enforced disproportionately with certain student populations. Although public school discipline policies have received increased scrutiny in recent years, Catholic school policies have received very little attention. This study presents the results of a content analysis of the written discipline policies of 33 Catholic secondary schools from two dioceses within a major metropolitan area in the United States. Results suggest that although variability exists in the types of behaviors included in formal written policies, schools in this sample rely heavily on exclusionary practices as possible consequences to many behaviors, even relatively minor ones. Further, they include positive or restorative consequences minimally, if at all. Suggestions for future research related to discipline practices in Catholic schools are made.*

### Keywords

School Discipline, Behavior, Discipline Policies, Codes of Conduct, Catholic Schools

A shift in education from a focus on the use of exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension and expulsion), commonly used for even minor behavioral concerns (e.g., tardies), is increasingly being advocated by policy makers, researchers, and practitioners due to long-standing evidence that exclusionary practices do not promote school safety and have a significant, negative long-term impact on students (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Students with behavior problems are likely to receive suspensions and expulsion, yet also have academic problems (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011; Morrison & D’Incau, 1997). Therefore, those caught in a behavior referral and subsequent suspen-

sion cycles are among those that are already behind academically and likely to get further behind after being removed from school through exclusionary discipline responses (Fenning, Theodos, Benner, & Bohanon-Edmonson, 2004; Morrison & D’Incau, 1997).

Long-standing research on exclusionary discipline reveals disparities by race and ethnicity. Specifically, African-American males have consistently and disproportionately been represented in school discipline (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). For some time, researchers have explored the reasons why such long-standing racial and ethnic disparities exist, with no supporting evidence that ethnic minority students engage in more serious offenses to warrant these consequences (Skiba et al., 2000; Skiba et al., 2011). Of note, Black students are more likely to receive referrals for subjective events, such as classroom disrespect, when compared to referrals generated by Caucasian students (Skiba et al., 2011). More recently, a national data analysis of middle and high schools in the United States in 2009-2010 found that over two million students received one or more suspensions for mostly minor infractions (e.g., tardies, class disruption, and dress code issues), with even more disparity among Black students than the findings reported in the 1975 Children’s Defense Fund study (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Suspension and expulsion, as forms of exclusionary discipline, are associated with school dropout and entry to the juvenile justice system, particularly among historically marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minority students, those in special education, and students with significant academic needs (Shapiro, Rodriguez, & Talip, 2014; US Department of Education, 2014). This phenomenon has been coined the “school to prison pipeline” (Wald & Losen, 2003).

As a result of these long-standing concerns related to the use of suspension and expulsion, particularly among students historically marginalized in schools, federal focus and guidance are increasingly being directed to school discipline reform. For example, the U.S. Department of Education released “Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline” (US Department of Education, 2014). The focus of the document is to provide schools with strategies to engage in prevention-oriented discipline practices that include building school climate and reserving suspension and expulsion for only the most serious behaviors that threaten school safety. Further, the US Dept. of Education report contains recommendations for the application of prevention-oriented supports in schools to address

behavioral concerns rather than focusing on exclusion and punishment, such as multi-tiered systems of positive behavior support (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010) and system-wide social-emotional learning (Greenberg et al., 2003). While the tide is turning with respect to the convergence of federal policy, research, and practice recommendations for schools to engage in more prevention-oriented discipline practices, the content of public school written discipline policies that guide discipline decisions contain primarily punitive responses focused on suspension, even for minor behavioral infractions, such as tardies and trancies (Fenning et al., 2004; Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning et al., 2012). Written discipline policies are the primary mechanisms by which school administrators communicate formal school discipline procedures to the larger school community (Fenning et al., 2008). Descriptive content analysis of public high school written discipline policies document that suspension and expulsion are the most likely responses, even for minor behaviors, such as truancy and tardies (Fenning et al., 2004; Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning et al., 2012). The descriptive findings of these content analyses of written policies in the public school arena mirror national data showing that suspension and expulsion are overwhelmingly present not only in written documents but also in practice through the use of exclusionary discipline in response to nonviolent and minor behaviors (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; US Department of Education, 2014).

### **Private/Catholic School Discipline Perceptions and Outcomes**

While there is an upswing in national attention to public school discipline policies and practices, there remains a lack of attention to the study of school discipline in Catholic schools. Content analyses of the school discipline policies in Catholic schools are an underexplored research area. What is contained in them in terms of policy statements is largely unknown. Whether the content of Catholic school discipline policies mirrors the primarily punitive and exclusionary content found in many public school discipline policies is an uncharted research area.

This lack of attention to school discipline policies within Catholic schools is concerning because of the role and opportunity for private religious schools, particularly those centered in urban and under-resourced communities, in serving youth who are at disproportionate risk for school exclusion in public school settings. Catholic schools, which are becoming more racially/ethnically diverse as a whole (National Catholic Education Association, 2015), continue to provide important educational opportunities for students

residing in under-resourced environments that may turn to them as alternatives to public schools (National Catholic Educational Association, 2015). Having a better understanding of the written discipline policies in Catholic school environments will help to inform Catholic school practitioners about written discipline policies and help to inform decisions about whether school discipline reform is a needed priority for supporting all children, particularly racial and ethnic minority youth who have historically been disproportionately disciplined through exclusionary means in public school settings.

Another rationale for focusing attention on discipline practices and policies in Catholic schools is that some families may perceive Catholic schools as maintaining order and challenging behaviors more effectively than public schools (Convey, 1986; Figlio & Stone, 1997). In one study, parents reported discipline as the third highest reason for choosing private Catholic schools instead of public ones, with the academic program and religious focus being factors ranked higher (Convey, 1986).

While the data reflecting the punitive nature of written discipline policies in public schools is readily available, an unexplored area is the degree to which the content of private school discipline policies compares to those in public schools. While speculative, due to limited school discipline research in non-public schools, discipline practices, policies and, relatedly, school climate in religious schools may be qualitatively different because of the flexibility of such private settings to explore philosophy-aligned beliefs in addressing behavior and discipline. As an example, one elementary school used religious principles to collaborate with the larger parish in greatly revising its discipline practices (Fox, Terry, & Fox, 1995). Fox et al. integrated the Christian principles of respect, spirituality, and responsibility into the discipline plan and provided examples of such behaviors when communicating the discipline plan to the larger religious community. While the research is somewhat inconsistent, one recent study reported that students in private and Catholic schools have more positive beliefs about school climate in comparison with peers in public school settings (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011).

Investigations into the question of whether students who attend private or religious schools actually engage in fewer problematic behaviors compared to peers in public schools have resulted in inconsistent findings based on the type of behavior examined. For instance, results from a regression analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS) found that attending a private religious school was associated with reduced rates of teen sexual behavior, arrests, and use of hard drugs, but this association was not supported

for status offenses such as smoking, alcohol, or marijuana use. The association was also not supported for gang activity (Figlio & Ludwig, 2000; Figlio & Ludwig, 2012). Mocan & Tekin (2006) found that the impact of Catholic school attendance on behavior may differ by gender, as their findings were that female high school students in Catholic schools were less likely to use hard drugs and engage in sexual activity compared to peers in public schools. However, males in Catholic schools were more likely to use and distribute drugs relative to those attending public schools. With respect to dropout, a school-related outcome strongly related to exclusionary discipline in public schools (Wald & Losen, 2003), students in Catholic schools were more likely to graduate on time with their class (Sander & Krautman, 1995).

### **Current Study**

The focus of the current study is to begin exploring the content of written discipline policies within Catholic secondary schools. We report the findings of a systematic content analysis of Catholic school discipline policies drawn from a large urban and suburban environment as part of this effort. There is relatively limited information available about the content of written discipline policies. Codes of conduct are the written, official policies that drive decisions made by Catholic school administrators and are the formal documents communicated to families about school discipline sanctions and responses. Through a descriptive content analysis, we identify behaviors commonly included in Catholic high school discipline policies, as well as the school consequences and responses typically associated with behavioral violations. More specifically, we address the following questions: 1) What is the discipline content (behaviors and consequences) found in these policies? 2) To what degree are punitive/exclusionary consequences the focus of school discipline responses and for what types of behaviors in the schools sampled? and 3) To what degree are positive consequences or restorative practices included in the policies?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The focus of this study was to evaluate discipline policies of Catholic high schools in multiple dioceses within a large, metropolitan area in the midwestern United States. To obtain the discipline policies, one of the researchers contacted administrators from individual high schools via email detailing

the study and inquiring about utilizing the school's policy. We received 12 discipline policies through this process. Additionally, we accessed 23 policies through a review of the publicly available websites of the remaining schools within the metropolitan geographic area. The resulting sample represented 35 of the 40 Catholic high schools located in the selected metropolitan area. Of these policies, it was not possible to code one due to its format, and one was used by the team to practice coding in training sessions. Therefore, a total of 33 discipline policies were part of the final sample that was coded and included in the analysis.

### Procedure

The research team initially utilized the *Analysis of Discipline Codes Rating Form* (ADCR) adapted from Fenning et al. (2012). This coding system, originally developed to evaluate public high school discipline policies, includes behaviors and consequences commonly found in public high school policies. The process of using the ADCR follows multiple steps. When a behavior was mentioned within a discipline policy, the coder first indicated that it was included. Then the coder indicated each consequence offered as a potential response to an infraction. Finally, the coder indicated if the policy included specific consequences for repeat violations of the same infraction.

To promote consistency, all coders practiced using the ADCR rating form on a practice policy. Coders were placed in pairs and asked to code the practice policy individually using an electronic spreadsheet. Responses were merged to evaluate agreement, which was judged by the overall percent of cells rated identically by both coders in the coding pair. Across coding pairs, the average agreement was found to be 92%. Once trained, the team initiated coding of the remaining discipline policies, which were divided among coding pairs. Each policy was coded individually before each pair compared results and came to consensus on their codes.

After coding a small portion of the policies, it became clear to the research team that the ADCR form, which was designed for analysis of public school policies, did not include important content found in the Catholic school policies. As a result, the team agreed to adapt the measure by adding to the coding form behaviors and consequences that better reflected the content of Catholic school policies. The modified form included 50 total behaviors, 17 of which were added to reflect content in the sample of Catholic school policies. Likewise, the form included 30 consequences, 11 of which were added from the Catholic school policies. The research team used the

modified version of the coding protocol for the remainder of the study. (See Appendices for descriptions of the behaviors/consequences included in the revised coding form.) When modifying the coding system from prior research in public schools (Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning et al., 2012) members of the research team categorized behaviors based on severity (mild, moderate, and severe) as related to safety. Behaviors that affected school/individual safety were rated as more severe. School consequences were categorized as punitive (provision of an undesired stimulus or removal of a desired stimulus) or positive (promotion of desired behaviors that may include a minimal teaching component). Consequences which were punitive were subcategorized along a dimension of mild, moderate, and severe based on the degree to which the consequence removed the student from instruction and/or the school setting. For instance, forms of detention were categorized as mild punitive because these occurred outside the instructional portion of the day and required relatively limited effort on the part of the student. Examples of moderate consequences, such as academic/behavior probation, are more decisive responses requiring extended effort on the part of the student. These consequences often precipitate a severe consequence, such as suspension or expulsion, both of which completely exclude the student from instruction.

The classification for each behavior and consequence, if not assigned through the prior ADCR rating system developed for public schools, was determined through research team consensus or as a decision by one of the research team members who led the development and revisions of the prior versions of the ADCR. The decisions were based on a comparison of the newly configured behaviors and consequences to ratings for other existing behaviors in terms of approach and severity. For example, "Food/Beverage/Gum Violation" was categorized as a mild behavior because it represented a low threat to school safety in the same vein as other behaviors rated previously as mild due to low risk for school safety.

Using the modified rating form, which reflected additional content not found in the prior version of the ADCR intended for public school use, each member of the research team re-coded the first, practice policy to evaluate consistency between coders. The average agreement across coding pairs was found to be 96%. Research pairs received a small number of policies to code. Each member of the pair coded the policy individually before meeting to resolve any discrepancies and develop consensus, resulting in one final Excel coding sheet for each of the Catholic school discipline policies sampled as part of the study. The final consensus coding sheet for each policy was uti-

lized in the tabulation of the results and the final analysis discussed below.

### Data Analysis

Coding data were primarily analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics. Proportions were calculated to determine the number of policies that included each behavior, as well as how many of these behaviors were linked to a specific consequence. Then, analysis indicated the proportion and types of behaviors linked to exclusion compared to more proactive and positive approaches.

## Results

### Behavioral Infractions by Level of Severity

For each level of severity, the researchers examined the behaviors consistently included in discipline policies. The researchers operationalized “consistently included” as included in at least 80% of policies (27 of 33). Table 1 shows the mild behavioral infractions mentioned in at least 80% of policies. A total of nine mild behaviors were found in over 80% of policies. For example, truancy was included in all 33 policies (100%), whereas cheating appeared in 28 policies (85%).

Table 1

*Mild Behaviors Appearing in >80% of Policies*

Behavior	n	%
Truancy	33	100
Dress code Violation	32	97
Electronic Device Misuse	32	97
Tardy	32	97
Tobacco Offense	32	97
Failure to Serve Consequence	30	91
Food/Beverage/Gum Violation	30	91
Transportation and Parking Violation	29	88
Cheating/Plagiarism/Forgery/Counterfeiting	28	85

Table 2 shows the moderate behavioral infractions mentioned in at least 80% of policies. A total of four moderate behaviors were found in over 80% of policies. Fighting, harassment, and vandalism appeared in 31 policies (94%), and bullying was mentioned in 28 (85%).

Table 2

*Moderate Behaviors Appearing in >80% of Policies*

Behavior	n	%
Fighting with Peers	31	94
Harassment: General	31	94
Vandalism	31	94
Bullying/Cyberbullying	28	85

Table 3 shows the severe behavioral infractions mentioned in at least 80% of policies. A total of four severe behaviors appeared in over 80% of policies. Drug and alcohol related infractions were included in 32 policies (97%), theft was included in 30 policies (91%) and weapons-related infractions were mentioned in 28 policies (85%).

Table 3

*Severe Behaviors Appearing in >80% of Policies*

Behavior	n	%
Alcohol Offenses	32	97
Drug Offenses	32	97
Theft/Burglary	30	91

### **Behaviors Linked to Exclusionary Consequences**

The researchers also aimed to identify behaviors linked to exclusionary consequences in a majority of discipline policies (>50%, at least 17 out of 33 policies). Table 4 shows the 13 behavioral infractions linked to expulsion and/or out-of-school suspension in at least 50% of the policies. Four of these

behavioral infractions were categorized as mild. For example, Internet misuse led to expulsion and suspension in 20 policies (61%). Four of the behavioral infractions were categorized as moderate. For instance, harassment was associated with expulsion in 24 policies (73%) and with out-of-school suspension in 22 policies (67%). The remaining five behavioral infractions fell within the severe category. For example, infractions related to drugs and alcohol led to expulsion in 31 policies (94%) and suspension in 27 policies (82%).

Table 4

*Behaviors Linked to Exclusion in >50% of Policies*

Category	Behavior	Policies Linked to Expulsion		Policies Linked to Out-of-School Suspension	
		n	%	n	%
Mild	Internet Misuse	20	61	20	61
	Truancy	19	58	--	--
	Cheating/Plagiarism/ Forgery/Counterfeiting	17	52	17	52
	Failure to Serve Consequences	---	--	23	70
Moderate	Harassment: General	24	73	22	67
	Vandalism	24	73	20	61
	Fighting with Peers	22	67	25	76
	Bullying/Cyberbullying	19	58	18	55
Severe	Alcohol Offenses	31	94	27	82
	Drug Offenses	31	94	27	82
	Theft/Burglary	26	79	23	70
	Weapons Offense	26	79	19	58
	Gang Behavior	21	64	--	--

### **Behaviors Linked to Positive Disciplinary Responses**

The researchers were also interested in identifying behaviors associated with positive responses; that is, consequences aligned with the principles of positive behavior supports, such as directly teaching alternative expected behaviors rather than focusing on punishment (Horner et al., 2010). These positive, proactive school responses focused on increasing collaboration between home, school, and community settings, promoting participation in counseling, and teaching new skills. Specifically, the modified coding protocol included eight distinct positive disciplinary responses: parent communication, teacher conference, community service, substance abuse intervention, counseling, peer mediation, skill building, and mentoring.

Table 5 shows the behavioral infractions associated with positive disciplinary responses. Parent communication and substance abuse interventions were the only positive consequences identified in more than half of policies. Although truancy and cheating (i.e., mild behaviors) were linked to a positive response (i.e., parent communication) in 70% of the policies, these behaviors were also linked to expulsion in more than half of the policies. Drug and alcohol related infractions were linked to positive responses such as parent communication and substance abuse intervention in more than half of policies, but these infractions were also associated with expulsion in 31 policies (94%). This finding suggests that some behavioral infractions can result in both exclusionary and positive responses within Catholic school discipline policies.

### **Discussion**

Given the paucity of research focused on Catholic school discipline policies, the purpose of this study was to analyze the content of discipline policies of high schools in one region in the United States. The rating form used for this study was originally developed to analyze discipline policies of public schools. During the process of the present study, it became clear that the protocol needed to be modified to fully capture the disciplinary practices found in the policies of Catholic schools sampled in the current study, leading to the addition of several behaviors and consequences in a revised coding system specifically for Catholic schools. Although some of these additions may not constitute challenging behaviors in other contexts, (e.g. pregnancy, failure to pay tuition), they were included in the modified rating form and subsequent analysis because they constituted content within this sample of policies that carried disciplinary consequences. Some of the behaviors added to the form

Table 5  
Behaviors Linked to Positive Disciplinary Responses

Category	Behavior	Parent Communication		Teacher Conference		Community Service		Substance Abuse Intervention		Counseling	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mild	Truancy	24	73	3	9	1	3	0	0	0	0
	Cheating/Plagiarism/ Forgery/ Counterfeiting	23	70	3	9	1	3	0	0	0	0
	Electronic Device Misuse	19	58	3	9	1	3	0	0	0	0
Severe	Accumulation of school consequences	18	55	7	21	2	6	0	0	0	0
	Alcohol Offenses	24	24	5	15	1	3	19	58	15	45
	Drug Offenses	24	24	2	6	1	3	18	55	14	42

reflect religious/moral aspects of Catholic schools, and therefore vary based on the degree to which a school espouses a conservative or liberal ideology. For example, pregnancy and public displays of affection were identified as challenging behaviors in some policies, while honor code violations were addressed in others. The Catholic school policies included the most severe behaviors listed in the original protocol designed for public schools (criminal behaviors such as arson, or assault/battery); they also included relatively less serious and non-violent behaviors such as gum chewing, sleeping, and unapproved bags. These policies, focused on decorum and protocol rather than safety, could be seen as a means of enacting stricter control over students and perhaps represent a focus on law and structure for which Catholic schools may have a reputation.

Our findings suggest that Catholic school discipline policies vary greatly across school settings sampled in this study rather than reflecting “one” uniform and consistent approach to school discipline that may be more characteristic of public school policies. Public school discipline policies were originally established for all public school settings to have a clear, uniform, and preset way of addressing discipline (National School Resource Network, 1980). An attempt at consistency across public school discipline policies has continued through today, driven in part by state and federal mandates dictating what should be included in written discipline policies (Fenning & Bohanon-Edmonson, 2006). The analysis of the discipline policies in the current Catholic school sample reflected significant variability across schools. Although one could find consistency on certain issues, there was a great deal of variability across policies, perhaps reflecting the autonomy of Catholic schools. Unlike public schools, which are required to adhere to federal or state guidelines in order to receive public funding, Catholic schools have more freedom to craft policies outside of government mandates. Further, Catholic schools may operate independently from a central office, which may result in less consistency across policies and practices. While our interpretation is speculative and must be borne out in future research that replicates and expands the current findings, variability among policies in the sample implies limited national consensus among Catholic school disciplinarians and administrators regarding the content of written discipline policies. The limited degree of consistency across the policies in the present sample indicates a varied approach to discipline that is context specific. Our findings suggest that Catholic schools may find it valuable to engage in comparative conversations on a national level regarding discipline, perhaps coming to common

ground and consensus around their unique religious values and the larger mission and focus of Catholic schools.

As an example of this variability, of the 50 behaviors coded in this analysis, only slightly more than one-third of the behaviors (34%) were present in at least 80% of policies. We interpret this variation as evidence of the latitude that private Catholic schools have in crafting their discipline policies. While there was a core set of behaviors consistently addressed by all schools (e.g. truancy, tardies, cheating), beyond that core, Catholic schools independently focused on different behaviors. This observation may not be surprising given the relatively independent manner in which Catholic schools operate. Further, the nine minor behaviors included in the majority of policies could be characterized as tied to the academic rigor, personal character, discipline, and order espoused by many Catholic schools. For example, truancy, tardies, cheating, dress code, internet misuse, and failure to serve consequences were among the minor behaviors featured in most policies. Taken together, these behaviors reflect a focus on being present for instruction, maintaining academic integrity, and properly presenting oneself through dress. Collectively, the behaviors most consistently found in the Catholic school discipline policies could relate to preparation for post-secondary college experiences and Catholic high schools' focus on academic rigor.

In contrast, one of the moderate behaviors featured, harassment, could be viewed as an offense that is open to interpretation, similar to subjective offenses described by Skiba et al. (2011) in their analysis of disproportionality in school disciplinary exclusion. Therefore, this behavior, present in most Catholic school policies, offers discretion to Catholic school administrators in their interpretation of discipline issues. The most severe behaviors, which are directly tied to school safety, were alcohol, drugs and weapons offenses. Public schools have mandates to address these significant school safety issues and have done so through "zero tolerance" policies. These controversial policies have been implicated in contributing to disproportionality, unnecessary exclusions, and lack of positive impact on school safety (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008). Perhaps Catholic schools are mirroring public schools' focus on "zero tolerance" for more severe offenses.

In addition to analyzing the types of behavior and consequences typically found in these policies, the current analysis focused on how behaviors were tied to consequences; specifically, to what degree were punitive/exclusionary consequences and positive consequences offered for various behaviors ranging in severity. Our descriptive analyses suggested that a significant majority of

the schools in the sample listed expulsion and suspension for behaviors ranging vastly in severity. While virtually all schools listed expulsion as a response to serious behaviors, such as drug and alcohol offenses, a high percentage of policies offered suspension and expulsion for nonviolent behaviors unrelated to school safety. These findings are similar to results found in content analyses of public school discipline policies (Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning et al., 2012) and analyses of how discipline policies are enacted (Skiba et al., 2011; Losen, 2014).

Overall, expulsion was more commonly offered as a response to a wide range of behaviors compared to suspension. Differences did emerge, but this depended on the severity of the behavior. For mild behaviors, expulsion was offered about as frequently as suspension. However, expulsion was mandated more often than suspension for moderate and severe behaviors. This indicates a tendency for schools to threaten expulsion as often or more often than suspension, especially as the severity of the behavior increased. Though expulsion may be considered the more severe exclusionary practice, Catholic schools identify it as a possible course of action across all levels of severity. It is important to note that this does not mean Catholic schools follow through with expulsion more often than other practices, given that our review is solely a content analysis of policy rather than the application of that policy in practice.

Administrators across all school settings have some degree of discretion despite having federal and state mandates guiding due process for discipline and with protections for specific subgroups, such as those in special education when suspension is considered (Findlay, 2015; IDEA, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Catholic school administrators are not bound by such mandates and, as a result, have even more discretion in invoking discipline decisions in policies. Our findings suggest that administrators may use this discretion by using expulsion in a wide range of discipline situations and for infractions that vary widely in terms of severity. Based on the current literature, it is not possible to make a data-based interpretation as to whether this discretion invokes more or less exclusionary discipline practices. Further research should closely examine how Catholic school administrators and personnel use their discretion in making discipline decisions through mixed methods designs, including qualitative research that begins to explore discipline-decision making in actual practice. Our descriptive findings are preliminary, focused only on written policy, yet begin to provide some data showing that Catholic school administrators have discretion in making significant

discipline decisions, including student removal, within the purview of their policies. However, what happens with this discretion in practice within Catholic school environments is largely unknown, not tested in this current paper, and should be the focus of future research on the topic.

In contrast to the prevalent punitive content in this sample of discipline policies, positive or proactive consequences were greatly under-represented. Of the five consequences determined to be positively-oriented towards parent, teacher, or community involvement, only six behaviors were linked to these consequences. The limited scope of proactive and non-punitive responses in the current study is similar to previous studies using public school samples (Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning et al., 2012).

Although it is possible that some schools might address these responses through other means (i.e. developing a separate document addressing positive or proactive approaches to challenging behaviors), it is still notable that proactive and non-punitive responses are absent from the formal written discipline policy. After all, the formal written discipline policy is the primary means by which a school communicates its approach to challenging behaviors. Looking specifically at the types of school responses seen as proactive, teacher conference, parent communication, and community involvement were three of the six responses coded as proactive. While the research team decided to include these responses as proactive due to the limited number of non-punitive consequences found in the policies, one could argue that such responses have the potential to lack an instructional or restorative tone. Rather, parent communication could simply be communicating about the infraction, which may not be a positive exchange but one of informing parents about a behavioral transgression. Parent communication could, in practice, be a simple call home about an incident rather than true collaboration. Parent communication was the only positive consequence connected to behaviors with any regularity. Of these six behaviors, parent communication was connected in no fewer than 18 policies. At the same time, the research team viewed these responses as having the potential to invoke collaboration and communication among adults in the student's life. Alcohol and drug use were the only two behaviors to which counseling and substance abuse intervention were connected. While speculative, it may be that school personnel consider substance abuse issues as requiring mental health treatment and support rather than punishment (Matheson & McGrath, 2012).

### Directions for Future Research

Overall, the current findings are that the Catholic schools in this sample are relying on punitive, exclusionary practices while including positively-oriented practices to a very limited degree. This approach to discipline reflects the actions traditionally taken by public schools, which have relied heavily on punitive and exclusionary practices at the expense of positive or constructive approaches, despite the cautions and negative outcomes associated with such practices (Skiba et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In contrast, one might expect that the underlying mission of Catholic education, one based on moral development and social justice, would result in disciplinary policies that are less punitive and more focused on positive growth. As researchers, educators, and policymakers continue to advocate for limiting exclusionary discipline and encouraging more positive, constructive approaches on a policy level (Losen, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), future research should examine the degree to which Catholic schools adapt their discipline policies to reflect these changing perspectives.

Additionally, future research should examine the degree to which discipline policies in Catholic schools promote Church teaching. For some time, Church officials have called for educators to better incorporate Catholic social teaching and Gospel values in parochial schools (Dobzanski, 2001). Given the connection between the ideas of justice and discipline as well as the potential for discipline practices to shape school culture, school policy regarding discipline provides a potentially important point of intervention by which Catholic schools can introduce young minds to the social teachings of the Church while practicing what they preach. Catholic and private schools have a great deal of autonomy in their discipline practices because they are not publicly funded or required to abide by federal laws that govern public schools. Given this autonomy and a rich tradition of social teaching, Catholic schools have significant latitude to create proactive discipline policies and are well positioned to include restorative practices that are aligned with a faith-based mission.

While there has been increased focus on school disciplinary practices in public schools, particularly practices that result in school exclusion and disparities among students based on race, ethnicity, and ability in public school settings (Skiba et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), there has been limited attention to school discipline practices in private, Catholic school settings and the effect of such practices on various student populations. Given that Catholic schools educate racially and ethnically diverse

students, more work needs to be done in studying how discipline policies are structured and whether they rely on punitive practices that increase the risk of racial and ethnic discipline disparities similar to those that have been found in public schools (Skiba et al., 2011). The overall gap in the literature on Catholic School discipline and whether racial and ethnic disparities exist reveals an important area for future research. As Catholic schools become more ethnically and racially diverse, and as they continue to play an important role in providing alternative school options for students who might be at risk for exclusion in public school settings, it will be important to evaluate the impact of discipline policies on racially and ethnically diverse students in Catholic Schools.

This study is one of the first to conduct a systematic content analysis of written Catholic school discipline policies. Given the infancy of the research related to discipline practices in Catholic schools, we recommend that further research systematically evaluate discipline policies in Catholic schools using varied data sources, including stakeholder perception of discipline practices, outcome data, such as office disciplinary referrals (McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010), and observation of school-based behavior. In addition, future work should replicate the current study using discipline codes of conduct drawn from a national sample of schools to examine differences across geographic regions, archdioceses and school populations.

The available research on Catholic school discipline policies is limited by a primary focus on stakeholder perceptions gathered through survey methods. In addition, the use of correlational regression analysis, and the associated risks of spurious findings when multiple correlations are completed with single items is another concern with the survey data that is available. Future investigations should utilize contemporary data sets to build on the current literature. They should also use a wider range of methodologies in addition to survey data that incorporate mixed qualitative and quantitative methods and content analyses that have wider sampling than the one conducted in the current study.

### Study Limitations

There were many limitations to the current study. First, it was solely descriptive in nature and tied to a content analysis of written discipline policies. Additionally, the sample size was small and limited to Catholic schools in two dioceses within a single geographic region. Therefore, the generalizability of our findings is limited. Our coding system was adapted for Catholic

schools but was limited to the behaviors and consequences that the research team selected. Further, although the team achieved reliability at the start of the coding process, the decisions about the categorization of codes and the instrument used should be replicated in future work to determine its applicability in Catholic schools, particularly whether the content of Catholic school discipline policies is adequately captured by the coding system. The coding system should be used and modified as needed using a larger and more representative sample of Catholic school discipline policies. Further, the research team did not examine the actual discipline practices within Catholic schools, focusing only on written policy through a systematic content analysis.

### Conclusion

The descriptive findings presented in this study are a preliminary step in understanding disciplinary policies and practices within contemporary Catholic schools. As educational institutions serving growing populations of racial and ethnic minority youth who historically have been disproportionately impacted by exclusionary disciplinary policies in public school settings, it is imperative that Catholic schools closely examine their disciplinary strategies and discern opportunities to make positive changes. Through this type of systematic and thoughtful reflection, Catholic schools will be able to remain true to the goal of serving all students.

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## Appendix A

### Behaviors Included in Modified Coding Protocol

Behavior	Category	Definition
Accumulation of School Consequences	Mild	Relatively minor consequences, i.e. demerits, detentions, that add up to trigger more severe consequences
Alcohol Offenses	Severe	Suspected or proven possession, consumption, or distribution of alcohol
Arson	Severe	Use of fire with the intent of damaging property
Assault	Severe	Using violence or force to intentionally harm someone else
Bags: Unapproved**	Mild	Use of non-sanctioned bags
Battery	Severe	Intentional use of physical contact in a harmful or offensive manner
Bomb Threats	Severe	Communication concerning an attempt to use an explosive device
Bullying/Cyberbullying	Moderate	Unwanted aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance conducted in person or expressed through electronic means
Cheating/Plagiarism/ Forgery/Counterfeiting	Mild	Intentional falsification of assignments, ideas, or paperwork
Class/School Disruption	Mild	Disruptive behavior that inhibits the ability of the rest of a classroom to function properly

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Behavior	Category	Definition
Demerit card: Failure to Carry**	Mild	Failure to carry proper documentation of infraction when designated to do so
Discrimination: Gender	Moderate	Unfair or biased treatment of a person or group on account of membership to a particular class/category
Discrimination: Race/Ethnicity	Moderate	Same as general discrimination though related specifically to race/ethnicity
Discrimination: Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity	Moderate	Same as general discrimination though related specifically to sexual orientation/gender identity
Door Policy Violation**	Mild	Leaving the school premises during the school day
Dress Code Violation	Mild	Failure to dress in accordance with the stated policy
Drug Offenses	Severe	Suspected or proven possession, consumption, or distribution of drugs
Electronic Device Misuse	Mild	Inappropriate use of electronic devices during school hours
Failure to Serve Consequences	Mild	Missing/avoiding previously assigned consequences
Fighting with Peers	Moderate	Physical altercation between students
Fireworks/Explosive Offenses	Severe	Any use, possession, or distribution of fireworks or explosives
Food/Beverage/Gum Violations**	Mild	Inappropriate possession of food/beverages (including gum) outside of designated areas or time of day

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Behavior	Category	Definition
Gang Behavior	Severe	Any identification as a member of a gang including wearing or displaying gang symbols
General Staff Disrespect/ Insubordination	Mild	Deliberate verbal or physical behavior shown towards staff deemed to be disrespectful
Harassment: General	Moderate	Systematic, unwanted, or threatening behavior by an individual or group towards another individual or group
Harassment: Sexual	Moderate	Same as general harassment though related specifically to race/ethnicity
Honor/Moral Code Violation**	Mild	Failure to meet the expectations specifically addressed in official policy related to honorable/moral behavior
Identification (Student ID violation)	Mild	Failure to have identification during designated time
Internet Misuse**	Mild	Improper use of internet or school computers
Littering**	Mild	Failing to place garbage in the designated receptacles
Loitering	Mild	Unauthorized presence on school property beyond designated time periods
Lying to Faculty/Staff**	Mild	Intentionally misleading school staff
Materials: Failure to Bring**	Mild	Being unprepared for class by failing to have the required materials

Behavior	Category	Description
Misuse of Fire Alarm	Severe	Improper use/tampering with the fire alarm
Misuse of School Property	Moderate	Improper use of school property other than its intended use
Off-campus Behavior Reflecting negatively on School**	Moderate	Student behavior outside of school that potentially influences the reputation of the school
Pregnancy**	Moderate	Being pregnant
Public Display of Affection**	Mild	Any overt demonstration of affection between students as defined in the policy, may include kissing, caressing, or hand-holding
Sleeping During School Hours**	Mild	Sleeping while in class or anytime at school
Social Exclusion	Moderate	Intentionally limiting the social experiences of another student
Swearing/Profanity	Mild	Inappropriate language in school
Tardy	Mild	Arriving late to school/class
Theft/Burglary	Severe	Intentionally taking/stealing the belongings of another person or group
Tobacco Offenses	Mild	Suspected or proven possession, consumption, or distribution of tobacco
Transportation and Parking**	Mild	Behavior related to the transportation to and from school that may be deemed dangerous or reflect poorly on the school.

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Behavior	Category	Description
Trespassing on Neighboring Premises or Being in Restricted areas on Campus	Mild	Entering a restricted area at or nearby school campus
Truancy	Mild	Unexcused absence from school
Tuition: Failure to Pay**	Mild	Late or delinquent status regarding payment of tuition
Vandalism	Moderate	Damage or defacement of property
Weapons Offenses	Severe	Suspected or proven possession, use, or threat involving dangerous objects

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\*\* indicates behavior added to create modified coding protocol used in final analysis.

## Appendix B

### Consequences Included in Modified Coding Protocol

Consequence	Category	Definition
Academic/Behavior/ Discipline Probation**	Moderate Punitive	Status/standing related to behavioral or academic struggles in which student must meet certain expectations to remain at the school.
Administrative Discretion**	Moderate Punitive	Specific nature of the consequence left ambiguous or unclear. May specifically state the word discretion or imply it
Alternative School	Severe Punitive	Removal from school setting for discipline reasons into an alternative placement such as a diagnostic/therapeutic environment
Counseling	Positive	Any form of individual or group counseling
Corporal Punishment	Severe Punitive	Physical punishment
Classroom Removal	Moderate Punitive	Any removal from the classroom environment due to inappropriate behavior
Community Service	Positive	Structured activities meant to provide service to the community; i.e. volunteering, tutoring
Dean/Principal Referral/ Administrator Contact**	Moderate Punitive	Referral to a disciplinary authority for a behavioral infraction
Demerit/Referral**	Mild Punitive	Any punitive response to a behavioral infraction that triggers higher consequence upon accumulation
Detention	Mild Punitive	Requirement to be present at a specific place and time beyond normal school expectations as a result of a behavioral infraction

Consequence	Category	Definition
Discipline Behavior Contract**	Moderate Punitive	Formal agreement made between student and disciplinary authority to meet specified behavioral expectations
Discipline Board Hearing/Review**	Severe Punitive	Formal review of infraction or pattern of behavior by an authorized body
Drug Test/Breathalyzer**	Moderate Punitive	Any examination designed to measure the presence of alcohol or drugs in a student's system
Expulsion	Severe Punitive	Permanent or semi-permanent exclusion from all school related activities for the remainder of year, specified number of years, or permanent basis
Fines**	Mild Punitive	Requirement that a student pay a monetary payment as consequence for a behavior
In-School Suspension	Severe Punitive	Temporary exclusion from instructional or other school related activities while having to maintain physical presence at the school
Mentoring	Positive	Support presented by a peer, adult, or other designated individual that attempts to help the student overcome an underlying challenge
Merit**	Positive	Reinforcement of desired behaviors
Natural consequences	Mild Punitive	Any consequence that results naturally from the behavior; i.e. restitution, repairing vandalized property, missed work
Out-of-school Suspension	Severe Punitive	Temporary exclusion from all instructional or other school related activities while not physically present in the building
Parent Conference	Positive	A meeting set up between parents and school personnel related to student behavior

Consequence	Category	Description
Police Involvement	Severe Punitive	Any police related intervention such as a police report, school based arrest, or referral to juvenile court
Peer Mediation	Positive	Approach to discipline which includes peer-to-peer problem solving activity; i.e. peer mediation, peer counsel
Privilege Loss**	Mild Punitive	Temporary or permanent exclusion from any non-mandatory school activity such as extra-curriculars or school dances
Substance Abuse Intervention	Positive	Any intervention that specifically addresses the use of illegal substances. May include individual or group counseling or recommendation to attend a rehabilitation clinic
Saturday Detention	Mild Punitive	Requirement to be present on a weekend beyond normal school expectations as a result of a behavioral infraction
Skill Building	Positive	Any means of addressing behavioral infractions by providing instructional or psychoeducational service meant to improve underlying skills
Teacher Conference	Positive	A formal meeting set up by the teacher to meet with a student regarding a behavioral infraction or pattern of behavior
Work Detention**	Mild Punitive	Detention that requires any sort of assigned work in addition to being present at a specified time and place outside general school expectations

\*\* indicates consequences added to create modified coding protocol used in final analysis.

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