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# Suspension in Worcester: A Continuing Conversation

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## Executive Summary

During the Spring of 2013, the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University and the Worcester Education Collaborative analyzed demographic and suspension data related to the Worcester Public Schools system. This data came from federal, state, and local sources, in particular from the Office of Civil Rights, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the WPS data warehouse.

An ensuing report, “Not Present, Not Accounted For: Suspensions in Worcester,” showed an alarming trend in district out-of-school suspensions. While there was an overall decrease in total suspensions since 2006 from a high of 5,550 (2007) to 3,906 (2012), there was significant disparity in how the suspensions fell on the student population. Comprising at least 38% of the student body, Latino students shouldered 53% of the total suspensions. Other groups experienced also notable disparities. African Americans, who comprise 14% of the system experienced 17% of the suspensions. Both White students (36% of the district population) and Asian American students (8% of the district population) had smaller proportions of suspensions at 24% and 3%, respectively.

While critically important in identifying tendencies, the data only allowed researchers and policy-makers a glimpse at what was happening. The data showed trends, but not causation. Accordingly, the LEI and researchers from the Vincent “Jake” Powers CityLab in the WSU Department of Urban Studies wanted to look more closely at the underlying situation in Worcester’s public schools to add some flesh to the statistical bones.

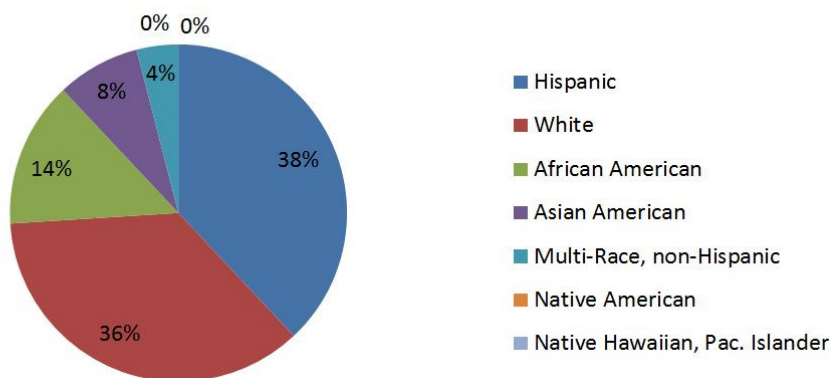
That is the background for this report, which proceeds on two fronts. First, CityLab researchers prepared two online surveys. One was sent to teachers from six schools in the WPS system with the highest suspension rates; the other was sent to all principals in the district. Second, researchers conducted two focus groups. One was with current and former students of the WPS system who had experienced suspensions; the other was with parents of WPS students who have experienced suspensions in their families.

Overall, these initiatives found:

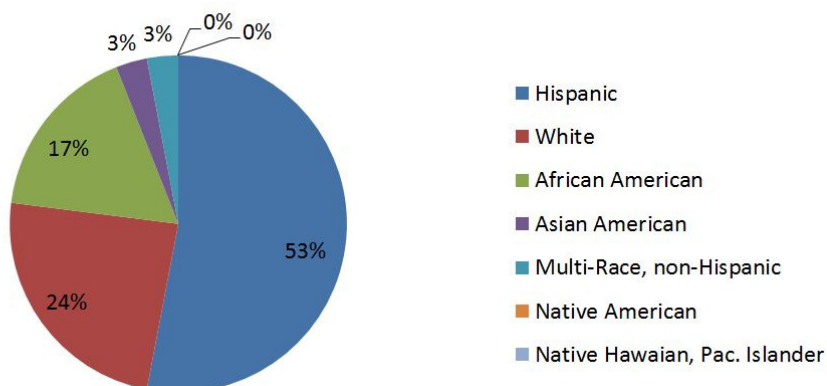
- Lack of English language proficiency and cultural differences contributed significantly to suspensions.
- Teachers and principals had different views about the effectiveness of the current disciplinary processes in WPS.
- While students certainly see some behaviors as necessitating serious disciplinary consequences, many student-system confrontations can be diffused or entirely avoided long before out of school suspensions are triggered.
- Students and parents fear that suspension, especially out-of-school suspension, creates an undue downward spiral from which students have a difficult time recovering and that therefore limits their future possibilities.

This report seeks to move the conversation on this important topic forward. Early in 2013, Governor Deval Patrick’s Office issued a statement outlining ways to “build a 21st century public education system in Massachusetts that prepares all students to compete and succeed in the global marketplace.” Certainly the issue of equal access to education needs to be seriously considered to reach this goal. To that end, this is not the end of the story, but rather, a beginning.

### District Population, 2011-12, by Race



### District Suspension Rates, 2011-12, by Race



## Online Surveys

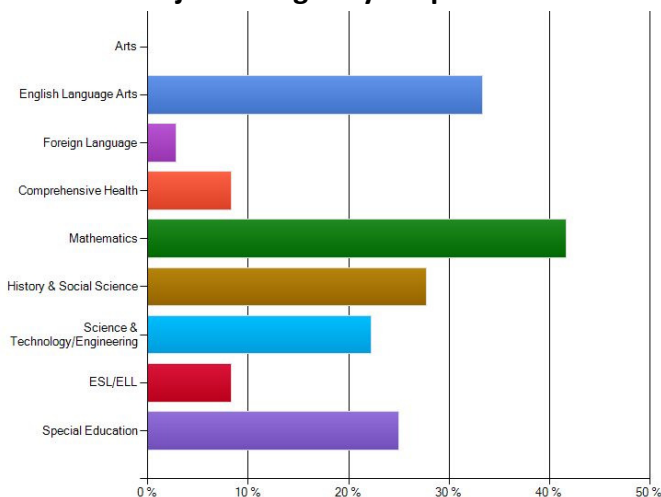
*The Department of Urban Studies conducted two online surveys of teachers and principals in September 2013. The goal was to better understand disciplinary concerns that teachers and administrators face in Worcester schools, how they are managed, and how closely teachers' and administrators' perspectives align. It is hoped these surveys would stimulate further discussion on school discipline and culture.*

### Teacher Survey Basics

Faculty of six district schools with high suspension rates were asked to participate. These schools were: North High School, Claremont Academy (High School), Sullivan Middle School, Chandler Magnet (Elementary) School, Goddard Elementary School, and Union Hill Elementary. In all, 277 individual survey invitations were initially sent; these recipients also received two follow up reminders during the survey period.

Thirty-eight teachers (13.7%) completed the survey. Respondents taught high school (48.6%), middle school (35.1%), and elementary school (16.2%). These were mostly veteran teachers: 67.6% reported 10+ years of teaching experience across a variety of disciplines.

### Subjects Taught by Respondents



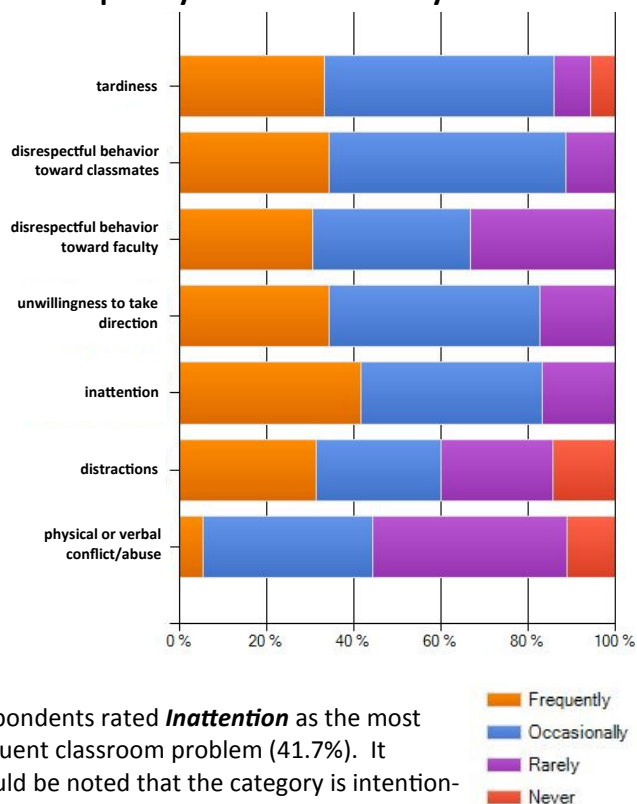
### Teacher Survey Findings

Teachers were asked about disciplinary concerns, approaches to discipline, and ways to address disciplinary concerns in the future.

Most teachers (63.9%) said their school had "established and clearly communicated guidelines for responding to disciplinary problems." Yet, 25% said they did not and 11.1% were unsure. In sharp contrast, when administrators and principals answered the same question, 100% of respondents said

schools had clearly communicated discipline guidelines. Teachers were asked to rate how frequently they faced a variety of discipline problems in their classrooms.

### Disciplinary Concerns Faced by Teachers



Respondents rated **Inattention** as the most frequent classroom problem (41.7%). It should be noted that the category is intentionally broad with a wide range of causes of inattention. To be sure, the range of issues under the title "inattention" do not represent the same level of infraction, but they do produce the same result: disinterest in classroom activities that is neither related to the students' use of technology nor aggressive behaviors.

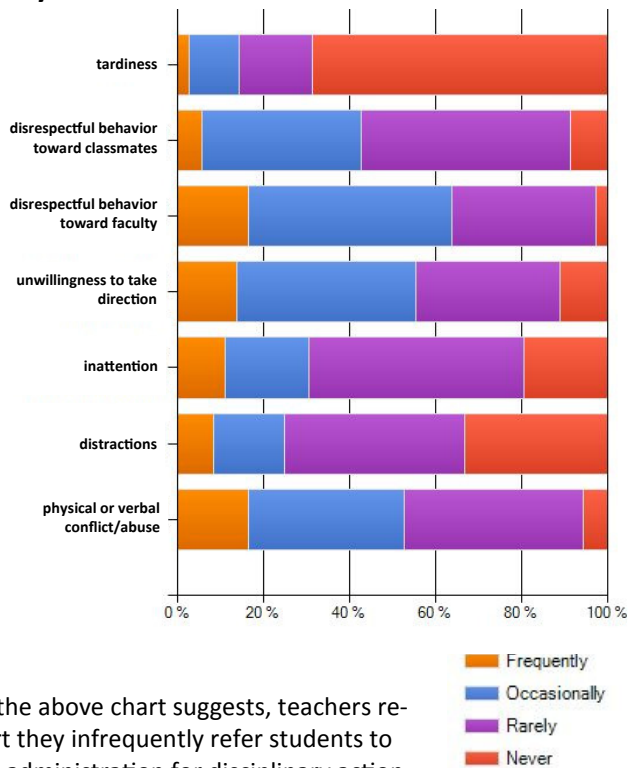
All but one of the remaining categories were called frequent by approximately a third of respondents:

<b>Unwillingness to take direction</b>	34.3%
<b>Disrespectful behavior toward classmates</b>	34.3%
<b>Distractions</b>	31.4%
<b>Tardiness</b>	33.3%
<b>Disrespectful behavior toward faculty</b>	30.8%

But, survey respondents rated **Physical or Verbal Conflict/Abuse** as an infrequent problem with 55.5% claiming it happened rarely or never in their classrooms. Interestingly, no high school teacher rated this a frequent problem.

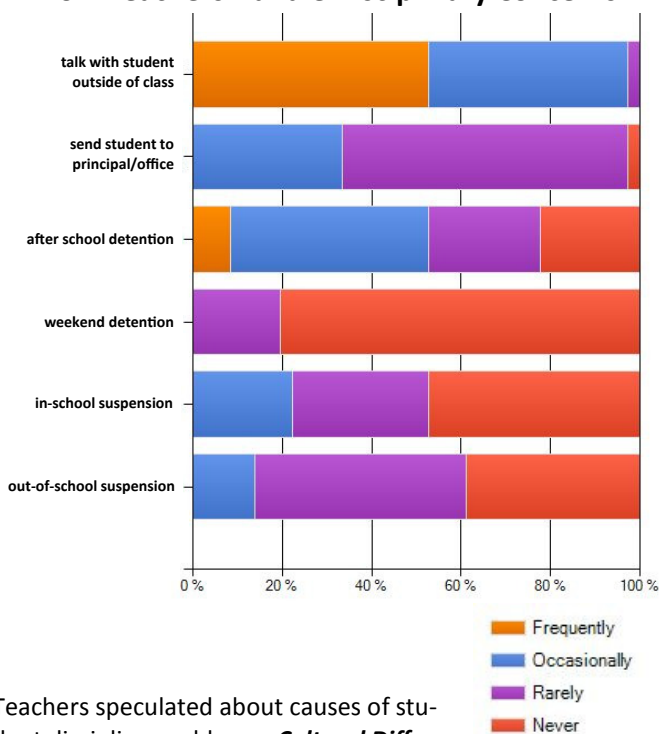
Teachers were also asked which of these circumstances prompt them to "send students to the administration." They reported that they most frequently refer students to administrators as a result of physical or verbal conflict/abuse, their least frequent disciplinary issue. Conversely, the majority of teachers (85.7%) report rarely or never sending students to the office for tardiness though it is considered a frequent or occasional problem by 86.1% of teachers.

## Why Teachers Send Students to Administrations



As the above chart suggests, teachers report they infrequently refer students to the administration for disciplinary action. Despite their large class sizes — 40.5% reported 16-25 students/class, and 48.6% reported > 25 students/class on average — when asked how many students they refer to the administration weekly, 58.3% said 1-3 and 41.7% said zero. Rather, teachers indicated they handle most issues themselves.

## How Teachers Handle Disciplinary Concerns



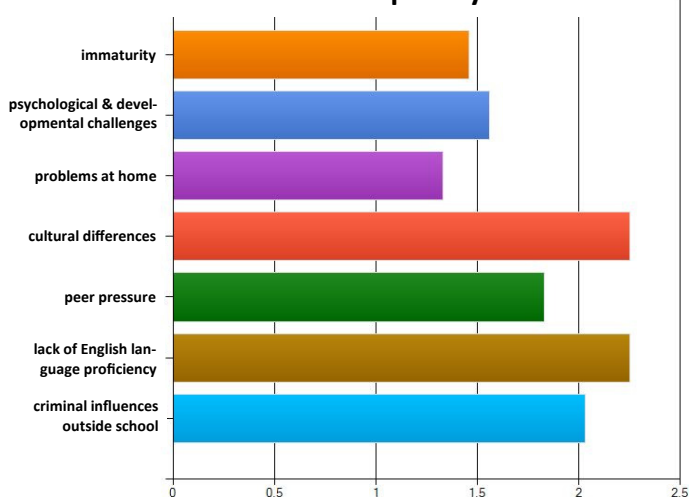
Teachers speculated about causes of student discipline problems. **Cultural Differences** and **Lack of English Language Proficiency** emerged as the most significant contributing factors

slightly ahead of **Criminal Influences Outside School**.

This coincides with (and is made more significant by) other issues addressed by teachers in the survey. When asked to estimate the percentage of students they taught who were non-native English speakers, teachers replied:

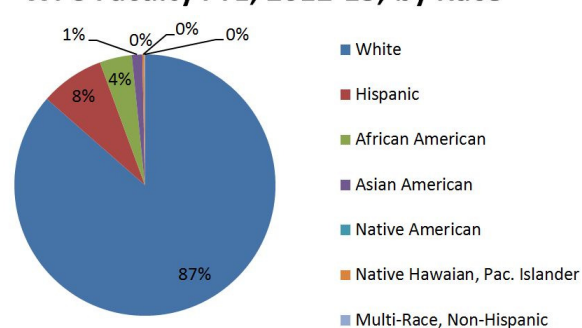
About 1/2	36.1%
About 1/4	25.0%
About 3/4	16.7%

## Causes of Student Disciplinary Concerns



A recent report by the Worcester Regional Research Bureau corroborates this. Using state data, the Jan. 2014 “Worcester by the Numbers: Public and Charter Schools” found 44% of WPS students speak a “first language other than English.” Moreover, staffing data maintained by DESE shows the 2012-13 WPS teaching staff was 87% white and only 8% Hispanic and 4% African-American.

## WPS Faculty FTE, 2012-13, by Race



Yet, only 52.9% of the teachers said they had taken part in “Diversity Training,” and only 44.1% claimed to have had any “Cultural and Intercultural Education Training.”

Given the high priority teachers gave cultural differences and lack of English proficiency in affecting disciplinary problems, the diversity of WPS, and comparative homogeneity of its faculty, stronger cultural and intercultural education training may be areas for future action.

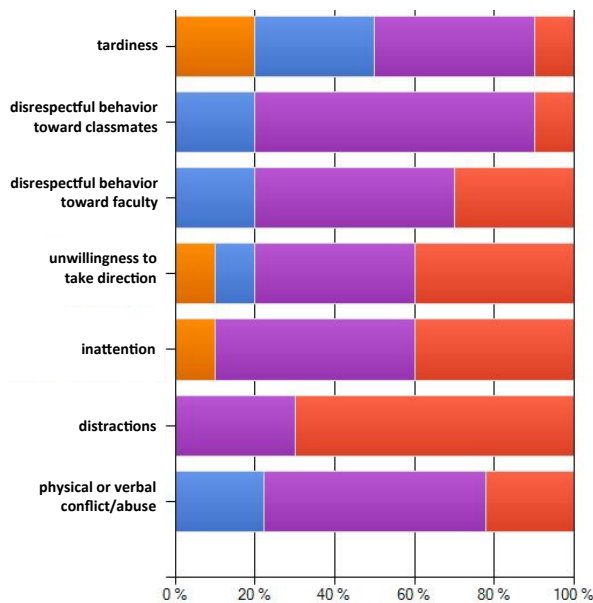
## Principal Survey Basics

A total of 41 principals from across the system were asked to participate in the survey. Ten (24.4%) completed it. Most of the respondents (70%) came from elementary schools. Like the teachers, these were veteran professionals with 80% having worked in school administration for more than 7 years; half had 10 or more years of experience.

## Principal Survey Findings

Principals were asked to gauge how serious certain discipline problems are in their schools. Their most significant problem, which concurred with the opinions of teacher, was **tardiness**: 20% of principals called it a major problem and 30% called it a moderate one. Following as major and moderate problems were **disrespectful behavior toward classmates** (20%), **disrespectful behavior toward faculty** (20%), **unwillingness to take direction** (20%), and **physical or verbal conflict/abuse** (22%). How widespread are the discipline problems? Nine of the ten

### Disciplinary Concerns Faced by Administrators

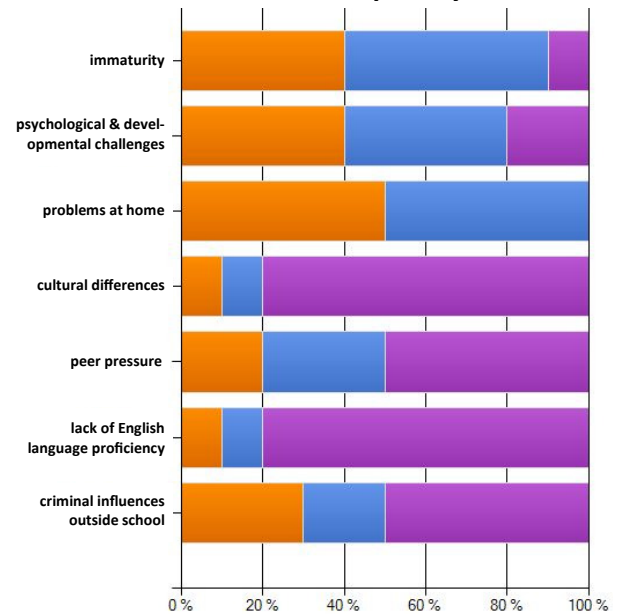


principals estimated that between 1-20 students are referred to administrators each week; the remaining principal said 21-50 students are referred weekly.

Like teachers, principals were also asked to speculate about the causes behind discipline problems. They noted **problems at home** as the most significant factor (50% said it was “very significant”), followed by **psychological and developmental challenges** (40%), and **immaturity** (40%). Unlike teachers, 80% of principals called **Cultural Differences** and **Lack of English Language Proficiency** “not significant” problems.

Such a disparity in responses is an area for further discussion. Perhaps it speaks to the difference in institutional perspectives. Teachers can see this issue most often at a ground level, and in a system as diverse as Worcester’s, they glimpse it in almost every class on every day. Principals see it from a

## Causes of Student Disciplinary Concerns



different vantage point. Indeed, all principals who responded to the survey said there are a variety of ESL/ELL services available at their schools. These run the gamut from ESL tutors and various “pull-out” strategies to ELL labs, classes, and in-class support. One middle school principal explained, “students are scheduled in ESL classes based on their assessed level and as mandated by protocol.” Moreover, 70% of the principals reported that their schools had training sessions in intercultural education which they said included Structured English Immersion (SEI) and Professional Development. From their perspectives, then, **Cultural Differences** and **Lack of English Language Proficiency** might be problems that are being addressed better than others.

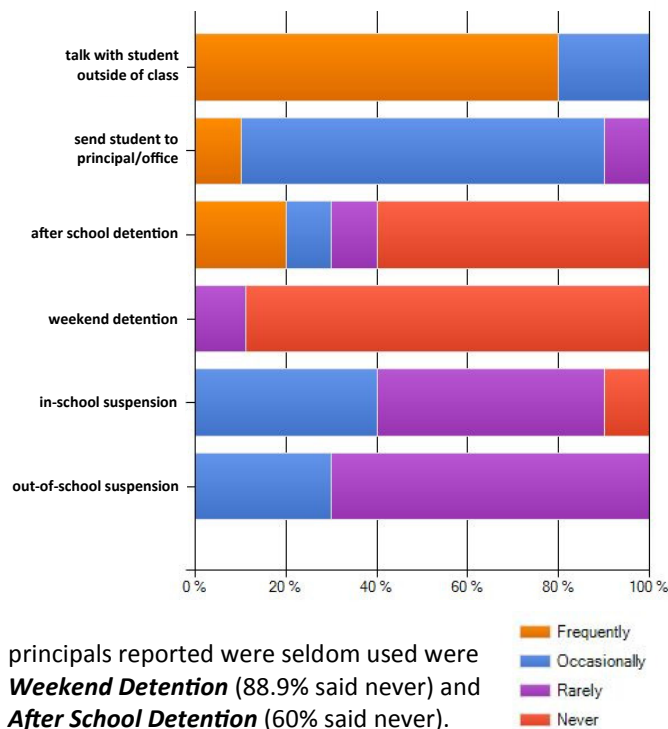
It might also have to do with each group’s understanding of the size and need of this population. This sampling of principals underestimated the number of non-native English speakers. As we have seen, 44% of WPS students speak a first language other than English, but half the principals surveyed put that percentage at 25%. It is possible they come from schools with a smaller population, which could also explain their view that cultural and language barriers are “not significant.” Some responded that there were no unique challenges with this population, and others said they used interpreters and translators to overcome any language barriers. None said they needed additional training. As one principal put it, “strategies are consistent across the board with all students. Rules, procedures, and consequences are clear to both students and families. PBIS is in place; focus is on prevention and positive behaviors.”

These surveys reveal that the degree and quality of International and English language programs is certainly an area worthy of further exploration with both groups.



In terms of disciplinary responses, 80% of principals noted students were most frequently spoken to outside of class when disciplinary issues arose. Among the corrective actions

### How Administrators Handle Disciplinary Concerns



Suspension was a corrective action that fell between talking outside class and detention in the survey. For **In-School Suspension**, 40% said “occasionally” used, 50% said “rarely” used, and 10% said “never” used. For **Out-Of-School Suspension**, 30% said “occasionally” used, 70% said “rarely” used, and none said “never.” In other words, in this particular survey, school administrators noted more frequently suspending students than giving detentions after school or on weekends.

## Moving Forward

The last questions of each survey asked respondents to comment on ways to improve discipline and school culture. There was agreement between administrators and teachers but also significant areas of contrasting opinions.

Respondents from both groups wanted more strict enforcement of disciplinary codes. Ninety percent of principals believed their school’s approach to student discipline was appropriate; the other 10% was “not sure.” Yet, while one principal estimated “99/100 of our students are extremely respectful, well-behaved, and motivated to learn” and another reported, “we have a modified PBIS program that works well for our needs,” there were dissenting voices. One called for “more severe consequences meted to those 1 or 2 students who are a disruption to the teaching/learning process.”

Principals also cited larger issues beyond their control as necessary to address for better discipline. One said, “we are seeing a changing in the demographics relative to poverty and culture. Looking at those dynamics influences what we do each day.” Another wrote, “We try to reach them early before we have big problems.” An elementary school principal noted, “the Social Services system is a challenge to our mentally and emotionally disturbed students.” Referring to the importance of the school-home connection, one principal wanted “more appropriate parent involvement.” (But it was a teacher who connected this to the language situation: “Need more translators to reach out to all parents.”) At least two principals made reference to what one called, “more ownership by classroom teachers.”

Teachers also voiced interest in more strict disciplinary measures, and had ideas about improving discipline. One teacher wanted to see, “more severe consequences for certain behaviors.” Another asserted, “students who assault students, teachers, or administrators should not be allowed back at the school.” The most common comment about improving discipline was a call on administrations to be more actively-involved in the process and supportive of faculty. One teacher claimed, “the reality is that teachers are discouraged from using admin.” Another said, I “refer very little to admin due to lack of follow-through.” Yet another believed, “administration is reluctant to remove habitual offenders who distract willing students.” One said simply, “Teachers are not backed up when they refer a student to administration.”

Teachers regularly cited a stark disconnect between faculty and administration about discipline through their use of two frequently recurring ideas: clarity and consistency. A number of teachers referred to a need for a clear, well-communicated, and consistently-applied disciplinary code. One teacher said, “the process is too vague and not equal from administrator to administrator. Many times students get different consequences for the same issues.” Citing “inconsistent discipline” as a major problem, another said, “administrators take side of students; school-wide rules not enforced.” Still another called for “even-handed discipline, even for athletes.” To bridge the divide, a variety of teachers recommended, “A common discipline policy is needed. A developed rubric would be good”; “a discipline rubric”; “more consistent follow through and open communication”; and “clarity.”

These surveys intended to delve deeper into school discipline and culture in the WPS from the perspective of teachers and principals. The surveys have identified some areas of common ground and some disagreement. A broad, city-wide conversation about the problems and solutions might ameliorate some of these issues. When placed against the focus groups that follow, testimonies from students currently or recently in the WPS district, other issues emerge that call for school and community discussions about public education, intercultural sensitivity, and appropriate discipline in Worcester’s public schools.

## Focus Groups

*The Department of Urban Studies in conjunction with the Latino Education Institute conducted two focus groups in the summer of 2013. Populated with current and former WPS students, and with parents of students who had experienced suspension, the goal of the groups was to gain a better understanding of the educational environment in Worcester schools from the perspective of persons who have experienced either in-school or out-of-school suspension. Each of these groups were conversations. Researchers tried not to be overly involved in the course of the discussions.*

### Focus Group 1 — July 2013

This group of current and former students was diverse, and the students' experiences of Worcester Public Schools were equally varied.

The group consisted of first- or second- generation newcomers to Massachusetts and the United States, from a variety of countries including: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Liberia. The majority (nine) of the twelve students were male. While diverse, clear themes emerged in this conversation, which are grouped here into three sections: Academic Concerns, Institutional Concerns, and Suspensions.

#### **Academic Concerns**

Current and former Worcester students agreed that many of their disciplinary issues began in the classroom. According to students, the inflexible classroom curriculum, the lack of English Language Learning support, and a disconnect with teachers were the cause of academic challenges as well as frustration that led to their actions, which resulted in suspension. While some of these suspensions were viewed as unreasonable, others were viewed as fair, but also preventable with adequate in-classroom support.

##### Curriculum

Students voiced a range of concerns about the classroom curriculum. Several students reported that they struggled to fully comprehend the material due to language barriers and the difficulty of the material. These same students expressed frustration at the lack of extra support, such as tutoring, to help them comprehend the material. By contrast, other students voiced disappointment in the remedial nature of their classes and wished they had been more challenged by their teachers.

The group agreed that the prevailing "teach to the test" model was responsible both for the lack of extra support for struggling students and the lack of additional challenges for excelling students. As one young man reported: "When you are doing something by the book [for a standardized test], it kind of has to stay by the book. It's kind of like you are being taught how to answer. Basically the answers that you give have to be for the questions that are asked, and that's it. There's no grey lines, no going around that. It's just textbook education and you can't really go above and beyond what's in the book... You are taught how to answer a question [for a standardized test], not really given an education."

Another focus group participant agreed, recounting how he resigned himself to doing "what's in the book" rather than working to receive an "education." He shared, "The second I got the taste of that easy A, it was incredible. I chilled all day and had headphones on, I hung around... I'd come to school late, leave early." A third young man had encountered a similar test-driven classroom model, but unlike the previous two students, he struggled to understand the material and did not find the additional support he sought. He explained: "he [the teacher] just gave me a sheet of paper with more problems that I didn't understand, thinking that if I did it for a few times, that repetition would make me fix the problem... Why are you making me do more problems that I don't understand?" According to this student, and several others, both English language and tutoring support were lacking to fill the educational gap he experienced.

##### The Lack of English Language and Tutoring Support

Several students were non-native English speakers and expressed concern with the limitations of English Language Learning support in their schools. While students did not cite a language barrier as the direct cause of an incident resulting in disciplinary action (i.e. due to a student not understanding an instruction), students did express that the language gap did reinforce a sense of marginalization in the classroom. Some students communicated a special concern about the challenge of language barriers given test-oriented curricula. One young woman reflected: "I don't really like it because they give the MCAS to people who don't speak English, I don't like that.... How you going to give MCAS to people, if they don't even speak English?" Students agreed that greater accommodations for non-native English speakers were needed in the classroom and particularly in test preparation.

Additionally, students expressed that greater one-on-one attention and after-school-school tutoring were needed to fully empower non-native English students. Several students had observed educational resources decline over their time in school. Students recognized that this was a product of tightening budgets, but felt that cutbacks in tutoring resources had profound impacts on students. Simultaneous to these educational cutbacks, students observed an increasing allocation of resources to discipline (in the form of hall monitors, cameras, etc.), creating a less inclusive tone in classrooms and the institution as a whole. While many students recounted having a

teacher or two who took special interest in their success, in general students felt that such teachers viewed them as “problems.”

### Teachers

According to students, positive teacher-student relationships formed when teachers are knowledgeable and challenging, but also caring and respectful. As one young man expressed: “There’s some teachers that actually want to pour

[knowledge] into you so you can learn and so you can push forward to what you want to do in the future. There’s teachers that take pride in what they do. The teachers who take pride in what they do are teachers that care about their students. And teachers that care about their students have good results like good relationships and stuff.

There’re some teachers in there that I respect very much for what they do ... And then I wouldn’t want to disappoint them in an action that I would do, too. I wouldn’t want a teacher be like ‘I did this for this student and then he ends up screwing up something like that.’ ” What distinguished positive teacher-student relationships for students was a human connection, with mutual respect, rather than a strictly disciplinary power relationship. Another young man reflected: “they [good teachers] come and joke and have laughs and stuff like that. But other teachers, I don’t like them.”

The importance of mutual respect in the classroom was a common refrain throughout the focus group. As one focus group participant articulated: “Have respect for us. Like if I give you respect, I require it back. But when they don’t show the same respect that I gave them earlier in the day back, then I get mad. Little things like that. Teachers think they are in a safe bubble. There’s some teachers that they don’t care what they say to a kid, and they don’t know if that kid is having a bad day or what. ...Some teachers don’t understand sometimes that they need to give respect or sympathy or space to a kid to avoid a problem like that.” Another focus group participant articulated that many teachers cannot empathize with him simply because they cannot understand his background or life experiences. He shared: “It’s the tone the way they come at you. It’s not what they say, it’s the tone, you can feel it. You can feel the person is talking down to you. We come from situations that we have to grow up faster than what they believe. Kids that come from outskirts of the city are ...a little bit more censored. They are definitely more censored to a lot of feelings in the real world, in terms of interactions and just that feeling when you know someone is talking to you in a certain way what they feel when they’re talking to you. I know when I look at a teacher whether she wants the best for me or not. If I can see that she doesn’t want the best for me, I would not even speak to her.”

In addition to respect and empathy, students also expressed the value of having experienced, knowledgeable teachers. Due to the test-based classroom model, students felt that some teachers did not in fact teach as much as they adminis-

tered pre-given lessons and, above all, discipline. Students recognized that teachers faced the curricular constraints of the school district, state, and federal government. Still, they expressed that “busy-work” in class left them feeling idle, uninspired, and frustrated with teachers. As one focus group participant put it: “If you want me to listen to you, speak more! Because you’re not saying anything. You’re speaking from this paper which I’m going to read after you’re done reading it again, you know?”

Overwhelmingly, students felt that teacher-student relationships were the biggest factor causing or preventing disciplinary action. In a number of cases, students expressed that certain teachers served as allies and advocates for them in cases where other teachers or administrators were less understanding of circumstances that may lead to disciplinary action (i.e. tardiness, or speaking to another student in Spanish during class).

“Have respect for us.  
Like, if I give you respect,  
I require it back.”

### **Institutional Concerns**

The issues outlined above reflect broader institutional concerns relating to educational segregation (i.e. tracking), an increasingly discipline-oriented environment, and a lack of student-centered learning.

#### Educational Segregation

Some students expressed feeling that they were viewed as “problems” even before a concrete problem arose. Several students attributed this to a conflation between students’ perceived academic level and perceived behavioral problems. As one student reported: “I was a really low level kid [academically]. ... They relate bad education with bad behavior...Based on academic level. So if you look at all the kids in in-house [suspension], they were all the kids that were in the low educational class. ...And you had to be caged with “your people.” ... This was the system in the school. It just worked for them. It was easier to manage.”

Another focus group participant shared: “The way they segregated everything...It was almost like certain classes of kids.” Students clearly felt that their “class” of students was already at a disadvantage in school. For this reason, they might be suspended for something that another less “problematic” student might not be. While some perceived this system to function according to academic level exclusively, others felt that there were discernable racial and ethnic dimensions as well. This sense of inequality prompted a range of responses from self-distancing (and a retreat from school altogether) to direct resistance to authority in school.

#### Disciplinary Environment

Also as a result of one’s academic level and racial/ethnic background, students felt they were more closely monitored than other students. Students recounted that certain “groups” were seen by the administration as gangs—sometimes arbi-



trarily. As a result, students were searched, followed, and questioned frequently. One young man mentioned: "There were certain groups that they considered gangs." Another added: "You couldn't wear jeans and a white t-shirt because that was a phase. It was cool you know because it was a crew." A third student agreed: "Yeah, they think it was a gang. So now it's like you know, watch out of for this, he's in this category. ... I don't carry a backpack or hoodie." A young woman observed: "Yeah you can't wear that stuff." A final student added: "Yeah, they stop me four times [in the hall]. What are you doing? Going to the bathroom. Next time you're going to the bathroom, suspended. There's cameras everywhere."

Students say they respond to this disciplinary environment in varied ways. While several have directly confronted teachers or administrators (usually leading to suspension), others find themselves resigning themselves to the reality of what seemed to them like an unequal disciplinary system. As one young man put it: "It's like if I'm a known thug in the streets and I'm going to get my rights violated with random searches, I know kids that are ok with it. You know why? Because it's easier for them to get searched than get in an altercation and get beaten down on the floor and go to jail. I'm not going to make it a big deal, I'm just go on and sign the stupid paperwork and move on with my life. Why am I going to cause a big deal, favoritism is crazy. They hate me, I'm that kid. It's easier to just move on."

#### Student-Centered Learning

Aside from the isolated teachers who served as advocates and allies, students felt the single greatest problem in school was that they were not heard by authority figures. A feeling of not being heard was both an immediate cause for disciplinary action (because students felt they did not have the opportunity to explain their situations in the event of disciplinary action), and more broadly, the systematic and symbolic cause for disciplinary issues. In cases where they acted out, students widely acknowledged they usually did so because they felt disrespected or unheard. In the case of a disciplinary incident, students felt silenced—unable to give their account of events even in cases when a teacher or administrator "switched" a story. One young woman remarked about her principal: "It's like she [the principal] doesn't hear anything you say. She just keeps on talking to you and doesn't let you speak." Another young woman added: "Yeah, they switch the story to get you suspended."

The lack of a student voice was not only cited as a problem once the disciplinary process had begun, but was also cited by students as the root cause of many disciplinary problems. The perception that one's voice did not matter caused some students to rebel against authority figures, resulting in discipli-

nary issues. One young man related: "I've cursed a person out and walked out [of a class] because if I didn't speak up, nobody was going to. ...She was ignoring me as a human being. I was stating a problem, telling her exactly how I felt, and she didn't acknowledge the problem. ...So then you handle it yourself. You let her know how you feel, and you pretty much disrespect her, right? I'm not saying it's right. It's deeper than just a teacher. It's an authority."

### **Suspensions**

All of the students in the focus group had experienced a suspension. The group as a whole tended to agree that while some of these suspensions were fair and reasonable, others were not. The students cited a wide range of negative and cyclical outcomes stemming from suspension.

#### Causes for Suspension

Among the causes for suspension viewed as unreasonable were: tardiness, walking in the hall without permission, talking or laughing in class, and wearing the "wrong" clothes. Among these, the sentencing of suspension for tardiness was overwhelmingly seen as the most unfair by students. As one young man articulated: "I want to say, one of the dumbest reasons is tardiness...so not only do you miss a piece of first period...now they're going to tell you, they're going to elimi-

"She was ignoring me as a human being. I was stating a problem, telling her exactly how I felt, and she didn't acknowledge the problem. ...So then you handle it yourself. You let her know how you feel, and you pretty much disrespect her, right? I'm not saying it's right. "

nate you from your classes for the day, whether it's an in-house [or not]... you are not comprehending what's being taught because you are not in the class." Students asserted they were tardy as a result of working the late shift the night before, waking up late, or missing the bus. While they understood that repeated tardiness could disrupt the class, what students found unfair about this disciplinary approach to tardiness was 1) that it resulted in more time out of class and 2) that they perceived this punishment was not administered

fairly among students and instead was an intentional way to keep some "problem" students out of the classroom. As one student remarked: "So, basically as a consequence for missing school they're going to make you miss more school."

Among the causes viewed as reasonable for suspension were: fighting with other students, pulling disruptive pranks in school, and speaking back disrespectfully to teachers or administrators. One young man shared: "Mine's [my suspensions] was just like all arguments...with students over dumb stuff. I had this one argument which was over a pencil, cause I didn't want to give one of my friends a pencil, and I guess we just started arguing." Another young man added: "I'm a pro [at suspensions]... just like stupid-ness. Stink bombs in schools." A young woman responded: "So he probably deserves a suspension... you're disrupting school!" While suspension was

viewed as a reasonable punishment for such incidents, students also tended to believe that certain incidents like these could be prevented with positive teacher-student relationships and a more student-centered environment.

### Effects of Suspension

According to students, suspensions led to academic loss and social disruption that led to further marginalization in the classroom and self-distancing in the school as a whole. In this way, suspensions became cyclical for many students. Repeated suspensions led students to fall behind in the curriculum, which is particularly challenging in today's test-oriented classroom. As one focus group participant stated: "When you're doing things through a book or a schedule, they have to finish this section of the book and they don't have time going back and re-teaching everything. [It's as if they say,] 'I'm not going to repeat everything I've said the last hour of the period just for you since you decided to miss earlier, you come late. Even then, I'm not going to because you chose yourself to become suspended.' So now you got you're sitting there trying to decipher everything that you're supposed to be taught by yourself at home. And I'm not going to do that. So it's easier for me to just get an incomplete and move on from there." Academically, many students accepted "incompletes" or failing grades on missed work rather than making it up. Socially, students felt that as a result of repeated suspensions, they were becoming more and more distant from fellow students and teachers.

For many, this suspension became cyclical. The cycle of suspensions can reflect students' growing sense of disconnection or resistance to authority, once they are in the disciplinary process. Students coped with suspension in a number of ways. One of the most deleterious effects of widespread suspensions for tardiness, in particular, was students' self-reported truancy instead. As one student said: "Why am I going to go in tardy and have an extra point to get closer to my suspension? ... I'm not tardy. I don't have to be tardy anymore. ...I don't go to school."

## **Focus Group 2 — August 2013**

This focus group had 12 parents of students who were currently in or had been in the WPS system. The goal of the focus group was to gain a better understanding of the educational environment in Worcester schools from the perspective of parents whose students experienced in-school or out-of-school suspension. The group consisted of first-generation newcomers to Massachusetts and the United States, from a

variety of countries including: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. The focus group was conducted with the use of a Spanish interpreter. Two clear themes emerged: 1) parents were concerned for their children's academic, developmental and physical well-being, and 2) parents experienced challenging parent-teacher and parent-administrator relationships.

### ***Educational Concerns For Students***

Focus group participants voiced a range of concerns about their children's education experiences in Worcester's public schools. The three areas of concern that emerged as the most important to parents were: the need for additional Special Education and English support in school, the need for more attention to the cultural adjustment of non-native students, and student safety in school.

#### Additional Special Education and English Support

Several parents and grandparents in the group feared their children had developmental and academic challenges that were not being adequately addressed by their children's schools. Two parents felt their children needed to receive "special educational" services but had not as yet been able to receive them. For example, one mother stated: "I feel he's needed Special Ed but until now he's gone up to fourth grade [without Special Education]...They just want him on medication. But even on the medication, he still needs help... And if he does better one on one, why can't he get that?"

"There's kids who come from different backgrounds, cultures with different customs. When they are placed in a public school here in America, they are quiet or different, and to Americans here they think there's something wrong with the child."

Other parents also expressed concern that their children had academic needs that were not being addressed. The single largest academic concern was that their children were falling behind due to the lack of English Language Learning support. The grandfather of a young boy reported: "I believe that they need to pay more attention to the non-English speaking children. They should put more attention to them. Because most of the time they say, 'oh, he doesn't know English!' They as-

sume he doesn't know anything... Well, I believe they should have more attention on those kids who aren't learning English well. Not less. Put more interest in them."

As a result of their children's language gap, many parents felt their children had fallen academically behind. A few parents felt their intellectually-gifted students had been neglected just because of the language gap. One parent shared: "Because this child is in sixth grade and he doesn't know how to read or do basic math. They keep moving him up, to not have to put effort into him. To me that is weird." Parents attributed the perceived lack of Special Education or English language support to a lack of resources, but also to certain cultural biases.

### Cultural Adjustment

Parents and grandparents expressed feeling cultural biases against both their children and themselves in their interactions with WPS personnel. Parents articulated the view that schools failed to pay attention to students' cultural background and adjustment to the United States. One mother shared: "There's kids who come from different backgrounds, cultures with different customs. When they are placed in a public school here in America, they are quiet or different, and to Americans here they think there's something wrong with the child." Rather than providing extra support, however, parents felt their children were avoided and overlooked, or were unfair targets of disciplinary action.

A second mother nodded, saying: "It's hard coming from another country and adjusting to the system. Because when I came and I started in high school for the first couple of months I would just wait outside till the school ended. It looks like I was cutting class but it's because I didn't speak English and I was so confused in class." Another parent added to this: "Yeah. Because of that my son doesn't like school. It's to the point where he hates it...He's going to leave the school. Dropout." Several parents shared the fear that their children might dropout of school due to their alienation and inability to fully integrate into the school. Many parents felt that their children were more likely to be disciplined in school as a result of this lack of cultural sensitivity and student integration. Parents also felt that their children were more likely to become involved in disciplinary problems, and sometimes illegal activity, as a result of their disconnect from school.

### Safety In School

Parents also expressed concern surrounding the safety of their children in schools. Given the lack of full integration into school, parents worried their children might engage in drugs or gang activity. One parent expressed the view that Hispanic students were more at-risk of becoming involved with gangs or drugs as a result of marginalization in school. She stated: "That's the truth...Hispanic kids in public schools, they treat them bad. Understand me? That's why kids get into bad habits and get into trouble, get into drugs, gangs, and that's it. Also there's a lot of teachers that don't want to work with students. ...They don't want to work with the children, so they forget about them." In response, another parent said: "I don't want my kids to go through that, I'd rather home school my kids, than go through that." A third parent voiced: "Sometimes the parents think their children are safe in schools, but with everything that's happening, there's no

safety. You just don't know." The focus group asserted that they believed teenage boys were the most at risk of being recruited into drug or gang activity in their schools.

### ***Parent-Teacher & Parent-Administrator Relationships***

Overall, parents described unsatisfactory—and in some cases adversarial or altogether absent—relationships with their children's teachers or school administrators. While some parents felt empowered to advocate for themselves and their students, others felt less able to do so as a result of language and cultural barriers. Two topics related to parent-teacher relationships surrounded the quantity and quality of parent-teacher interactions and parent-administrator interactions.

#### Parent-Teacher Communication

Parents reported that they heard from their children's teachers infrequently and had little knowledge of what was going on inside the classrooms. Parents agreed that aside from occasional parent-teacher conferences, they generally only heard from their children's teachers if there was a problem. A mother reported: "One teacher calls me to tell me other things that they are not doing well...asking me if I'm watching what he's doing and his behavior. Those things, not good positive stuff." Parents described feeling judged by teachers; some felt that they almost "accused" the parents for any disciplinary problems at school.

Parents also agreed teachers expected too much of them at home. The amount of homework that required parental supervision/involvement was overwhelming to several parents. One parent shared: "I feel that the teachers want the parents to be the teachers because they send all the work home. All the work. It's like what are you teaching him if I have to sit with him for five hours that he's out of school, and I work. And I have other kids. It's like really? What are you doing in the classroom that you're sending all the work here?" Given parents' work schedules and English limitations, many felt they were not able to meet expectations of homework supervision.

#### Parent-Administrator Interactions

When their children were disciplined at school, many parents felt that the school administrators' communication about the disciplinary action was insufficient. According to parents, paperwork sent home to parents was frequently hard to understand, even with the help of an English translator. One parent described at length a situation in which her son had been expelled without a clearly communicated explanation. She recounted: "I had a situation last year. There was a problem with my son who got expelled. At first I didn't understand what they had been sending to me since it was in English. But

"It's hard coming from another country and adjusting to the system. Because when I came and I started in high school for the first couple of months I would just wait outside till the school ended. It looks like I was cutting class but it's because I didn't speak English and I was so confused in class."

even after I got someone to translate it, I didn't understand... So, I went to the building on Irving Street, [WPS Central Administration] and the person that I needed to speak with never had time for me. Never. So I advocated for my rights... I even went to the newspapers. Because no one would explain the situation. And what he did, did not equal to expulsion."

Another parent shared a similar story about her son's expulsion. "There was an issue at school with a girl: they fought. An administrator told him to leave the school. They opened the door and told him to go. Then afterwards, they called the police and were looking for him because he left the school. This was illegal!" The mother explained that the principal had called and given her 5 minutes to pick up her son or he would be arrested by the police. She could not make it to the school in 5 minutes. Her son was arrested for truancy and subsequently expelled from school for fighting. Afraid this incident would set her son on a negative path, she decided to pull her son out of Worcester Public Schools altogether. Without any other options of support in Worcester, the mother explained, "I had to send him back to my country [Dominican Republic]. I didn't want him to get into trouble here."

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The focus group testimonies, particularly when viewed next to the survey results, suggest a few areas for further exploration. Principals point fingers at "home life" as the biggest cause of students of disciplinary problems but students point fingers back at the school administrations. Parents of students who experienced suspensions also report their own difficulties with administrations, heightened by concerns for their children, while teachers and administrators have clear if unfulfilled expectations of the other.

Yet, there is some important common ground here, too. Students and teachers agree about the need for more ESL support. Principals did not disagree with this although they did not feature it prominently in their responses. Students and parents both called for more cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of administrations and teaching staffs, and teachers also understood this to be important.

While students and parents certainly related stories of misunderstandings between faculty and students, they also noted the important (sometimes transformative) roles some teachers have played in their lives or the lives of their children.

In all, community-wide discussion that includes all groups and that is focused particularly on the issues of behavioral expectations, cultural factors, home-school-student communication, and disciplinary measures appears to be an important starting point to any future action.

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The Mission of the Vincent "Jake" Powers CityLab is to engage in informative projects with and for the people, groups, and organizations of Central Massachusetts about topics of interest to their lives and the world around them.

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