EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recently, no excuses charter schools have been viewed as a promising solution to advance educational equity for all. They take a “no excuses” approach to education, and they primarily serve low-income students and students of color. They have extended school days, pre-and after-school support programs, high-quality teachers, uniforms, and high academic and discipline standards for students. In essence, no excuses schools do “whatever it takes” to ensure their students succeed academically and make it to and through college. With this no excuses approach, though, comes a set of strict disciplinary practices. There is zero tolerance for misbehavior. For even the smallest infractions, students can expect to receive an afterschool detention or a suspension. Using an ethnographic approach, my thesis research explored strict school discipline policies at a no excuses school on the northeast: the Young Scholars Academy (YSA).¹ My findings indicate that while these policies are intended to provide structure for students, they lead to the implicit criminalization of students of color. Somewhat surprisingly, this criminalization occurs despite the Academy’s intentional efforts to foster a family-like environment and make students feel at home.

INTRODUCING THE YOUNG SCHOLARS ACADEMY

YSA serves students in grades Pre-K through 8th grade, and is divided into a lower school (Pre-K to 2nd Grade) and an upper school (3rd through 8th). Over the last three years, the school added grades 6th through 8th (adding one grade each year). As such, the 2014-15 school year was the first year for 8th graders. Nearly 100% of the students identify as either Black or Latino, and 95% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

At the start of the 2014-15 school year, YSA hired a new principal, Mrs. Townsend, for the upper school. As a former teacher at another no excuses school, Mrs. Townsend began to implement strict disciplinary practices at YSA. Before Mrs. Townsend’s arrival, YSA was doing well academically, but she still viewed discipline as a problem at the school. To that end, she implemented a new “behavioral system.” If a student makes even the slightest noise in the hallway, they now receive an afterschool detention (a behavioral), where

¹ A pseudonym is used to protect the identity of the individuals at the school.
they must sit – in silence – and reflect on their “misbehavior.” During this time, they are not allowed to work on their homework. If a student misses afterschool detention, they receive an in-school suspension the following day. Additionally, if a student is caught using their cellphone during school, they automatically receive a one-day out-of-school suspension.

Mrs. Townsend also made changes to the school’s existing “scholar dollar system,” a system that tracks students’ academic and social behavior through a faux paycheck system. Each week, students begin with fifty dollars, and they lose and earn money based on how they behave in and outside of the classroom. Mrs. Townsend is now strictly enforcing a policy that students must receive a lunch detention for the entire week if they do not make “paycheck” at the end of the preceding week. This means that if a student’s paycheck is less than thirty-five dollars at the end of the week, they will have lunch detention every day for the following week. During lunch detention, they must eat their meals in separate room, in silence, and they miss recess.

It is important to note that these policy changes are being implemented in an Academy that already institutes high levels of control in and outside of the classroom. At the start of each class, students complete a “Do Now” assignment – a short set of questions about the previous lessons. Teachers start a timer for three to six minutes and project a countdown clock on the whiteboard at the front of the room. When the timer goes off, students know to immediately drop their pens, trade papers with another student, and then begin grading their peer’s assignment. Afterwards, students sit in silence as the teacher proceeds with the lesson for the day. Periodically, students are told they can “turn and talk” for a few minutes about the topic of the lesson. During the “turn and talk” time, teachers set the timer for just a few minutes and project the countdown clock on the board. When time is up, students must cease the conversations immediately. Throughout the class, teachers walk around the class saying, “Plus Two,” “Minus Three,” “Plus One,” as they give and take away scholar dollars from students based on their behavior. Students can lose scholar dollars for chewing gum, not having their shirt tucked in, or talking out of turn. Some classrooms are more flexible than others, but on the whole, teachers focus on “sweating the small stuff” and follow a strict order at school.

When many people hear about how no excuses schools like YSA “sweat the small stuff,” they are often reminded of the broken windows theory. This theory states that physical and/or social disorder can and will lead to more crime. In other words, if you allow
people to get away with small infractions, then they are more inclined to engage in worst behavior. Put simply, as George Kelling and James Wilson argue, “one broken window becomes many.”2 However, this theory has received several critiques and has only led to the further criminalization of people of color.3 In an effort to create more order, the broken windows theory has merely provided justification for racial profiling and the incessant criminalization of harmless acts, such as loitering. Despite the limited and flawed empirical evidence supporting this theory, however, we now see no excuses charter schools adopting the same approach and calling it “sweating the small stuff.” Many no excuses schools, including YSA, even openly cite the broken windows theory as one of their guiding principles in their school handbooks.

My research explores how “sweating the small stuff” leads to the criminalization of youth in the same ways that the broken windows theory does. As the Academy decides whether they should continue these strict disciplinary policies in the years to come, this research provides important insight about the real implications of their current practices, and will hopefully encourage them to reconsider their disciplinary policies.

**METHODOLOGY**

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has also recently created a database that tracks suspensions and expulsions at schools across the country.4 While these metrics are useful, suspension and expulsion rates do not reveal the complex ways in which students are disciplined – and in some ways criminalized – on a daily basis. For this reason, my research adopts an ethnographic approach to public policy. I conducted 14 site visits to the Young Scholars Academy. During each visit, I observed classrooms, hallways, lunch detention, and recess. I paid particular attention to the interactions between students and teachers when discipline issues arose. Furthermore, I interviewed YSA teachers and administrators about their opinions on school discipline and the efficacy of their current practices. Likewise, I conducted focus groups with 7th and 8th grade students about their perceptions of school culture and school discipline at their school.

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4 See *The Civil Rights Data Collection*, ocrdata.ed.gov
MAJOR FINDINGS

Students feel targeted

Students feel as if YSA educators are always “looking for the bad,” as one student put it. When discussing the scholar dollar system, students and teachers talked about how there is a greater focus on taking away scholar dollars rather than giving scholar dollars. One student described how one teacher made a poster with how you can lose and earn scholar dollars, noting that the ways in which you can lose scholar dollars was much longer than how you can earn scholar dollars. In my interviews with teachers and students, I also learned that there are more punishments than rewards with regard to the scholar dollar system. The punishments for not “making paycheck” are strict and consistent (e.g., lunch detention, not going on field trips), whereas the rewards for having a high paycheck are minimal and sparse. There was just one auction during the year for students to “buy” items based on their paychecks, for example.

Beyond the scholar dollar system, students feel most targeted when they are in the hallways. Throughout my focus groups, several students commented on how teachers constantly watch them to see if they make even the smallest noise in the hallways. I heard several anecdotes from students who received an afterschool detention for saying, “excuse me” to another student in the hallway or coughing. On the whole, students feel anxious transitioning between classes given the behavioral system. One student even mentioned how he thinks strategically about where he stands in line when transitioning from one class to another to avoid wrongfully being accused of talking in the hallways.

Students feel supported

Despite the constant monitoring, students still feel supported by the teachers and administrators at their school. While many students have negative sentiments about the discipline at their school, they feel supported academically. In my classroom observations, I saw how teachers held their students to high standards. They asked specific questions. They ensured that all students participated in class. They walked around the classroom to make certain that students understood the material. And students appreciated this. They told me how they valued their teacher’s commitment to academic excellence, and how the education at YSA is much better than the education they would receive at other schools.
Outside of the classroom, students also felt supported. YSA educators make a concerted effort to promote student’s culture, which I saw in multiple forms. For example, classrooms were filled with photos, quotations, and information about ethnic leaders, namely leaders from the Civil Rights Movement. The YSA leadership also thinks critically about the racial composition of their teachers, to ensure that students see teachers who look like them. As I spoke with students, I often heard how they feel like they can talk to their teachers about issues at home, and they liked that there is a family-like environment at YSA.

**YSA educators are strict out of “tough love”**

The teachers at YSA frequently described their strict discipline as “tough love.” By being strict on students now, YSA educators believed that they are better preparing students for the future. For some teachers, this was especially important given that YSA students are primarily low-income students of color, meaning they must be especially prepared for hardships in the future.

**Discipline policies are not implemented consistently**

Almost every teacher and administrator I spoke with commented on the inconsistencies present in YSA’s disciplinary system. This ranges from how the behavioral system is implemented to how scholar dollars are allocated. There is a strong desire amongst staff members to have the disciplinary practices be implemented more uniformly.
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Avoid sweating the (wrong) small stuff

Throughout my interviews with educators, I recognized a deep commitment to punishing students for minor infractions so that they are less inclined to engage in worse behavior. But what this results in is students getting in trouble for behaviors that cause no actual harm to the institution. Moreover, this philosophy of “sweating the small stuff” stems from the broken windows theory – a theory with little to no empirical support that has only led to the criminalization of people of color. Currently, YSA cites the broken windows theory on its website. However, given the controversy around – and limited support for – this theory, YSA should no longer use the broken windows theory as its guiding principle.

Abolish the behavioral system for 6th – 8th grade students

Certainly, order in the hallways is important; however, the behavioral system only encourages teachers to punish students for innocent behaviors (e.g., small talking). As a compromise, YSA can institute a rule requiring students to be quiet in the hallways so that they do not disrupt other classes. The rule does not need to go as far as to make students silent, though. Students should not receive an immediate afterschool detention for talking in the hallway because that leads to the constant punishment of students for actions that do little to no harm to the learning environment. Several teachers openly admitted that they think the silent requirement does go too far, meaning there is already a desire from some educators to shift away from stringent rules.

Revamp the scholar dollar system

For students in grades 6th – 8th, the scholar dollar system no longer seems effective. Students and educators openly noted that it does little to incentive good behavior; therefore, YSA should strongly consider reserving the scholar dollar system for students in 6th grade and below. When implementing the scholar dollar system, YSA administrators should train teachers to minimize the number of negative scholar dollars they give and focus on giving positive scholar dollars. Moreover, YSA should develop more reward systems for students who have a high paycheck. This more positive approach to discipline will incentivize good behavior without making students feel like teachers and administrators are focused on identifying the bad.
Create a student-teacher advisory board on school discipline

Students sincerely appreciate the family-like environment at YSA and would like more open communication with teachers and administrators about school policies. Likewise, teachers would like to feel more included in decisions around school discipline. As such, YSA should create a student-teacher board on school discipline to constantly review YSA disciplinary practices and revise them. The board can be reserved for students in 6th through 8th grade, and open to all teachers. During my conversations, I found that students and teachers presented a nuanced critique of their school disciplinary system. It is important for YSA administrators to hear these perspectives. This board will ensure that student and teacher perspectives are constantly at the forefront of policy conversations.

CONCLUSION

The Young Scholars Academy is in a period of transition. For years, the Academy has held its students, teachers, and staff to high standards, and their outcomes have been noteworthy. Their test scores are always higher than district averages (though they are not as high as state averages); students enjoy the academics; and there is excellent structure in the classroom. But test scores only measure one outcome. By talking directly with students and educators at the Academy, I learned about things that test scores do not reveal – how individuals feel on a day-to-day basis, and what their attitudes are about the institution. These perceptions are just as, if not more, important as YSA’s standardized test scores.

The data from this ethnographic study clearly reveal that students have negative attitudes about the ways in which they are treated with regard to discipline. Now, the Academy has an opportunity to listen to these stories and change their practices accordingly. By listening to the voices of students, the Academy will be better equipped to understand the real impact of their policies. It is only by listening to student voices that any educator or policymaker can make the positive changes that any school needs.
WORKS CITED


The Civil Rights Data Collection, ocrdata.ed.gov