Do no-excuses disciplinary practices promote success?

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ABSTRACT
The urban education reform landscape is being transformed by the rapid spread of charter schools. Leading the way is a group of high-performing, no-excuses charter schools, represented by networks like Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools. Although critics have raised concerns over these schools’ highly structured disciplinary practices, these schools have justified these practices on the basis that they increase student achievement. In this article, we provide the first review of literature on the impact of no-excuses disciplinary practices on various measures of student and organizational success. We find little evidence to support the connection between no-excuses disciplinary methods and students’ academic performance on standardized tests—and some evidence that these methods may undermine nonacademic outcomes, such as students’ social and behavioral skills.

On February 12, 2016, the New York Times released a video taken by a former assistant teacher at Success Academy Cobble Hill (Taylor, 2016). In the video, “A Momentary Lapse or Abusive Teaching?” a young, White, female teacher asks a Black first-grader to describe how she solved a math problem. The young girl begins counting but is unable or unwilling to continue. In response, the teacher takes the girl’s paper, rips it in half, and orders her to “go to the calm down chair and sit.” The student complies quickly, while the other students continue to sit quietly, cross-legged with arms folded in their laps. With a sharp tone, the teacher continues to chastise the young girl several times: “You’re confusing everybody. Very upset and very disappointed.” Within 24 hours, 2,000 readers commented on the article, expressing a range of emotions from shock and disgust to defense of the teacher and the rapidly growing charter school network.

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No-excuses” charter schools like Success Academy have faced intense scrutiny over their approach to student discipline (Ben-Porath, 2013; Ellison, 2012; Goodman, 2013). The term no excuses comes from the idea that schools should make no excuses for student failure (Carter, 2000) and has come to describe a group of urban charter schools that subscribe to a similar model. No-excuses schools share several practices—a longer school day and school year, intensive professional development for teachers, data-driven instruction, and after-school tutoring—but most controversial is their highly structured and strict disciplinary approach. Advocates defend no-excuses discipline on the grounds that it holds students to high expectations and provides the order necessary for student learning; critics argue that it has deleterious effects on student well-being and reinforces racist ideologies by using methods that would not be acceptable for White, middle-class children (Goodman, 2013; White, 2015).

We offer the first comprehensive review and analysis of the impact of no-excuses disciplinary practices, focusing on the following research question: What are no-excuses disciplinary practices and how do they relate to academic and nonacademic measures of student success and organizational success? Prior literature argues that these methods are unethical and age-inappropriate (Ben-Porath, 2013; Ellison, 2012; Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013); however, no studies have systematically
analyzed their impact on student success. Our review and analysis yields no compelling evidence that the no-excuses disciplinary approach is necessary for raising student test scores; rather, it may be counterproductive to traditional and broader measures of student and organizational success.

In this article, we challenge the assumption held by many no-excuses leaders\(^1\) and policymakers that such intensive and strict discipline is foundational to maintaining order and increasing student achievement in urban schools (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; Whitman, 2008; Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, & Lopez-Torkos, 2008), supporting efforts by a growing number of schools—both traditional, charter, and no-excuses—to move away from punitive disciplinary practices. We also explore how schools can shift their disciplinary practices through a comparison of no-excuses and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) practices. Finally, we argue that a more holistic approach to measuring the success of schools is needed and propose alternative measures by which charter authorizers and researchers should evaluate school success.

**Why study no-excuses schools?**

The urban education reform landscape is being transformed by the rapid spread of charter schools—public schools that are granted greater autonomy and flexibility in exchange for greater accountability. Cities including Detroit, Los Angeles, Denver, Camden, Newark, and New Orleans have seen explosive growth in charter schools; for instance, students in New Orleans are almost exclusively served by charter schools. President Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos are vocal supporters of charter schools and want to cut $10 billion from other federal education initiatives and use hundreds of millions of dollars to support school choice and charter school expansion (Brown, Strauss, & Douglas-Gabriel, 2017).

Though research suggests that, on average, charter schools produce no better student achievement outcomes than traditional public schools (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2006), advocates point to the success of urban charters, particularly high-achieving no-excuses charters like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Success Academies, Mastery, Aspire, and YES Prep. Some research suggests that they are doing the impossible—narrowing, and even closing, racial achievement gaps for students in high-poverty, urban communities (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011a, 2011b). Because of their academic success, no-excuses schools have been featured in media outlets like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *Oprah*, and *60 Minutes* and in a popular documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) declared that KIPP is “widely considered one of the most promising initiatives in public education today” (p. 38). To supporters, these schools provide living proof that schools can get all students to achieve at high levels, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, or skill level (Carter, 2000; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Over the last decade, corporate foundations like the Walton Family Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Fisher Fund, Dell Foundation, and Broad Foundation have committed millions of dollars to replicating no-excuses schools by supporting the development of charter management organizations (CMOs; Quinn, Oelberger, & Meyerson, 2016; Scott, 2009; Snyder & Reckhow, 2017). CMOs are especially popular in urban centers, with such schools dominating over a third of the charter market (Lake et al., 2010), leaving the community-run schools popular in the early charter school movement struggling to compete (Bukley & Fisler, 2003). One concern that has emerged with the growing influence of CMOs and no-excuses charters is that these schools will neither reflect nor respond to the voices of local community members (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Lipman, 2015; Scott, 2009). Traditionally, many Black families and educators viewed charters as an opportunity to empower local communities and to resist White dominance by restoring parental and community control to schools (Henry & Dixson, 2016; Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). As White philanthropists, venture capitalists, and politicians from outside local communities take a more central role in shaping the charter school landscape, it is important to take a closer look at charter school practices and their effect on urban communities and children of color. Do no-excuses disciplinary practices promote student success, or do they inadvertently reproduce the very racial
and socioeconomic inequities they purport to address (Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Kretchmar et al., 2014).

**Conceptual framework**

In recent years, policymakers have mainly measured school success by student performance on standardized tests. This may be changing. For example, the federal Every Students Succeeds Act requires state accountability proposals to include at least one nonacademic outcome (i.e., school climate). No-excuses schools themselves increasingly emphasize character and social justice (Lake et al., 2012; Maranto & Ritter, 2014); for example, the mission of Democracy Prep, a no-excuses network based in New York City, is “to educate responsible citizen-scholars for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship” (Democracy Prep, 2016). Moreover, there is growing research consensus that nonacademic skills, such as self-regulation, agency, and persistence, are as important as academic skills in preparing students for success in school, work, and life (Moore, Lippman, & Ryberg, 2015). In light of this, what can we learn about no-excuses discipline and its effects when we look at a variety of outcomes?

We follow Moore and colleagues (2015) in defining nonacademic outcomes and advocating for their importance, arguing that “educational, economic and life success reflect children’s nonacademic as well as academic competencies” (p. 1). They define nonacademic outcomes as indicators of well-being at a given point in time and “primarily use the term nonacademic in preference to non-cognitive” (Moore et al., 2015, p. 3), because the attributes of many outcomes, such as self-regulation, require cognition. In their review, a number of nonacademic constructs were considered, including self-regulation, agency/motivation, persistence, executive functioning, social competence, positive relationships, educational engagement, and indicators of psychological and emotional development often associated with character development (e.g., grit, integrity, hope). Although many of these constructs are related to academic success, many “are considered intrinsically important to child development in their own right” (Moore et al., 2015, p. 1).

In addition to examining several of the nonacademic outcomes mentioned above, we also consider the extent to which strict disciplinary practices are racialized (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, 2014) given the disproportionate impact of harsh and exclusionary disciplinary practices on students of color. Racial disparities in school discipline have led to the coining of the term the discipline gap, with some scholars arguing that the Black–White achievement gap cannot be closed without first closing the Black–White discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen, 2014). The fact that no-excuses schools mostly serve Black and Latino students raises questions about whether no-excuses disciplinary practices improve upon the zero-tolerance practices’ that have proliferated in urban schools since the 1990s or produce more of the same. We therefore examine whether students perceive discipline as fair and review research on student suspensions and attrition in no-excuses schools.

Because no-excuses CMOs have goals to “scale up” (Quinn et al., 2016; Tuttle et al., 2015)—or are pressured in various cities to increase their market share—we broaden our focus to include nonacademic outcomes related to the organization itself, including organizational measures of success relevant to school choice policy, such as parental perceptions and teacher turnover.

In summary, we review studies discussing the link between no-excuses-style discipline and various academic and nonacademic indicators to assess the impact of these practices on broader notions of development and success. We use student performance on standardized tests as our primary academic outcome because most no-excuses schools are too young to have available college outcomes data.

**Methods**

We searched for literature aligned to our research question, including peer-reviewed empirical studies, reports and program evaluations produced by think tanks and other organizations, and peer-reviewed
nonempirical work (i.e., essays or commentaries). We searched for literature from 2000 to 2017, because the term no-excuses emerged at about the turn of the century (Carter, 2000). We also searched for “paternalistic schools,” “over-subscribed charters,” and “totalitarian schools”; though no-excuses has become the predominant nomenclature in the literature for these schools, other researchers have used these other names as well. We searched separately for studies on CMOs and well-known charter organizations associated with a no-excuses approach, such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, Democracy Prep, and Mastery Charter Schools. We also consulted with senior scholars in the field of charter school research to help us identify pertinent literature that might appear outside of peer-reviewed literature searches; consequently, we searched for literature produced by RAND and Mathematica and working papers published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, SRI International, the National Education Policy Center, and the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

We then reviewed studies focused on describing disciplinary approaches in no-excuses charters and how they related to student achievement, school climate (including teacher–student relationships, student perceptions of discipline), teacher commitment, and various social and behavioral skills. We excluded studies that discussed the disciplinary structure of the school but did not consider it as a variable of interest potentially affecting other student outcomes. The next sections describe the no-excuses disciplinary model and how it relates to these specific outcomes, starting with academic achievement.

What is the no-excuses disciplinary model?

No-excuses schools generally share what we will call the 4Cs: comprehensiveness, clarity, consistency, and consequences.

Comprehensiveness

No-excuses schools implement behavioral programs regulating numerous aspects of student behavior. Instead of picking their battles, no-excuses schools “sweat the small stuff” (Whitman, 2008). Using a “broken windows” policing approach (Kelling & Wilson, 1982), these schools seek to eliminate as many visible signs of disorder, no matter how minor, to prevent more serious offenses. Students are often forbidden to talk quietly in the hallway, enter and exit classrooms on their own, keep backpacks at their desk, wear jewelry, stare into space, slouch, put their head down, get out of a seat without permission, or refuse to track a teacher’s eyes (Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Lake et al., 2012; Whitman, 2008). Teachers are encouraged to “constantly monitor child behavior and give quick, sometimes severe, feedback and consequences to behavior” such as talking out of turn or not following directions immediately (Lake et al., 2010, p. 27). Methods popularized by no-excuses organizations such as “Do it Again” and “100%” emphasize repeating procedures until teachers receive full student compliance with behavioral expectations (Lemov, 2010).

Clarity

Clear expectations are viewed as essential to effective classroom management (Lake et al., 2012; Lemov & Atkins, 2010), with teachers directed to set extremely specific and concrete behavioral expectations. Whitman (2008) describes the no-excuses approach as paternalistic, attributing these schools’ success to their explicit efforts to resocialize students into middle-class behavioral norms like discipline, attention, punctuality, and effort (see also Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). “These schools thus require and teach students to meet high expectations for behavior and academic achievement—rather than just encouraging them to aim high,” argues Whitman (2008, p. 4). By contrast, drawing from Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) color-blind racism framework, White (2015) argues that these practices represent a form of cultural racism, privileging White, middle-class norms over Black and Latino culture.
Consistency

No-excuses schools insist on schoolwide consistency in setting and enforcing behavioral expectations (Lake et al., 2012). Consistency is prized over discretion; even teachers able to manage classrooms using alternative methods must follow school systems to avoid undermining school procedures and provoking student resistance (Lake et al., 2012). In principle, insisting on common expectations and consistent enforcement of consequences is well supported by research on effective school management (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Inconsistent implementation of school rules can result in increased student resistance and conflict (Ingersoll, 2003) as students begin to resent being punished for behaviors that were acceptable in another classroom or hallway. However, the enforced rules must be perceived as fair by students to maintain a positive dynamic (Arum, 2005).

Consequences

No-excuses schools rely on positive and negative consequences to enforce student behavior; students who behave well may earn points or scholar dollars toward field trips or school store purchases, and those who do not are punished with detentions, demerits, or suspensions (Goodman, 2013; Lake et al., 2012). For example, a student might lose $2 for calling out, $6 for walking inappropriately through the hallways, and $10 for laughing at a peer. At the end of the week, if a student’s paycheck falls below a certain amount, he or she can earn a detention or suspension.

No-excuses schools defend these 4Cs on the basis that they promote academic achievement. School leaders share a sense of urgency around academic achievement: because a minute cannot be wasted; with so much catching up to do, even minor misbehaviors must be dealt with swiftly, and often harshly (Lake et al., 2010; Whitman, 2008). Systems for rewards and consequences, like “paychecks,” allow educators to make rapid decisions to achieve student compliance (Lake et al., 2010; Woodworth et al., 2008). When asked about the link between behavior and culture, one school leader put it this way: “Our priorities are always culture and instruction. And I put culture first, but really culture yields academic achievement” (Woodworth et al., 2008, p. 54). Similarly, teachers and leaders believe that a schoolwide approach to behavior is critical to achieving a culture focused on academic achievement. Although one third of teachers across the KIPP Bay Area network stated that they were uncomfortable with school disciplinary approaches, they rated the consistent enforcement of the school’s behavior management system as “extremely important” (74% of teachers) or “important” (25%) features of their school in helping students succeed academically (Woodworth et al., 2008). Thus, though staff believe that the many components of the no-excuses model are necessary for promoting student success, they view school disciplinary practices as an essential part of this package (Lake et al., 2012).

Do no-excuses disciplinary practices promote academic achievement?

Evaluations of no-excuses schools typically do not distinguish between their different practices, thus obscuring exactly what makes these schools effective. The model is taken as a black box, replicated without consideration of whether each practice is necessary or beneficial for students. But is the no-excuses model a “package deal”? Are all elements of the model responsible for raising academic achievement? Recent studies have attempted to go inside this black box to determine exactly which practices increase student achievement. Reviewing these studies, we find no compelling evidence that school disciplinary policies are necessary for academic achievement, as measured by student performance on standardized tests.

Two studies conducted by Mathematica Policy Research provide the strongest support that no-excuses behavioral practices correlate with student test scores. The first national study of charter management organization effectiveness found that the highest-achieving charter networks implemented comprehensive behavioral policies, consistently enforced disciplinary policies, used rewards and sanctions, and had zero-tolerance policies for dangerous behaviors (Furgeson et al., 2011). The authors note, however, that the associations between school disciplinary practices and student test score impacts are not to be interpreted as
causal relationships. Similarly, in a study of 43 KIPP middle schools, Tuttle et al. (2013) found that schoolwide behavioral codes had a positive association with student test scores. Because of their small sample size and the lack of robustness in their findings, however, they do not make conclusive statements about the impact of school behavioral practices on student achievement.

A few recent studies employing more rigorous methods challenge the notion that no-excuses disciplinary practices improve student test scores. Across 35 New York City charter schools, Dobbie and Fryer (2011b) interviewed administrators, teachers, and students; videotaped classroom observations; and collected administrative data on student outcomes and demographics. They identified five practices explaining nearly half the variance in school effectiveness: data-driven instruction, extended instructional time, high-dosage tutoring, intensive professional development, and high academic and behavioral expectations. Notably, they also found that, net of these five practices, the no-excuses behavioral approach had no association with students’ academic achievement. These results, they concluded, are “highly suggestive that there is nothing mystical about ‘No Excuses’ schools” (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b, p. 19). In other words, no-excuses schools are successful because they include these five features, not because they sweat the small stuff.

One could argue that Dobbie and Fryer’s measure of high expectations is highly correlated with the no-excuses disciplinary culture. Dobbie and Fryer (2011b) coded a school as having high expectations if the school administrator ranked “a relentless focus on academic goals and having students meet them” and “very high expectations for student behavior and discipline” as the top two priorities. Other possible priorities included “a comprehensive approach to the social and emotional needs of the whole child,” “building a student’s self-esteem through positive reinforcement,” and “prioritizing each child’s interests and passions in designing a project-based unit” (2011b, p. 9). In their sample, however, Dobbie and Fryer (2011b) identified six charter schools that had high expectations but were not no-excuses schools.

A subsequent study provides further evidence that high behavioral expectations can be distinct from no-excuses disciplinary practices. In a randomized field experiment to test the effectiveness of these five practices in 20 of the lowest performing Houston public schools, Fryer (2014) found that the intervention schools that implemented the five best practices significantly increased standardized test scores. These schools did not have to adhere to a no-excuses disciplinary system: to ensure high expectations, schools were required to set and post student goals, present visual evidence of a college-going culture, and have parents sign contracts to honor school expectations. They did not have to establish a schoolwide system of rewards and consequences or prescribe silent hallways, for example. Principals played a key role in establishing school culture, and some relied on schoolwide, incentive-driven behavioral systems, whereas others did not.

Finally, using lottery-based impact estimates from a sample of 113 charters, Chabrier, Cohodes, and Oreopoulos (2016) aimed to identify what practices drove variations in charter school performance. Once they accounted for the performance of fallback schools, defined as urban schools that are very low-performing and often used as comparative context for the higher performance of no-excuses schools, they found that the relationship between the remaining variation in school performance and the entire no-excuses package of practices (including strict disciplinary codes) weakens. Intensive tutoring is the only no-excuses characteristic that remains statistically significant.

These studies suggest that schools can be high-achieving without being no-excuses schools. In fact, what drives the success of no-excuses schools may be their other features, not their sweating-the-small-stuff disciplinary approach.

The impact of no-excuses discipline on nonacademic outcomes

The next sections review how no-excuses disciplinary practices relate to nonacademic and organizational indicators of success, specifically (a) students’ social and behavioral skills, (b) students’ perceptions of fairness, (c) teacher commitment and organizational scalability, and (d) parental choice.
Social and behavioral skills

No-excuses schools emphasize academic achievement as a means to an end: to set students on a path to college and the middle class. New work does suggest that some no-excuses schools positively impact students’ college enrollment and earnings (see Dobbie & Fryer, 2016, for an example); still, many no-excuses leaders are shifting practices to explicitly teach social and behavioral skills in an effort to better meet these goals. KIPP found that a third of students from their first cohorts completed college within 6 years, short of their goal of 75%. Attributing these lower completion rates to students’ nonacademic skills rather than academic preparation, they began to emphasize character education (KIPP Foundation, 2011). Indeed, social and behavioral skills like grit, self-control, organization, leadership, and effort are strong predictors of educational and occupational attainment (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001).

Using ethnographic methods and observational data, some scholars have noted that students at these schools may not develop the skills necessary for success in college (e.g., independent decision making, initiative, and assertiveness), precisely because the no-excuses behavioral climate stands in stark contrast to college expectations (Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013). College students are expected to manage their work independently, approach their professors during office hours, and ask for help (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Karp & Bork, 2012). In a 15-month ethnographic study of one no-excuses middle school, Golann (2015) found that, under a highly regulated system, students learned to monitor themselves, repress their opinions, and defer to authority, rather than to take initiative, assert their needs, and negotiate with their teachers. Whereas middle-class children learn to interpret situations and break rules at opportune times (Calarco, 2011; Streb, 2011), students at the school learned to always respond to rules in the same way. These findings suggest that the no-excuses discipline undermined the schools’ own goals of preparing students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college.

Proactive interactional skills are important for college but are also integral to citizenship. Of the civic role of schools, Ben-Porath (2013) argues that the strict controls and limited interaction in no-excuses schools reduce opportunities for students to practice self-expression, advocacy, and collaboration, skills critical to participation in a democratic society. Sondel (2015), in a 6-month ethnographic study of Teach For America teachers in two New Orleans no-excuses charter schools, found that, despite varied good intentions, the teachers struggled to develop students as citizens within the context of their school model. Although teachers had varying conceptions of an ideal citizen, only those who sought to develop “personally responsible” citizens—individuals concerned primarily with their own behavior—as opposed to “participatory” or “justice-oriented” citizens felt able to enact their ideas.

No-excuses schools might argue that students must first learn self-control before they can learn to be independent, assertive citizens. Yet students may not even internalize the discipline that these schools try so hard to teach. In the most comprehensive study of the KIPP schools, Tuttle et al. (2013, 2015) found that attending a KIPP school had no effect on a variety of measures of student attitudes and behaviors related to college success, including self-control, grit, school engagement, effort/persistence in school, academic confidence, educational aspirations, and good behaviors. Dobbie and Fryer (2013), following students from the Harlem Children’s Zone Promise Academies® 6 years after enrollment, also found that the school had little impact on students’ noncognitive skills, such as grit and self-esteem, although they did find a decrease among students in teen pregnancy and incarceration. A third set of researchers using self-report survey data from fourth- through eighth-grade Boston students found that, though measures of conscientiousness, self-control, grit, and growth mindset were positively correlated with attendance, behavior, and test score gains, attending an oversubscribed charter school had a positive impact on attendance but a negative impact on noncognitive skills (West et al., 2016). Thus, whatever skills students may learn from the school’s behavioral system may overshadow what they learn from explicit lessons on character or college.
Racialized discipline: Perceptions of fairness, school climate, and student attrition

Researchers have found that students support strict disciplinary policies if they perceive school rules and teachers as fair (Arun, 2005). Using nationally representative data, Arum (2005) found that in schools where consequences were viewed as unfair, strict disciplinary policies were associated with negative academic outcomes and higher student resistance. Yet over half of surveyed students in KIPP’s Bay Area schools felt that school rules were not fair, with a high of 84% at one school (Woodworth et al., 2008). Students’ perceptions of fairness have broader societal implications, because they can influence how they perceive social and criminal injustice and the legitimacy of social structures (Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005; Shedd, 2015). When evaluating the success of no-excuses schools, we must also consider the role that schools play in teaching Black and Latino students about themselves and their place in society.

Although students do need strong, clear guidance regarding what is expected of their behavior—Wubbels, Brekelmans, Van Tartwijk, and Admiral (1999) call this the dominant dimension of establishing effective student–teacher relationships—teachers must balance this with what they term the cooperative dimension, which requires teachers to be responsive to students’ needs and opinions. Disciplinary methods in no-excuses schools may actively discourage focusing on the cooperative dimension: Golann (2015) found that some teachers silenced student opinions or views related to perceived misbehavior, instead insisting on compliance and applying consequences in an effort to stay focused on academics. White (2015), in a 2-year qualitative study of charters in New York City, described how one White teacher struggled to deepen relationships with her students and learn about their lives outside of school amid a heavy focus on test preparation and behavioral management.

Students may also perceive no-excuses discipline as unfair because minor infractions can lead to major consequences, including suspensions and expulsions. According to a recent report released by Advocates for Children of New York (2015), 65% of the 164 charter school discipline policies reviewed violated state law because they permitted suspension or expulsion as a penalty for any infraction in their discipline policy, no matter how minor. Concern is growing that no-excuses charter schools are more likely than comparable traditional schools to use exclusionary discipline (Denise, Gross, & Rausch, 2015; Stern, Clonan, Jaffee, & Lee, 2015), which has been shown to have negative psychosocial and academic consequences, for both suspended individuals and their peers at school (Gregory et al., 2010; Perry & Morris, 2014). According to an analysis of publicly available data from 2011–2012, New York City charters suspended students at almost three times the rate of traditional public schools, with several of the largest no-excuses charter networks suspending more than 20% of their students at least once (Decker, Snyder, & Darville, 2015).

Especially worrisome is the disproportionate impact of these disciplinary practices on Black males. One study of three no-excuses schools found that those students most likely to receive consequences were low-achieving Black males (Seider, Gilbert, Novick, & Gomez, 2013). They are also more likely to leave no-excuses schools. In a study of 30 KIPP schools, Miron, Urschel, and Saxton (2011) found that approximately 40% of Black males left the schools between grades 6 and 8. A Mathematica study of 22 KIPP schools also found high levels of attrition (34% by eighth grade), at rates comparable to those of the local public school district (Nichols-Barrer, Gleason, Gill, & Tuttle, 2015). Black males and lower achieving students were more likely to leave both KIPP schools and district schools (Nichols-Barrer et al., 2015). This evidence suggests that rates of student attrition for Black males in these schools are no better, and possibly worse, than the supposedly low-performing dysfunctional schools they replace in urban districts.

In sum, even if disciplinary approaches help educators maintain order and focus on delivering instruction to the majority of students, there can be substantial costs. Strict disciplinary practices can cause students to feel unfairly treated by teachers and schools; moreover, they can exacerbate racial and socioeconomic disparities in school discipline.
**Teacher commitment and scalability**

One of the goals of many CMOs is scale, or growing the number of schools within the network while maintaining academic success (Farrell, Wohlístetter, & Smith, 2012). A major challenge to this is human capital: specifically, a limited supply of teachers willing and able to work in no-excuses schools compounded by high teacher turnover (Wilson, 2009). For instance, turnover in no-excuses schools is significantly higher than that in traditional public schools and can be as high as 25–35% annually in some CMOs (see Torres, 2014b).

The largest CMOs, serving 10 or more schools, are more likely to be prescriptive regarding disciplinary methods than smaller ones (Lake et al., 2010). Standardized disciplinary systems may be easier to teach and replicate, especially considering that the novice and early career teachers who make up the majority of teachers at no-excuses schools typically struggle with classroom management (Torres, 2014b; Wilson, 2009). Although this prescriptiveness may have certain advantages, analyses of CMO teacher survey data find that no-excuses discipline is associated with teacher turnover even after controlling for teacher/school characteristics and conditions such as teacher workload and perceptions of principals (Torres, 2014b). In an interview study looking at CMO teachers’ decisions to leave, teachers cited their discomfort with disciplinary approaches and their limited autonomy to change these approaches as reasons for leaving their jobs (Torres, 2014a; Torres, 2016). In particular, teachers mentioned burnout and a reduced sense of efficacy due to the need to frequently and consistently mete out consequences for minor behaviors as contributing to their decisions to depart (Torres, 2016). Considering high turnover and a low supply of teachers for these schools, disciplinary systems have the potential to harm as much as help with CMOs’ efforts to grow.

No-excuses advocates might argue that student achievement is what matters above and beyond teacher retention or teaching experience. But turnover matters when it comes to scaling these schools. Yeh (2013), reanalyzing evaluation data from studies of KIPP and the Harlem Children’s Zone suggesting that these schools and their practices were potentially effective at closing the achievement gap, found that these gains would “fall to zero” if these programs were implemented nationwide due to “high teacher attrition and hoarding a disproportionate share of the nation’s pool of highly dedicated teachers” (p. 1). Moreover, CMOs devote tremendous resources to developing new teachers, and KIPP leaders have expressed concern over the limited supply of teachers and leaders who are a good fit with their organizations (Tuttle et al., 2013). Excessive turnover may also affect the ability to scale while maintaining high performance because it can adversely affect student achievement regardless of the quality of teachers who leave or teachers who stay (Rondelet, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Finally, even if the no-excuses disciplinary model supports novice teachers, high turnover leads organizations to lose the potential benefit of expected increases in teacher effectiveness over time (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).

**Parental choice**

Lengthy waiting lists demonstrate clear demand for no-excuses schools in many urban communities. However, parental demand may not be equivalent to parental endorsements of these schools’ disciplinary practices. Some urban parents may prefer strict schools, with parents in high-poverty communities identifying safety as a primary reason for choosing charter schools (Calvo, 2007). Critics and supporters agree that no-excuses schools provide a calm, orderly learning environment (Goodman, 2013; Lake et al., 2012). Although the style of control used in no-excuses schools appears to repel middle-class parents—whose children attend “prestige charter schools” that focus on the whole child and foster a warm and welcoming learning environment (Makris & Brown, 2016)—strict discipline may reflect the more authoritarian style found in many working-class homes (Bernstein, 1971; Lareau, 2003). On the other hand, parents may not be actively choosing the no-excuses model. Parents in low-income communities often lack sufficient information about different school options and make their choices based on word-of-mouth, proximity, or the racial/social class composition of
the school (André-Bechely, 2005; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). These parents often choose charter schools because they are fleeing low-performing and unsafe traditional urban schools (Chabrier et al., 2016). The emphasis on test scores and the lack of easily accessible alternative metrics also make more holistic evaluations of schools challenging for parents. Finally, because no-excuses schools have become the dominant charter school option in some cities (Angrist et al., 2011), parents seeking an alternative to the traditional public school may have few school models from which to select. Additionally, they may hear mostly about no-excuses schools because of many of these schools' aggressive marketing strategies (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016).

Few studies exist of parent and community perceptions of no-excuses schools. In interviews with parents who chose no-excuses schools or urban public Montessori schools, Golann, Debs, and Weiss (2017) found that both parent groups expressed concerns with school structures post-enrollment. Prior to enrollment, parents at the no-excuses school knew few specifics about school disciplinary practices. As they learned more over time, they showed greater ambivalence over the appropriateness of school rules, the pressures faced by their children, and the lack of an outlet for student self-expression. Parents supported structure but desired greater student autonomy. Yet because they had chosen to enroll their children in these schools and had signed contracts agreeing to school disciplinary practices, they largely refrained from voicing their reservations to their children or to the school (Hammack, 2016; Lake et al., 2012).

Tennessee’s Achievement School District (ASD) provides a counterexample of heightened stakeholder conflict when parents’ decisions cannot be framed in the context of choice. In 2011, Tennessee created the ASD, courting high-achieving CMOs to turn around Tennessee’s lowest-performing schools. Although CMOs are usually reluctant to enter turnaround models (Therriault, 2016), preferring to start new schools from scratch, a group of CMOs agreed to follow a traditional system of neighborhood school enrollment. Drawing from 140 interviews with leaders of the ASD and charters, Massell, Glazer, and Malone (2016) found that charter school leaders struggled to gain parent and student buy-in for their disciplinary practices without this initial parental commitment. Moreover, the ASD faced a high level of community resistance, with detractors accusing the ASD of having ulterior racist, paternalistic, and neoliberal motives (Glazer & Egan, 2016). Unlike other no-excuses schools, the ASD charters have not yet shown significant performance gains (Zimmer, Henry, & Kho, 2017), speaking in part to the importance of parent and community support for the success of these schools.

**Discussion: The need for evidence-based practices**

In an editorial in the Wall Street Journal, Eva Moskowitz (2015) pushed back against critics of Success Academy's controversial disciplinary practices: "Success Academy’s 34 principals and I deeply believe that if we lessen our standards for student comportment, the education of the 11,000 children in our schools would profoundly suffer.” Like Moskowitz, many no-excuses leaders and policymakers believe that no-excuses disciplinary practices are an essential part of the success of the school model (Lake et al., 2012). Our review of the literature suggests otherwise. We find that these practices do not clearly promote students’ academic achievement or social and behavioral skills and, in fact, may make these schools less attractive to some teachers and parents. As no-excuses schools mature and expand, the time seems ripe to consider alternative, well-established, research-based approaches to discipline and behavior that may better serve their students and schools.

Some no-excuses schools, in fact, are doing just that. Several no-excuses schools in Indiana, Denver, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and San Francisco are beginning to use alternative, research-based approaches to discipline such as PBIS and restorative justice approaches (Carr, 2014; Mastery Charter Schools, 2015; Zappa, 2015). In 2009, Ric Zappa, Head of Schools and Character Development for KIPP Bay Area Schools, began implementing restorative justice practices at KIPP Summit. Restorative justice practices changed the school’s approach from automatically punishing students to working together with them to resolve problems and restore relationships. “Almost immediately, we began seeing results—fewer students were sent out of class, and students’ reading
levels and academic performance improved exponentially,” he writes in a KIPP blog (Zappa, 2015). “Our KIPPsters felt more in control of their day-to-day lives by taking ownership of their education and setting goals for themselves. A partnership between students and teachers emerged.” KIPP Summit was named a California Distinguished School in 2011 and a National Blue Ribbon School in 2014. In the 2014-2015 school year, all KIPP Bay Area schools began piloting restorative justice. This example suggests that no-excuses schools may be able to significantly modify their disciplinary approach without compromising academic achievement. In another case, Kerstetter (2016) found that a no-excuses school using a restorative justice approach performed at higher levels than both the district average and a traditional no-excuses school in the district. Although this comparison is imperfect, Kerstetter (2016) argues that it provides evidence that no-excuses schools can be high-performing without using harsh and punitive disciplinary practices.

PBIS may be an even easier transition because it shares many similarities with the no-excuses approach. Both PBIS and no-excuses discipline rely on schoolwide implementation and agreement around consistently reinforced, core behavioral expectations. Both teach students behaviors desired and dictated by school administration and specify what these behaviors look like, providing rewards to students who exhibit these behaviors (see Table 1).

Thinking back to the 4Cs framework we outlined and considering the comparison in Table 1, both models emphasize consistency, clarity, and comprehensiveness but differ in their views of consequences in terms of frequency, proportionality, and differentiation. In contrast with the no-excuses approach, PBIS aims to avoid the use of punishment (e.g., detention, timeout, verbal reprimands) and emphasizes to the greatest extent possible the use of the “most effective and most positive approach to addressing even the most severe problem behaviors” (PBIS.org, 2010). This positive approach, for example, teaching and then observing and praising appropriate behavioral actions, is supported by much research showing the limited value of exclusionary, punitive approaches, which may work as a short-term fix to stop problematic behavior but may end up exacerbating antisocial behavior (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010).

Another key difference is that PBIS encourages teachers to understand the underlying cause of problem behavior and to individualize the solution accordingly. The theory is that addressing the root cause (i.e., the “function”) of problem behavior is a better method to encourage consistently positive behavior over the long term (Sugai et al., 2000). If problematic behavior is unresponsive to positive schoolwide approaches, teachers may apply consequences that are proportionate to the offenses and matched to the function (PBIS.org, 2010). By contrast, no-excuses schools encourage uniform responses to undesirable behaviors, and teachers often do not seek out the reason for misbehaviors or teach appropriate replacement skills (Lake et al., 2012). Finally, a third difference pertains to how schoolwide rules are established. PBIS solicits staff input on the content of behavioral expectations and moves forward with plans if some percentage of the staff (e.g., 80%) is committed to the approach (Sugai & Horner, 2006). By contrast, no-excuses schools often insist on replicating and implementing with fidelity what they feel has already worked to get their students to achieve (Wilson, 2009), regardless of teachers’ perceptions of the approach (Torres, 2014a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>No-excuses disciplinary system</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive behavioral intervention system</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Both emphasize schoolwide consistency in implementing behavioral practices.</td>
<td>Uses punitive consequences for noncompliance. Minor infractions are punished to deter major offenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both teach specific expected behaviors (e.g., what they look like) and provide rewards to reinforce them.</td>
<td>Promotes a uniform response (e.g., demerits) to undesirable behaviors.</td>
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</table>

Table 1. Comparison of features of PBIS and no-excuses disciplinary systems.
By focusing on positive consequences, understanding the cause of problematic behavior, and building consensus over school rules, disciplinary frameworks like PBIS address some of the key challenges with no-excuses discipline that we have identified. Unlike the no-excuses disciplinary system, alternative approaches like PBIS have a robust empirical foundation to support student success (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2007; Horner et al., 2009; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002). No-excuses schools interested in piloting alternatives may find PBIS a familiar place to begin.

**Conclusion**

Too often, concerns about the suitability of no-excuses discipline are dismissed by claims that these methods are necessary to raise student achievement. We find that this widely held assumption is not well supported empirically. Compared to more disorderly settings, no-excuses schools may help new and novice teachers better control their classrooms, affording students and teachers more time on instruction. This order, however, could also be established using alternative disciplinary models better supported by theory and research.

These findings hold significant implications for urban education reform. Policymakers and researchers must attend to multiple measures of success, as well as what factors produce such success. Federal accountability policies should include measures of school climate, suspensions/expulsions, student and parent perceptions, and teacher turnover. School choice advocates should acknowledge that even the most successful charter schools may have harmful unintended consequences for students. As our review demonstrates, no-excuses charter schools, though potentially reducing gaps in achievement, may reproduce other racial and socioeconomic inequalities—for example, in students' social and behavioral skills. Local and state-level charter authorizers must consider potential costs of no-excuses discipline and encourage detailed behavioral plans emphasizing inclusive decision-making processes and positive approaches. They should also broaden their authorization criteria to account for community values and goals.

Our findings suggest that no-excuses schools might benefit by turning to evidence-based disciplinary approaches such as restorative justice or PBIS. We note that some charter schools, including those in KIPP and Mastery charter networks, recognize the need to explore alternative disciplinary approaches and have implemented these approaches. Researchers should examine how no-excuses schools integrate alternative disciplinary frameworks into their highly structured models. What are the challenges and benefits these schools experience? Do these schools continue to raise student test scores? Do teachers, students, and principals report greater satisfaction with, and commitment to, their schools? How difficult are these alternative models to implement and bring to scale? We also know little about the relationship between CMOs and the decision-making processes that principals and teachers use to adopt schoolwide disciplinary approaches in their schools. Researchers should focus on understanding this process and its variations, as well as its implications for principal and teacher autonomy and commitment.

Much attention has been rightfully directed toward the appropriateness of no-excuses disciplinary expectations, especially in light of the expansion of no-excuses schools into the charter and traditional public school sector (Fryer, 2014). These practices can no longer be taken as part and parcel of the no-excuses model but must be seriously reconsidered in their own right. If no-excuses schools adopted less punitive discipline while maintaining academic success, it would help address some concerns of the model. It might also shift attention from discipline to other elements of the model—like high-dosage tutoring, data-driven instruction, and intensive professional development (Chabrier et al., 2016; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b)—generating insights into what really makes no-excuses schools work.
Notes

1. We acknowledge that no-excuses leaders hold varied ideas about discipline, and we later note evidence of this in pointing out how certain KIPP schools are moving toward restorative justice. Nonetheless, many schools and school leaders still grapple with this belief and dilemma.
2. Zero-tolerance policies make expulsion or suspension a mandatory penalty for a variety of violent offences and drug charges (Zwolfer & De Beers, 2002).
3. This example is taken from “Defining the Consequences: Student-Behavior Management With Doug Lemov,” an Education Week webinar that originally aired on September 17, 2013.
4. No-excuses discipline was measured using a list of 10 multiple-choice questions written for the purposes of the study by the founder of a prominent no-excuses school (e.g., questions related to schoolwide behavioral rules, desk and backpack rules, silence in the hallways, and tracking the teacher).
5. There was only a significant impact on math scores, not reading scores. No-excuses schools tend to have weaker impacts on reading scores than on math scores (e.g., Angrist et al. 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011b).
6. Dobbie and Fryer (2011a) characterize Harlem Children’s Zones Promise Academy as a no-excuses school with wraparound services.

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