

# Inequities in School Discipline in Melrose Public Schools

## Introduction to the Issue

Exclusionary school discipline is ineffective and harmful. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) advises that suspending students for non-violent offenses, “has limited effectiveness in improving their behavior and performance, and causes the students to fall behind academically” (MA DESE, 2016). Research shows that suspension and expulsion put students at greater risk of dropping out altogether (ACLU Washington). Disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion also have negative long-term effects, including lower earning power, fewer job opportunities, and greater chance of involvement in the carceral system, via “the school-to-prison pipeline” (ACLU Washington; Bacher-Hicks, Billings & Deming, 2021). Because Black students and students of color are disciplined more frequently and more harshly than white students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2022), they are more likely to experience negative outcomes stemming from school discipline.

Recent studies show that racial bias is a primary cause of inequities in school discipline. For example, an experimental study in which teachers were asked to review the record of a fictional Black or white student found that teachers were more likely to label the Black student “a troublemaker” and more likely to recommend disciplinary action for the Black student than they were for a white student with an identical record (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Another study shows that, nationwide, Black students are more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled, and that inequities are greater in communities with more racial bias (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Restorative practices may reduce reliance on exclusionary school discipline. A local expert in restorative practices notes that many schools are now moving away from disciplinary models that “mirror the criminal justice system of rules and punishment,” to focus on programs that emphasize communication and relationships (Hampson, 2019; WCAI, Feb. 2, 2022). The Massachusetts Department of Education encourages schools to adopt alternatives to exclusionary school discipline, including restorative practices and conflict resolution, explaining that such programs “not only reduce suspensions but also promote greater school safety, discipline, and academic success” (MA DESE, 2016)

## Purpose of this Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to document racial inequities in school discipline in Melrose Public Schools (MPS), using data reported by MPS to the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DESE). Specifically, this chapter examines:

- 1) Racial inequities in school discipline during the past three school years
- 2) Trends in discipline and racial inequities in discipline over time
- 3) Racial inequities in discipline in Melrose compared with neighboring communities

## Methods

### Data Used in these Analyses

Data used in this report are from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) School District Profiles, which are publicly available online at <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>. The following data are available for each Massachusetts municipality, for nine school years, from 2012-2013 through 2020-2021:

- 1) The total number of students
  - a. The number of students identified as African American/Black; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Hispanic/Latino; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; White; and multi-racial.
  - b. The number of students identified as male or female (no other gender identity options are made available); disability; high needs; English learner; and economic disadvantage. We find no definitions for these terms, and it seems unlikely that students self-identified into some of these classifications.
- 2) The total number of disciplinary actions
  - a. The total number of disciplinary actions by subgroup (race/ethnicity, gender identity, disability, high needs, English learner).
- 3) The percentage of the overall student body and the percentage of each subgroup that was given the following type of school discipline: in-school suspension; out-of-school suspension; expulsion; alternative setting; emergency removal; school-based arrest; and law enforcement referral.
- 4) The reason given for the disciplinary action, including a category for “non-drug, non-violent, or non-criminal related offense.”

This report focuses on Melrose. For some analyses, we compare Melrose data with data from the 12 municipalities that form two concentric rings around Melrose. Specifically, these municipalities are: Everett, Lynn, Lynnfield, Malden, Medford, Reading, Revere, Saugus, Stoneham, Wakefield, Winchester, and Woburn.

### Data Quality and Completeness

Data used in this report were downloaded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet by one individual and checked for accuracy by a second individual. The team has documented two instances in which state data appear to have been revised over time. In the first case, state-level data on staff race and gender reported for the 2019-2020 school year were later moved to the 2020-2021 school year, and new data were uploaded for the 2019-2020 school year. In the second case, data for Everett for the 2019-2020 school year were updated to increase the total number of disciplinary actions from 19 to 445. (Everett has also reported 19 actions for 2020-2021 as of 5/22/22, although actions are regularly in the range of 400+). It is possible there have been other data revisions the team has not noticed.

Data are not reported in the public dataset when fewer than six students are reported for a type of disciplinary action. For example, if five female students were given in-school suspensions, the cell representing female in-school suspensions will be blank.

## Calculating Inequities

Racial inequities in discipline are calculated as follows.

- Rate of discipline for Black students = (# of Black students disciplined/# of Black students in MPS).
- Rate of discipline for white Students = (# of white students disciplined/# of white students in MPS)
- Rate of Black versus white students disciplined = (Rate of Black students disciplined/Rate of white students disciplined)

For example, in 2019-2020 of the 231 Black students, 12 were disciplined; that is,  $12/231=0.0519$  or 5.2% of Black students. Of the 3,137 white Melrose students, 27 were disciplined; that is,  $27/3137=0.0086$  or 0.9% of white students. To calculate the rate of Black versus white discipline we divide the rate of discipline among Black students (0.0519) by the rate of discipline among white students (0.0086) with the result of 6.0348. Black students were disciplined at 6 times the rate of white students.

## Findings

### Overview of Racial Inequities in Melrose Public Schools by Year, Past Three Years

#### *Findings from 2018-2019*

In 2018-2019, MPS reported 60 disciplinary actions to the state. Black students in Melrose were three times as likely to be disciplined as white students, and four times as likely to be given an out-of-school suspension. Latinx students were twice as likely as white students to be disciplined, and twice as likely to be given an out-of-school suspension. Black students were twice as likely as white students to be disciplined for non-violent, non-drug incidents. Overall, students of color represented about 22% of the student body, and 35% of the disciplinary actions reported to the state.

#### *Findings from 2019-2020*

In 2019-2020, MPS reported 44 disciplinary actions to the state. Black students in Melrose were six times as likely to be disciplined as white students, and nearly eight times as likely to be given an out-of-school suspension. Latinx students were twice as likely to be disciplined as white students. Black students were five times as likely as white students to be disciplined for non-violent, non-drug incidents. Overall, students of color represented 23% of the student body and 39% of the disciplinary actions reported to the state.

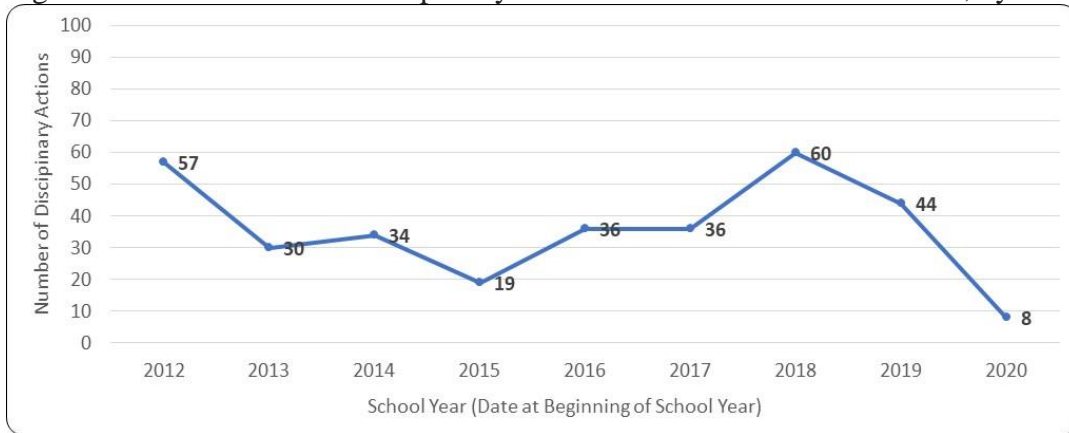
#### *Findings from 2020-2021*

In 2020-2021, MPS reported eight disciplinary actions to the state. Four of the disciplinary actions were taken against Black students, and four against white students. No Latinx students were disciplined in the 2020-2021 school year. Despite the dramatic decrease in and small number of disciplinary actions, Black students in Melrose were thirteen times as likely to be disciplined as white students. Black students were twenty-five times as likely as white students to be disciplined for non-violent, non-drug incidents. Black students represented 6% of the Melrose student body and 50% of the disciplinary actions reported to the state.

### Trends in Discipline, and Racial Inequities in Discipline, in Melrose Public Schools

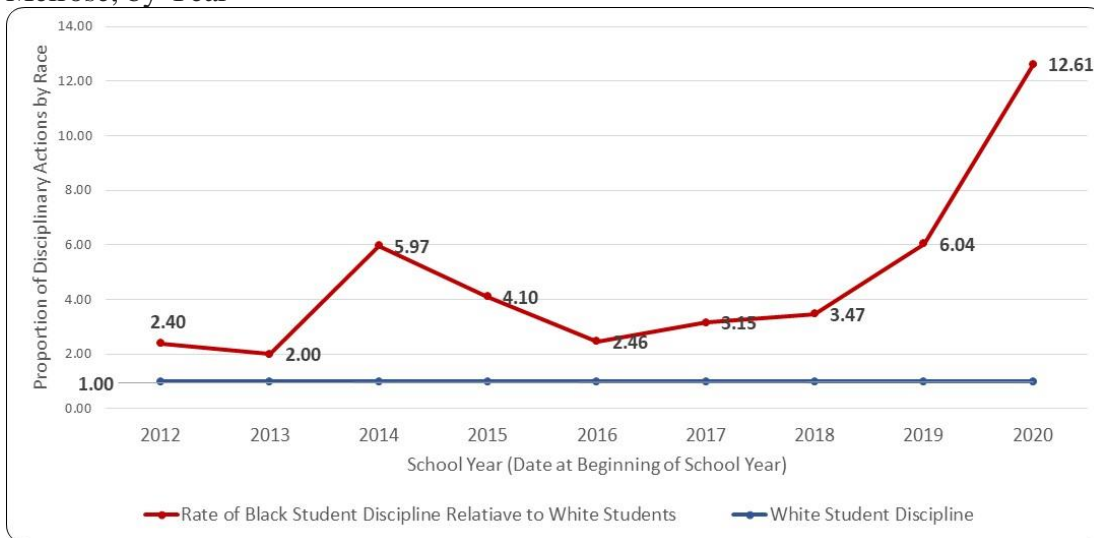
The total number of disciplinary actions taken by MPS has declined markedly over the last three years, from 60 in 2018-2019, to 44 in 2019-2020, to eight in 2020-2021 (Figure 1). Note that after March of the 2019-2020 school year students did not return to school due to COVID-19, and that the 2020-2021 school year was severely disrupted, with many students alternating between weeks of in-person and online schooling for most of the year.

Figure 1. Total Number of Disciplinary Actions in Melrose Public Schools, by Year



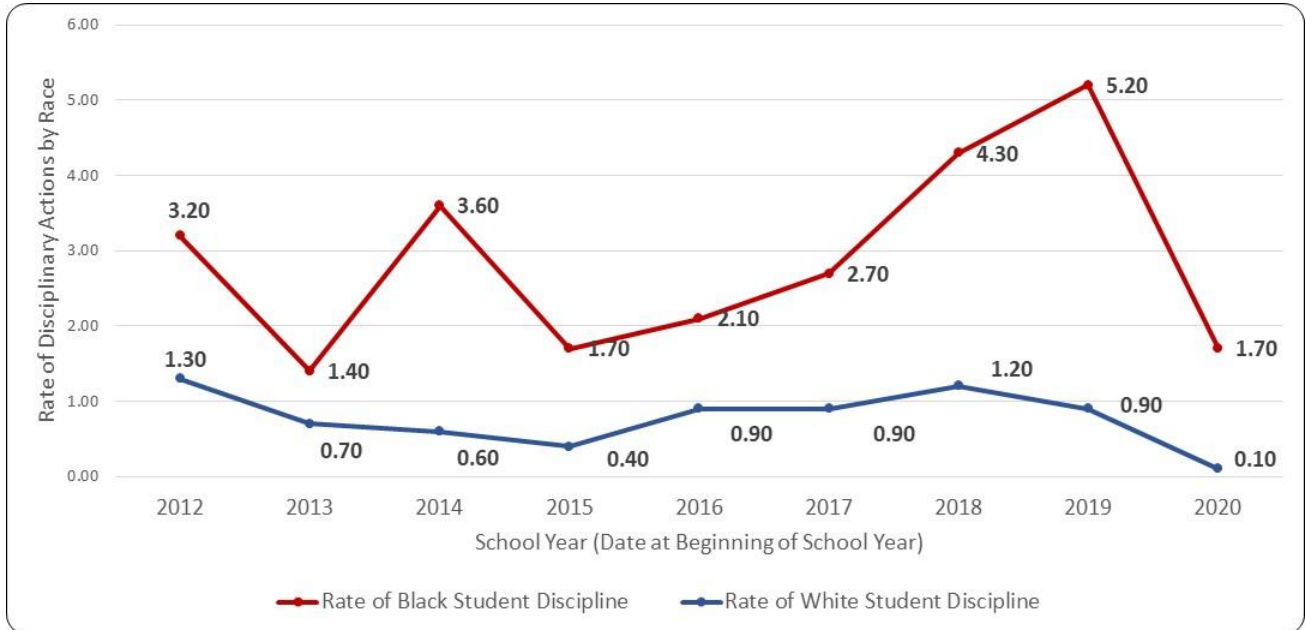
Despite dramatic declines in discipline, racial inequities have increased (Figure 2). Although there were only eight disciplinary actions overall in 2020-2021, four were against Black students and four against white students. Because there were 231 Black students in MPS in that year, and 2,913 white students, the rate of discipline is  $((4/231)/(4/2913)) = 12.61$ . Black students were disciplined at 12 times the rate of white students. Figure 2 holds the rate of disciplinary action taken against white students constant at 1 to better illustrate the difference in rates by race.

Figure 2. Proportion of Disciplinary Actions for Black Students Relative to White Students in Melrose, by Year



In most years for which we have data, the rate of disciplinary actions among white students is less than one as shown in Figure 3, below. Among Black students, the rate of disciplinary actions is consistently greater than one. Despite students being physically in school much less frequently during the 2020-2021 school year, the rate of disciplinary actions for Black students matched or exceeded two school years in which there were no such disruptions (2015-2016 and 2013-2014, respectively). The same year white students were disciplined at the lowest rate over the nine-year period for which we have data.

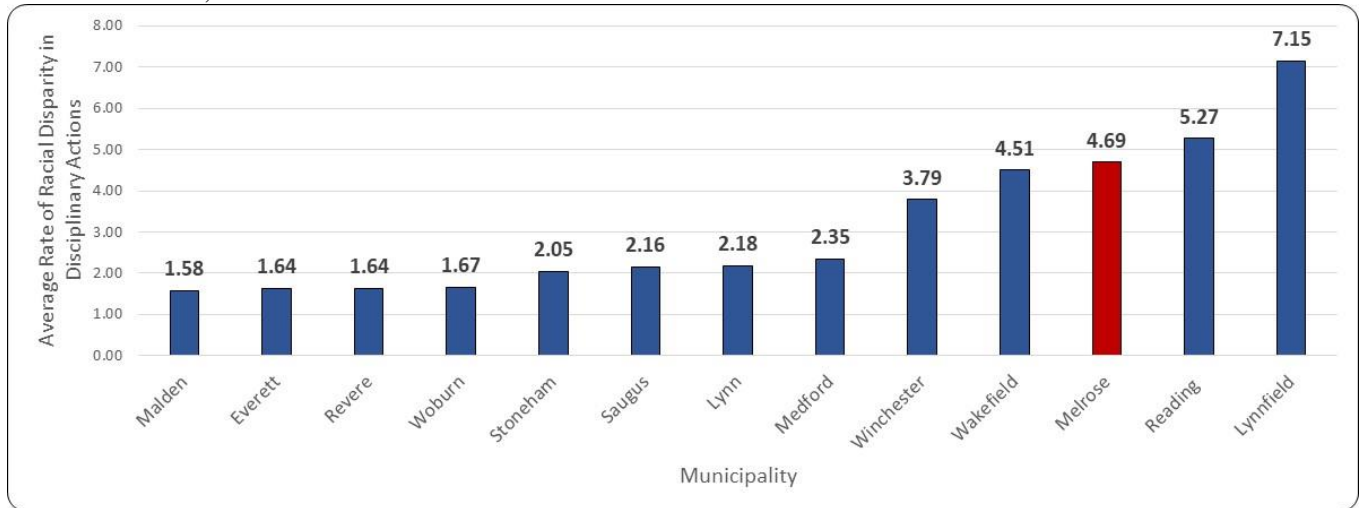
Figure 3. Rate of Disciplinary Actions for Black Students and White Students in Melrose, by Year



## Racial Inequities in Melrose Public Schools Compared with Neighboring Communities

Melrose has one of the highest rates of racial disparity in school discipline compared with 12 neighboring communities. Figure 4 shows the average rate of disparity in school discipline between Black and white students over the nine-year period from 2012-2013 through the 2020-2021 school year.

Figure 4. Average Rate at Which Area Public Schools Discipline Black Students Relative to White Students, 2012-2021

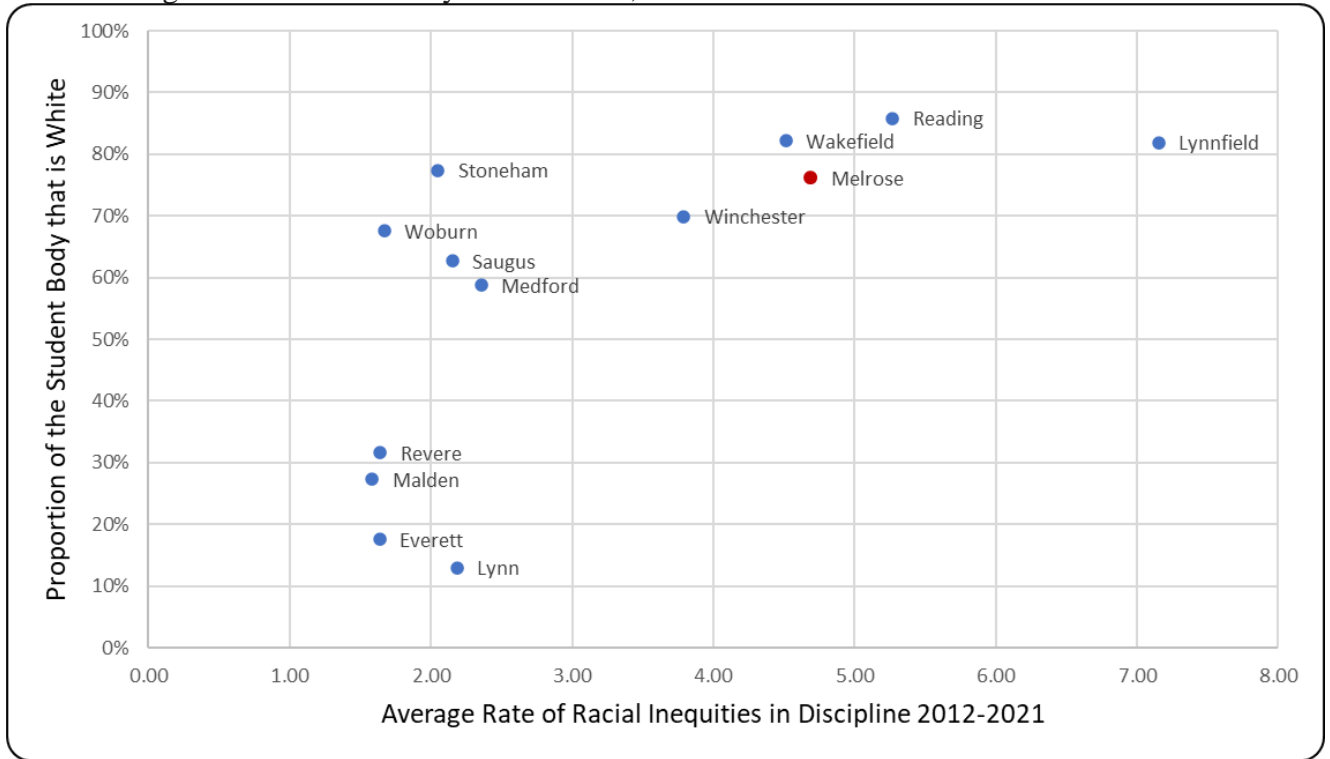


The Broader Social Context

*Racial Inequity in Discipline by Racial Composition of Student Body*

The whitest schools have the highest rates of racial inequities in school discipline. Among the five municipalities in which 75% or more of the student body is white, four also are among those with the highest rates of disparity in school discipline: Melrose, Lynnfield, Wakefield, and Reading (Figure 5). Stoneham is the exception. Stoneham’s student body is similar to Melrose, yet the rate of Black-white disparity in school discipline from 2012-2013 through 2020-2021 is less than half that of Melrose.

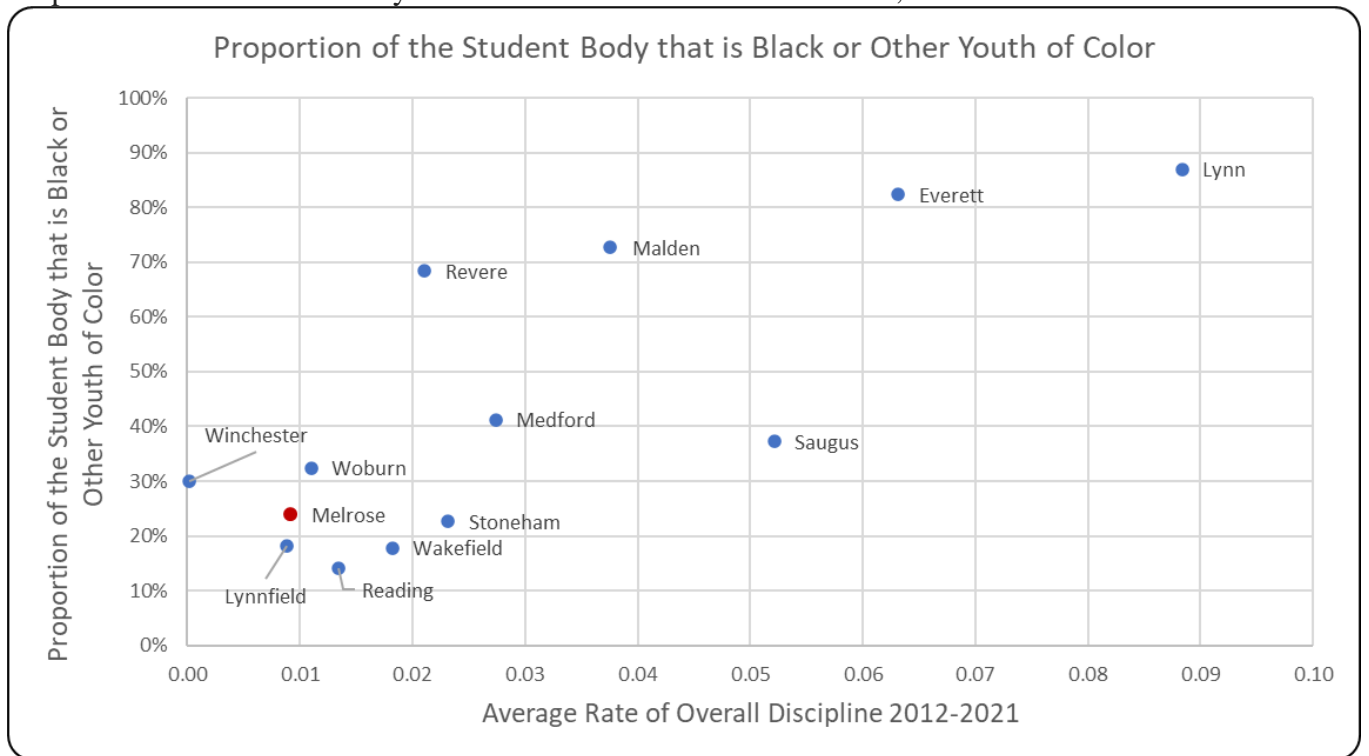
Figure 5. Average Rate of Racial Inequities in School Discipline in Area Schools, 2012-2021, by the Percentage of the Student Body that is White, 2021



*Overall Discipline by Racial Composition of the Student Body*

Overall rates of discipline are higher on average in municipalities with a greater proportion of students of color (Figure 6). Among the four municipalities in which more than half of the student body consists of youth of color, two have the highest rates of disciplinary actions (Lynn and Everett), and a third is among the top four in terms of disciplinary actions (Malden).

Figure 6. Average Rate of Overall School Discipline in Area Schools, 2012-2021, by the Proportion of the Student Body that is Black or Other Youth of Color, 2021





## Conclusions

Melrose has a serious, long-standing problem with racial inequities in school discipline. Specifically, we document racial inequities in each of the nine school years studied, from 2012-2013 through 2020-2021. In 2013-2014—the year with the *smallest* racial disparity in school discipline—Black students were disciplined at twice the rate of white students. Despite recent reductions in discipline overall, racial inequities have persisted and increased. Compared to 12 neighboring municipalities, Melrose has among the worst rates of racial disparity in school discipline.

Within the geographic area studied, racial inequities in school discipline and overall discipline rates appear to be correlated with the racial composition of the student body. Specifically, municipalities with whiter student bodies have higher rates of racial disparity in school discipline, and municipalities with predominantly students of color have lower rates of racial disparity, but higher rates of discipline overall. These findings may reflect the ways in which racial bias plays out in communities with different racial compositions.

## Discussion

Exclusionary school discipline is ineffective, harmful, inconsistent with state policy...and a seemingly ingrained part of the Melrose Public Schools culture. Research shows that suspending students for non-violent offenses is ineffective and harmful, especially for Black youth and other youth of color. For these reasons, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) has advised against such use of discipline since at least 2016. Nevertheless, data show that Melrose consistently disciplines youth for non-violent, non-drug, non-crime incidents. For example, in March 2022, Melrose High School sent an email to students and parents announcing that students who park in teachers' parking spots will be given two detentions for the first offense and a full day suspension for the second. Exclusionary school discipline for non-violent incidents remains a part of the Melrose Public Schools culture.

Research shows that racial bias is a primary cause of inequities in school discipline (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Determining which behaviors warrant disciplinary action is to some degree subjective, which is why these decisions may be particularly susceptible to the influence of racial bias. Because we live in a society in which Black people are systematically criminalized and white people receive the benefit of doubt and second chances, staff may not realize that they are choosing harsher discipline for Black youth and youth of color, and choosing leniency for white youth.

We know how to do better. Research shows that restorative practices provide an opportunity for schools to break from disciplinary approaches that mirror—and too often feed into—the criminal justice system (Hampson, 2019; WCAI, Feb. 2, 2022). Moreover, the Massachusetts Department of Education encourages schools to adopt restorative practices and conflict resolution, explaining that such programs do more to promote safety, discipline, and academic success than exclusionary school discipline (MA DESE, 2016)

## Recommendations

- **Review school discipline policies to determine whether they are aligned with MA DESE recommendations and whether any policies are likely to be differentially applied by race.** As this report makes clear, some of the disciplinary actions being taken within the Melrose Public Schools conflict with guidance from MA DESE. A first step is to document where policies are not aligned with current best practices. Particular attention should be given to policies that may be applied inequitably by race.
- **Address racial bias to eliminate racial inequities in school discipline.** These data show that Melrose is unlikely to solve the problem of racial inequities in discipline by reducing overall instances of discipline. Even as Melrose markedly reduced the overall number of disciplinary actions from 2019 to 2021, racial inequities increased. This is because inequities are not essentially rooted in discipline—they are rooted in racism.
- **Look to Stoneham as a possible model.** Stoneham—which has a student body with a similar racial composition to Melrose—has a much lower rate of racial disparity in school discipline. Melrose administrators would benefit from connecting with administrators and staff in the Stoneham public school system to understand their approach to school discipline, and whether Melrose may benefit from adopting some of their practices.
- **Collect data to understand staff use of exclusionary school discipline.** The state collects the race, gender, economic situation, language learner status, and disability status of students who are disciplined, but we know students are only one part of the equation when it comes to discipline. Melrose would benefit from proactively collecting data to better understand patterns in staff use of exclusionary discipline. Collecting these data would acknowledge that it is staff who have the power to discipline and thus staff who are primarily responsible for patterns in discipline—including racial inequities.
- **Begin the process of implementing restorative practices.** Experts in restorative practices underscore that developing a culture of restorative practice to replace exclusionary school discipline can take 5-10 years (WCAI, Feb. 2, 2022). We must begin this work immediately, so children who are just entering the Melrose Public School system can begin to benefit from a new approach during their middle or high school years.

## Reporting Team

The reporting team for this report consisted of Jane Allen, Erika Nauda, Jim Garrett, Beth Hampson, Cory Allen, Grace Berte, and David Valade. Jane Allen was the primary author. Erika Nauda checked the downloaded state data for accuracy. Jim Garrett checked the methods for accuracy. Beth Hampson provided expert guidance on restorative practices. Cory Allen provided guidance on the section as a whole, including methods and reporting. Grace Berte, David Valade and Dan Pratt reviewed and provided comments that enabled us to expand, correct, and clarify various aspects of the report. If you have comments or questions about this report, or would like to report any errors or inaccuracies, the team would appreciate you bringing them to our attention by contacting us at [janeappleyardallen@gmail.com](mailto:janeappleyardallen@gmail.com).

## Citations

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\*The MA DESE *About the Data* page for school discipline reports that disciplinary data for years prior to the 2012-2013 school year are reported in the Student Indicators Profile.