



July 21, 2021

Alejandro Reyes
U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights
550 12th Street SW
Room 6125
Washington, DC 20024

Docket ID ED-2021-OCR-0068

Dear Mr. Reyes

On behalf of Knowledge Alliance (KA), the following comments are provided in response to the Request for Information Regarding the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline published in the Federal Register on June 8, 2021. Knowledge Alliance, a non-profit, non-partisan organization, is comprised of leading education organizations committed since 1971 to the greater use of high-quality and relevant data, research, evaluation and innovation in education policy and practice at all levels. Collectively, Knowledge Alliance promotes the use of rigorous research to collect, study and disseminate effective student interventions to policymakers, practitioners and the general public. Knowledge Alliance member organizations have and continue to conduct research, provide technical assistance and support States and districts on a multitude of issues affecting students and educators, including effective implementation of policies and practices related to school discipline and school climate initiatives.

Knowledge Alliance is pleased that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) is soliciting public comment to inform future policy guidance, technical assistance, or other resources to support the provision of positive, inclusive, safe and supportive school climates and ensure the nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline.

We urge to ED to consider the following as it seeks to provide comprehensive support to the field in this area:

- 1. Invest in research to help the field better understand how to foster positive school environments.**

Schools and communities contend with many factors that affect the conditions for learning, such as bullying, harassment, violence and substance abuse. Accurately measuring school climate helps States, districts, and schools identify areas of improvement and choose evidence-based interventions for effecting positive change. Knowledge Alliance calls on ED (through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)) to provide greater investments in research on State and

district reforms in school climate to help education leaders make sense of the various resources and frameworks that are available to them in supporting the creation of safe, equitable and engaging schools. It is critical that ED's efforts to support schools, and ultimately school and classroom practices regarding school discipline and climate, are informed by a wealth of research on this topic.

2. Build State and district capacity to collect, analyze and use school discipline data effectively.

Disparities in school discipline practices are a real and pressing problem in U.S. public schools – one that every State and district is responsible for addressing. To facilitate improvement in effective and nondiscriminatory school discipline policies, we believe ED should encourage States and districts collect, analyze and use school discipline data to advance equity while also continuing to provide safe and supportive school environments for all students. Having high-quality data on school discipline, which is disaggregated and publicly reported, can help States and districts identify the challenges their schools face in the design and application of school discipline policies and come up with effective policy and practice solutions.

As shared in a [policy brief by the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center](#), providing training in data collection, analysis and use for key State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) staff as well as support for other strategies can help SEA and LEA leaders take ownership of the issue and drive necessary reforms from the local level. With encouragement and support from ED, we believe taking such an approach can build the capacity of States and districts across the country to be better able to disaggregate data (based on student characteristics such as race or ethnicity) and use that data for the purpose of identifying potential disparities in the implementation of discipline practices and student outcomes.

As SEAs and LEAs build their capacity and systems to collect, analyze and use quality data for continuous improvement of school climate policy and practice, ED could consider how it could assist SEAs to incorporate measures of school discipline as part of State accountability systems required under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in service of improved practices and public accountability. Additionally, with increased data capacity at the State and local levels, ED could consider providing guidance to SEAs to support LEAs in developing local accountability systems that include measures of school discipline, which can help SEAs identify and respond to inequities in the application of school discipline practices and improve the ability of school districts to use school level data to improve school climate.

3. Focus Federal efforts on implementation support of evidence-based school discipline and school climate initiatives.

Research by Knowledge Alliance member organizations as well as others have demonstrated that investing in student and educator supports and professional development for educators and other school staff are effective practices to provide for safer, more welcoming and inclusive school environments. For example, a recent brief by the [EdResearch for Recovery project](#),

[Bringing Evidence-Based Decisionmaking to School Safety](#), found that research consistently places practices to improve mental health as well as social and emotional skills at the center of evidence-based school safety interventions. Additionally, to ensure effective and consistent implementation of school discipline and climate initiatives that address disparities and provide supportive environments, professional development must be prioritized and embedded through a school-wide plan.

While effective policies and practices have been identified through research to address inequities in the administration of school discipline and the creation of positive school climates, more attention must be paid to the implementation of these policies and practices through systemic capacity building and professional development at the school level. For example, a research study done by the [Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\) Northwest](#) on school discipline policy reform in Oregon found, that despite the goal of reducing racial disparities in exclusionary and nonexclusionary discipline, the number of both types of disciplinary actions increased among all students in grades K-5 and Black and American/Indian/Alaska Native students were disproportionately disciplined compared to other student groups. These findings suggest that increased professional development and coaching for teachers and school leaders is needed to effectively implement multitiered system of support (MTSS) and nonexclusionary discipline practices. We encourage ED to provide greater guidance, technical assistance and other resources to SEAs and LEAs as they monitor and evaluate the implementation of evidenced-based school climate practices.

4. Leverage existing federally funded research and technical assistance networks to provide implementation support.

As ED has highlighted and leveraged in COVID-19 response and recovery, the Federal research and technical assistance (TA) network provides invaluable evidence-based information, support and capacity building to SEAs tackling the challenging and critical needs of students and educators. We encourage ED to utilize the current Federal research and TA network's work to develop and disseminate future policy guidance, technical assistance or other resources to support States, districts and schools in promoting fairer, more equitable school climate policies and ensuring student safety.

For example, the [National Center on Safe and Supporting Learning Environments](#) (NCSSLE) and the [Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety](#) are charged with building State and local capacity to improve school climate and conditions for learning. At times, this involves these centers providing intensive technical assistance to SEAs and local educational agencies (LEAs) in developing policies and procedures to reduce racial and ethnic disproportionality in school discipline. Additionally, the [Title IV, Part A Technical Assistance Center](#) (T4PA Center) provides SEAs with dedicated support for implementing the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program which provides resources to SEAs and LEAs to create safe and supportive learning environments. We would also like to highlight the upcoming competition for [Equity Assistance Centers](#) which provides another opportunity for ED


to drive improvements in school discipline with a focus on reducing disparities in the administration of school discipline.

Furthermore, the Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) and Comprehensive Centers (CCs) work tirelessly to support SEAs and LEAs to meet their needs on school discipline and climate information. This is exemplified by REL Northwest which created a training series titled “[Using Data to Promote Equity in School Discipline](#).” This five-part series provided resources to help school and district teams use data to identify areas of concern related to exclusionary disciplinary policies. The training was mindful of discrepancies between districts in their collection of data and was purposefully designed to be flexible to meet the needs of each district. This vast research and technical assistance network can and should be leveraged by ED to ensure that SEAs and LEAs are properly supported in their efforts to ensure that school discipline and climate practices equitable.

ED’s support to State and districts to foster safe and supportive school environments must be reinforced by evidence-based practices. In order to achieve equal access to education programs and activities free from discrimination, ED must invest in research, technical assistance and a consistent evaluation of the administration of school discipline and related school climate practices. Knowledge Alliance looks forward to working with ED to promote evidence-based practices and strategies that encourage a positive school climate that is inclusive and nondiscriminatory of all students.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this notice. Please contact Lindsay Fryer at lfryer@pennhillgroup.com and Soraya Zrikem at szrikem@pennhillgroup.com with any requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jacki Ball".

Jacki Ball
President
Knowledge Alliance