

# SUSPENDED EDUCATION

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
2016-17 TO 2018-19

## A REPORT CALLING FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOLS

DECIPHERING & MONITORING EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE DATA  
MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE & MEANINGFUL TO OUR COMMUNITY  
ADVOCATING FOR POLICY CHANGE, TRAINING AND EXPANDED SUPPORTS  
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, STAFF AND ADMINISTRATORS





## SUSPENDED **EDUCATION**

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INTRODUCTION

## SUSPENDED EDUCATION PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

2016-17 to 2018-19



Five years have passed since Education Rights Network, a campaign of 412Justice, launched the “Solutions, Not Suspensions” campaign in the Pittsburgh area to call attention to, and enact policies addressing, the crisis of overuse and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in Pittsburgh Public Schools. Three years have passed since the 2017 release of “Suspended Education in Pittsburgh Public Schools 2015-16 - A Report to the Community,” a groundbreaking document outlining never before seen data, disaggregated to show the glaring inequities of an antiquated system.

***We have stated that Black Lives Matter and held protests to affirm this, but, as you will read in the following report, excessive use of exclusionary discipline still holds these lives in the balance.***

There has been a lot of transition in the city of Pittsburgh over the past five years. Elected officials, school board members, superintendents, and even Presidents have changed. We have seen an economic recession and a global pandemic, new housing developments, and new displacement. A tragic mass shooting in our city, and domestic terrorism in abundance across the country.

Exclusionary discipline is a national problem with a hyper-localized effect on student learning. Suspensions and expulsions remove students from classrooms, eliminating a path to learning, and disproportionately victimizing Black and brown students, and students with disabilities. After the release of our last report, policy changes were enacted by the Pittsburgh Public School Board to focus on keeping students in school. We applaud

the members who supported these initiatives and Superintendent Dr. Anthony Hamlet for understanding the importance of this work. But we are not done. The work must continue and there is a long way to go.

Implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, and a much sought after suspension ban for pre-K through second graders, were a few of the positive changes that Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) have put into effect since 2017. While these programs have begun implementation, the level of fidelity with which the programs have been rolled out looks different in every school - and perhaps suggests a reason for overly harsh punishments for minor offenses. ERN has helped to lead the conversation around exclusionary discipline by having our parent members speak with School Directors, hosting actions to lift up the voices of children directly impacted by biased policies, participated fully in the Suspension Ban Working Group convened by PPS, and by working in conjunction with the District to disaggregate data in a way that highlights the discrepancies in the educational system in Pittsburgh.

However, in this report we focus specifically on pre-K to fifth grade suspensions and the demographics of students affected by this interruption to education. In the Pitts-

<sup>1</sup> Data for this report include academic years 2016-17 through 2018-19 and were sourced from the “Suspension Rates” data dashboard published by the Pittsburgh Public Schools Office of Data, Research, Evaluation & Assessment, with additional data provided by the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University supported analysis. Where out-of-school suspension information is presented by race, we have focused on African-American, multi-racial, and white students. K-5 students in other race groups (American Indian, Asian [not Pacific Islander], Hispanic, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander) have very low rates of suspension and/or enrollment numbers - in all of these subgroups, 10 or fewer K-5 students were suspended in any one year between 2016-17 and 2018-19. Appendix I includes limited K-12 discipline data.

burgh Public Schools, Black females in pre-K through fifth grade are suspended at four times the rate of their white counterparts, and Black males in the same grades are suspended at five times the rate of their white peers. The struggle to halt these disparities continues.

***Eliminating exclusionary discipline at every level must remain a focus of the community and the District.***

In collaboration with the Center for Youth & Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University, Pittsburgh Public Schools, ACLU of PA, the Education Rights Network and 412Justice, we have worked to decipher school discipline data and display this information in a way that is accessible and meaningful to our community. While the focus of this report is specifically on pre-K to fifth grade infractions, we continue to monitor exclusionary discipline data across all grade levels and demographics.

Through furthering policy changes to include a ban on exclusionary discipline to fifth grade, advocating for changes to the District Code of Conduct, implementing needed training, and support for teachers, students, and administration, we can be on the path to education justice as long as equity guides us into the horizon. Further, a deeper dive into how the District categorizes referrals and an increase in data transparency will be key to making the changes necessary for student success. We hope that this report inspires you to get involved in our campaign “Solutions, Not Suspensions,” and to fight for a better future for the children of Pittsburgh.

A Partnership



EDUCATION RIGHTS NETWORK, ACLU OF PA, 412JUSTICE, CYCLE & PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS



2016-17 and 2017-18

Table 1:

**PITTSBURGH  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
K-5TH GRADE SUSPENSIONS**

Between 2016-17 and 2017-18, incidents leading to suspensions, number of suspensions, days of school missed due to suspensions, and percentage of students suspended at least once in grades K-5 all decreased substantially, even as the District's K-5 enrollment increased. This is something to be celebrated, and may in part be attributed to growing awareness of the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline and the District's ban on K-2 suspensions for non-violent infractions. However, in 2018-19 there was an increase from the previous year in all of these categories. While there is still a notable decrease from 2016-17, we would hope to see a continuing downward trend.

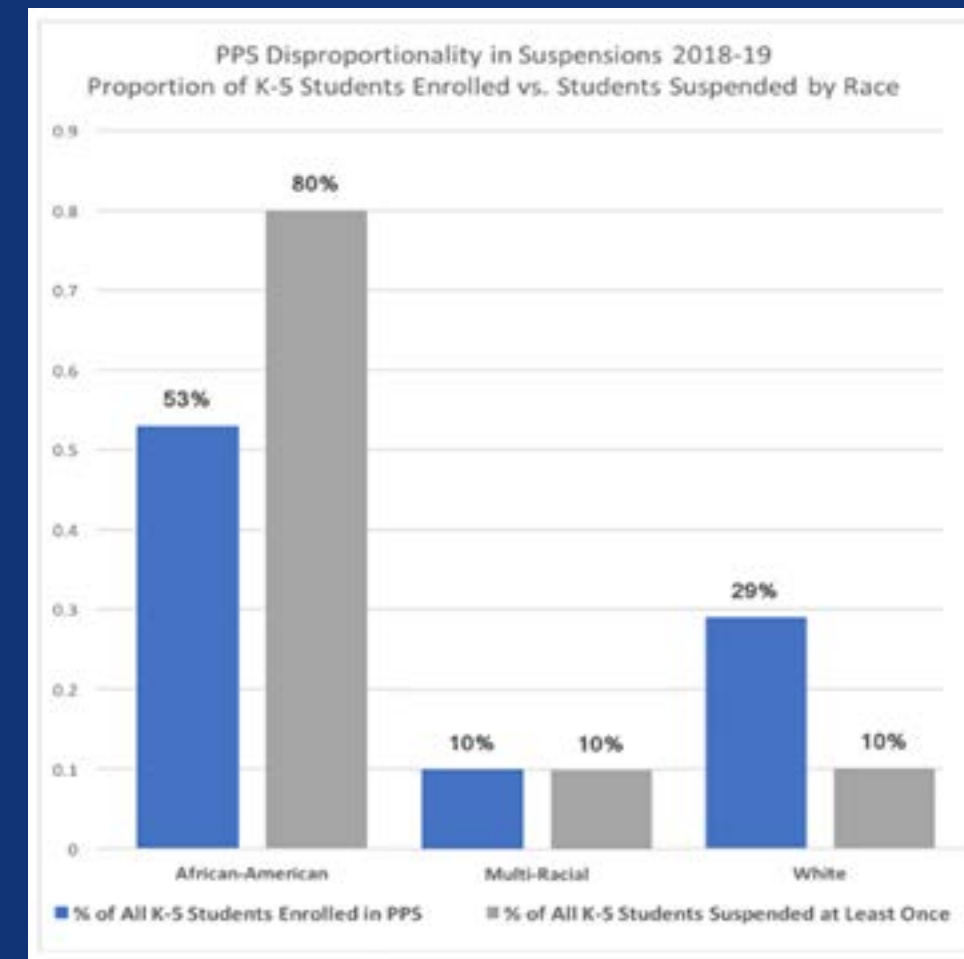
	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
<b>K-5 enrollment<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>11,158</b>	<b>11,624</b>	<b>11,905</b>
<b>Number of K-5 students suspended at least once</b>	<b>936</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>540</b>
<b>Percentage of K-5 students suspended at least once</b>	<b>7.9%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
<b>Number of K-5 unique incidents<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>1,582</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>985</b>
<b>Number of K-5 suspensions</b>	<b>1,664</b>	<b>769</b>	<b>1,062</b>
<b>Number of K-5 days of school missed due to out-of-school suspensions</b>	<b>2,440</b>	<b>1,117</b>	<b>1,476</b>

<sup>2</sup> Enrollment counts include the number of students who were enrolled in PPS at any point throughout the school year. This is the enrollment figure used by PPS in calculating student suspension rates.  
<sup>3</sup> "Unique Incidents" includes the number of incidents that resulted in student suspension(s). One incident may result in multiple student suspensions.

# RACE, GENDER AND IEP STATUS

**Chart 1: PPS Disproportionality in Suspensions 2018-19 by Race**

Looking at the intersection of race, gender, and disability can help to highlight disparities in exclusionary discipline, as students of color (particularly African-American students), students with disabilities, and males are more likely to be suspended than their peers. Throughout PPS, African-American students were, and continue to be, most impacted by exclusionary discipline and lose the most days of instruction due to out-of-school suspensions. As shown in Chart 1, while African-American students make up about 53% of the District's K-5 enrollment, they account for 80% of students suspended at least once. White students make up about 29% of the District's K-5 enrollment, and only 10% of students suspended at least once.



In 2018-19, K-5 students were suspended for 1,476 days. African-American students were suspended for 1,168 (79%) of these 1,476 days. Chart 2 shows days of instruction lost due to suspension from 2016-17 to 2018-19, broken down by race. It also shows the number of days suspended in grades K-2 (in blue) compared to grades 3-5 (in orange).

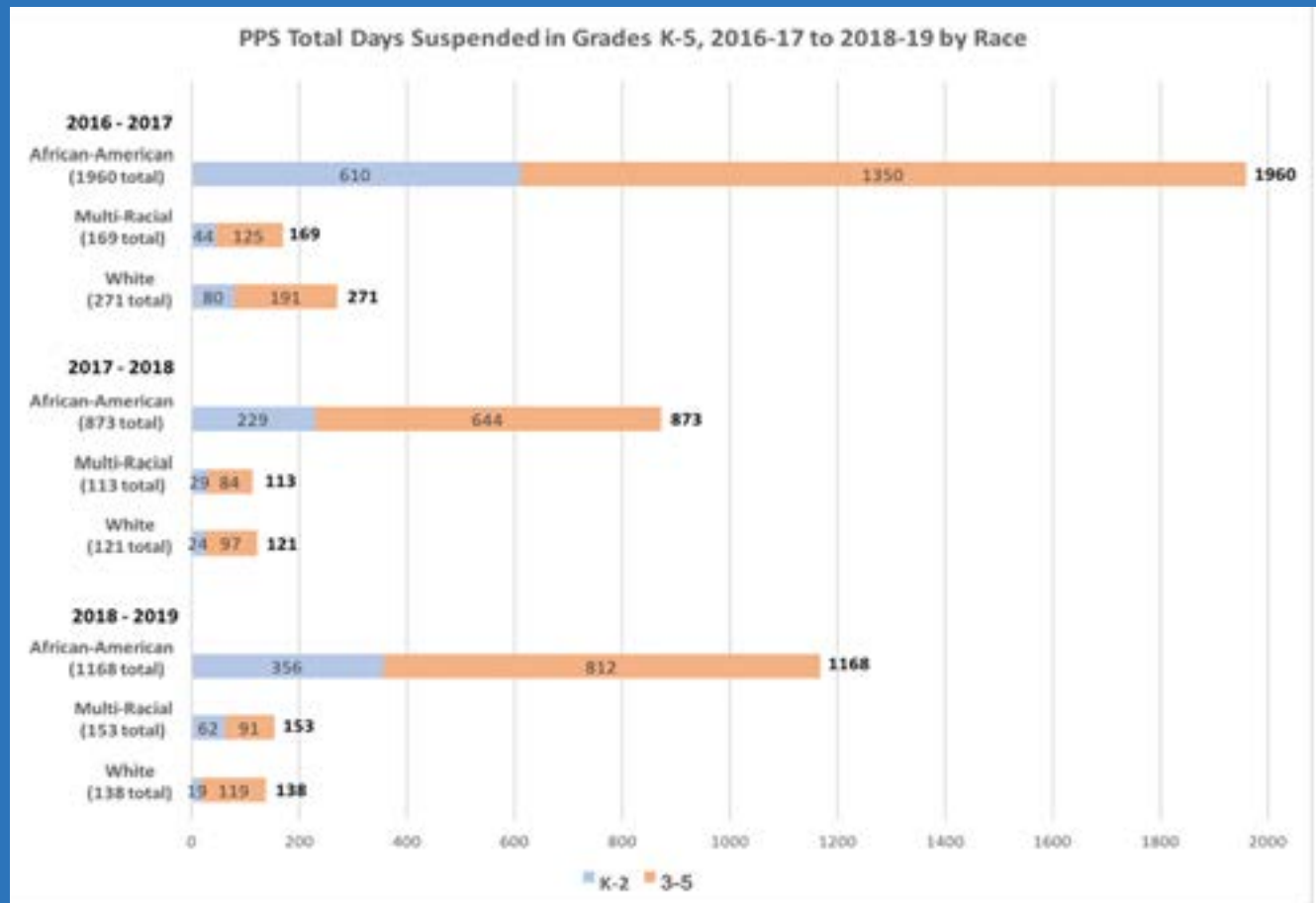
As shown in Table 2, students in grades 3-5 have received about 70-75% of all K-5 days of suspension between 2016-17 and 2018-19.

THE DATA TELLS A STORY  
OF DISPARITY

“  
**Disparities based on race persist.**

African-American students were, and continue to be, most impacted by exclusionary discipline.

**Chart 2: PPS Total Days Suspended in Grades K-5, 2016-17 to 2018-19 by Race**



**Table 2:**

**PPS Percentage of K-5 Days Suspended: All Students Grades K-2 vs. Grades 3-5**

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
<b>Grades K-2 Days Suspended</b>	<b>31%</b> <b>(750 days)</b>	<b>25%</b> <b>(283 days)</b>	<b>30%</b> <b>(440 days)</b>
<b>Grades 3-5 Days Suspended</b>	<b>69%</b> <b>(1,690 days)</b>	<b>75%</b> <b>(834 days)</b>	<b>70%</b> <b>(1,036 days)</b>
<b>Total Days Suspended Grades K-5</b>	<b>2,440</b>	<b>1,117</b>	<b>1,476</b>

As shown in Chart 3, African-American males lost the most days of instruction due to out-of-school suspensions (765). And while African-American females were suspended for about half as many days (403) as African-American males, in 2018-19 African-American females were suspended for more days than male and female K-5

students in all other race groups combined.

Additionally, from 2017-18 to 2018-19, when suspensions began to rise after substantial drops from 2016-17 to 2017-18, K-5 African-American females had the largest increase in total days suspended (243 days to 403 days).

**Chart 3: PPS K-5 Total Days Suspended by Race and Gender 2018-19**

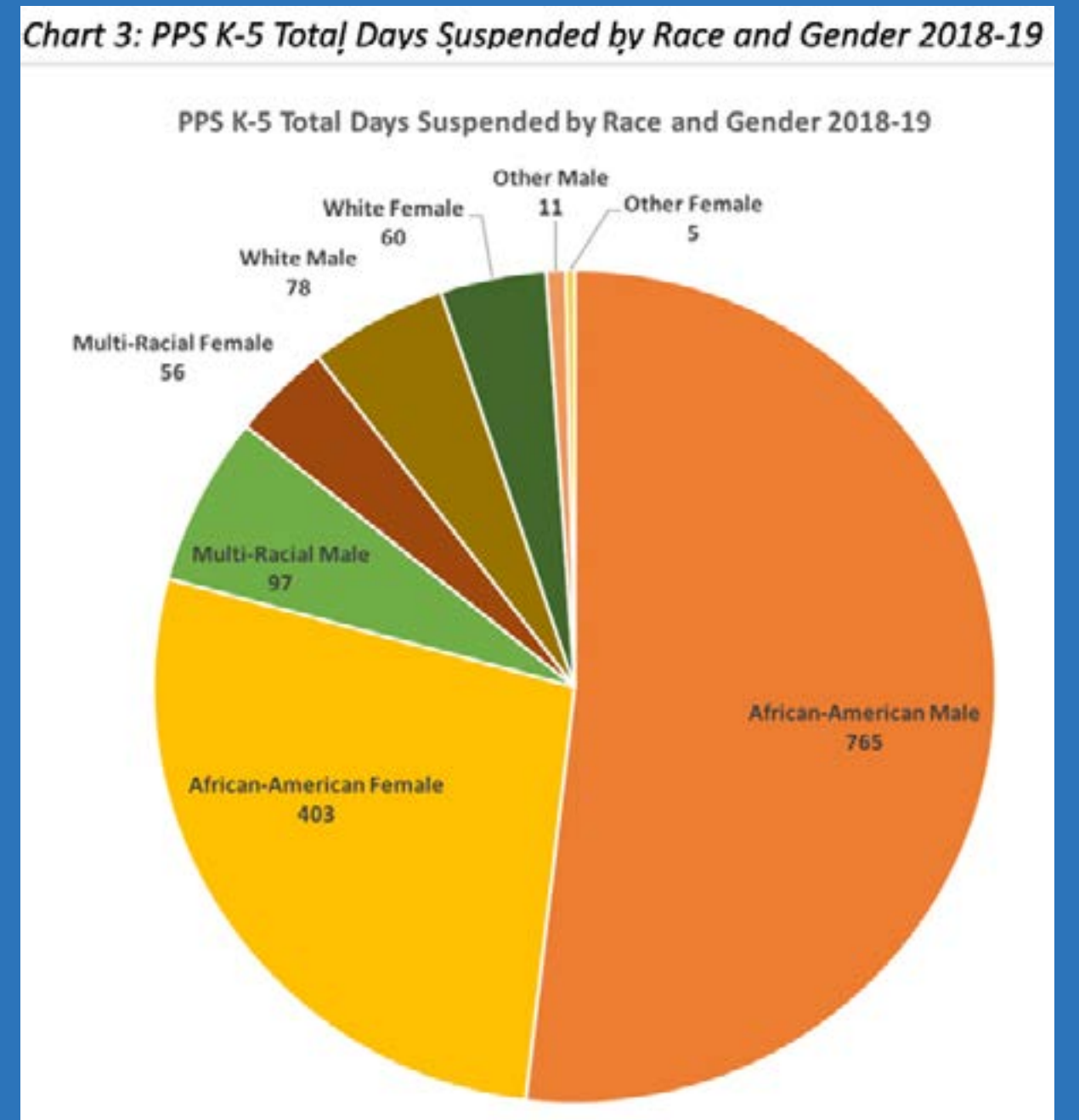


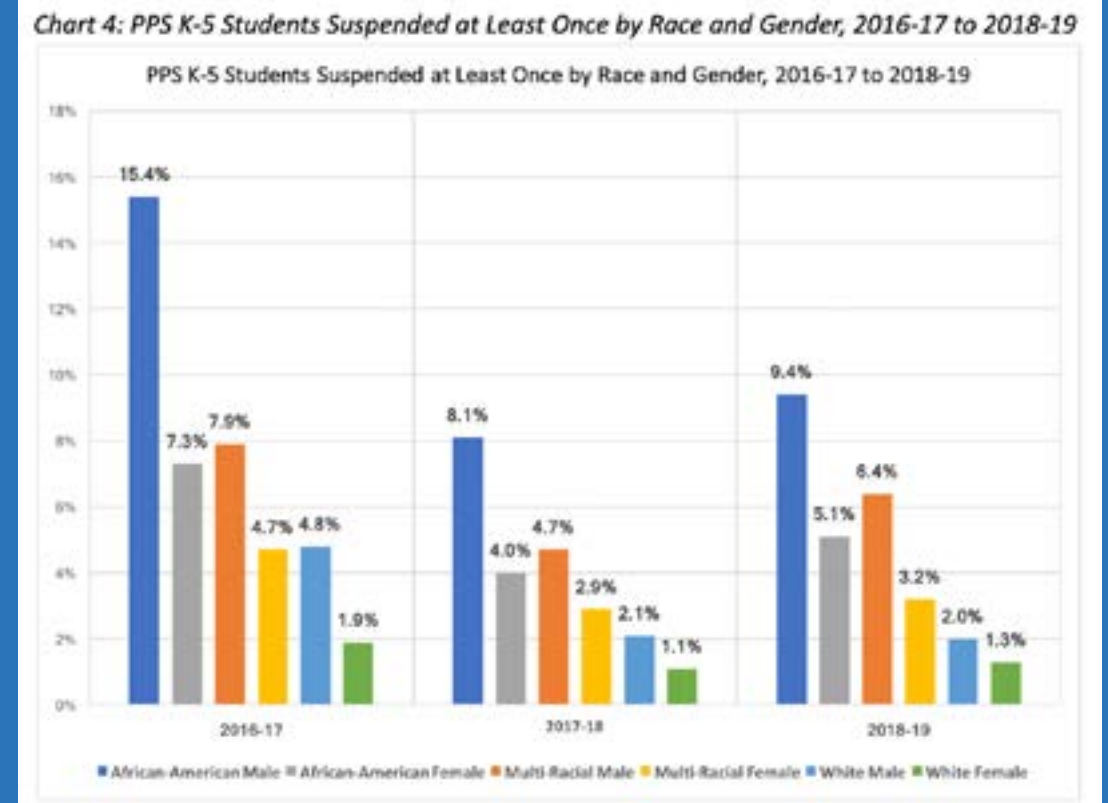
Table 3:

PPS K-5 Days Suspended 2017-18 to 2018-19 by Race and Gender			
	2017-18	2018-19	Difference
African-American Female	243	403	+ 160
African-American Male	630	765	+ 135
Multi-Racial Female	49	56	+ 7
Multi-Racial Male	64	97	+ 33
White Female	36	60	+ 24
White Male	85	75	- 10

Though the percentage of students suspended at least once in grades K-5 has decreased in all subgroups since 2016-17, disparities based on race persist. As shown in Chart 4, African-American and multi-racial students remain much more likely to be suspended than their white peers.

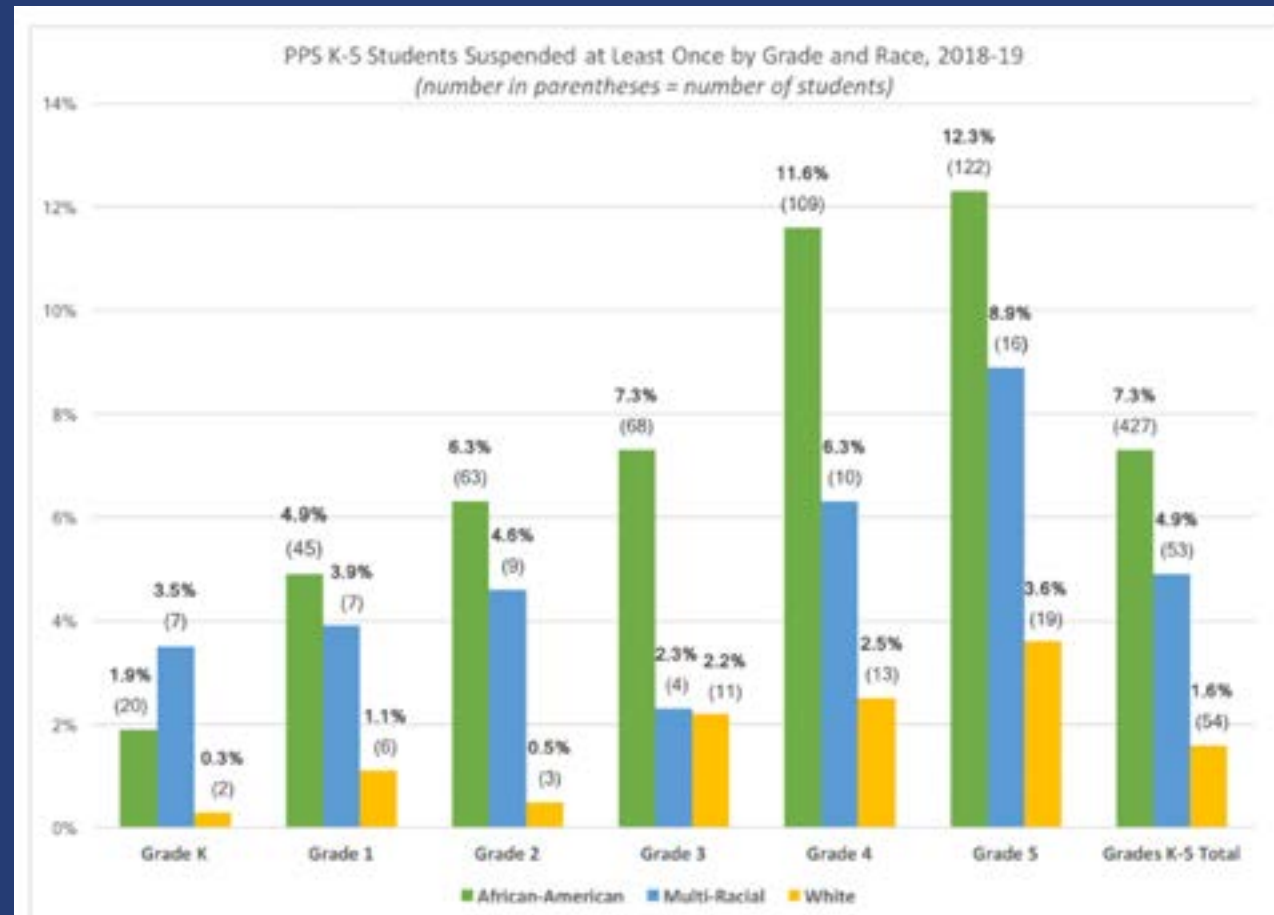
In 2018-19, female African-American students in grades K-5 were about four times more likely to be suspended than white females, and African-American males were nearly five times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts.

Chart 4: PPS K-5 Students Suspended at Least Once by Race and Gender, 2016-17 to 2018-19



# 16% OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES IN FOURTH GRADE WERE SUSPENDED AT LEAST ONCE

Chart 5: PPS K-5 Students Suspended at Least Once by Grade and Race, 2018-19



As shown in Chart 5, in nearly all K-5 grades, African-American and multi-racial students are far more likely than white students to be suspended at least once.

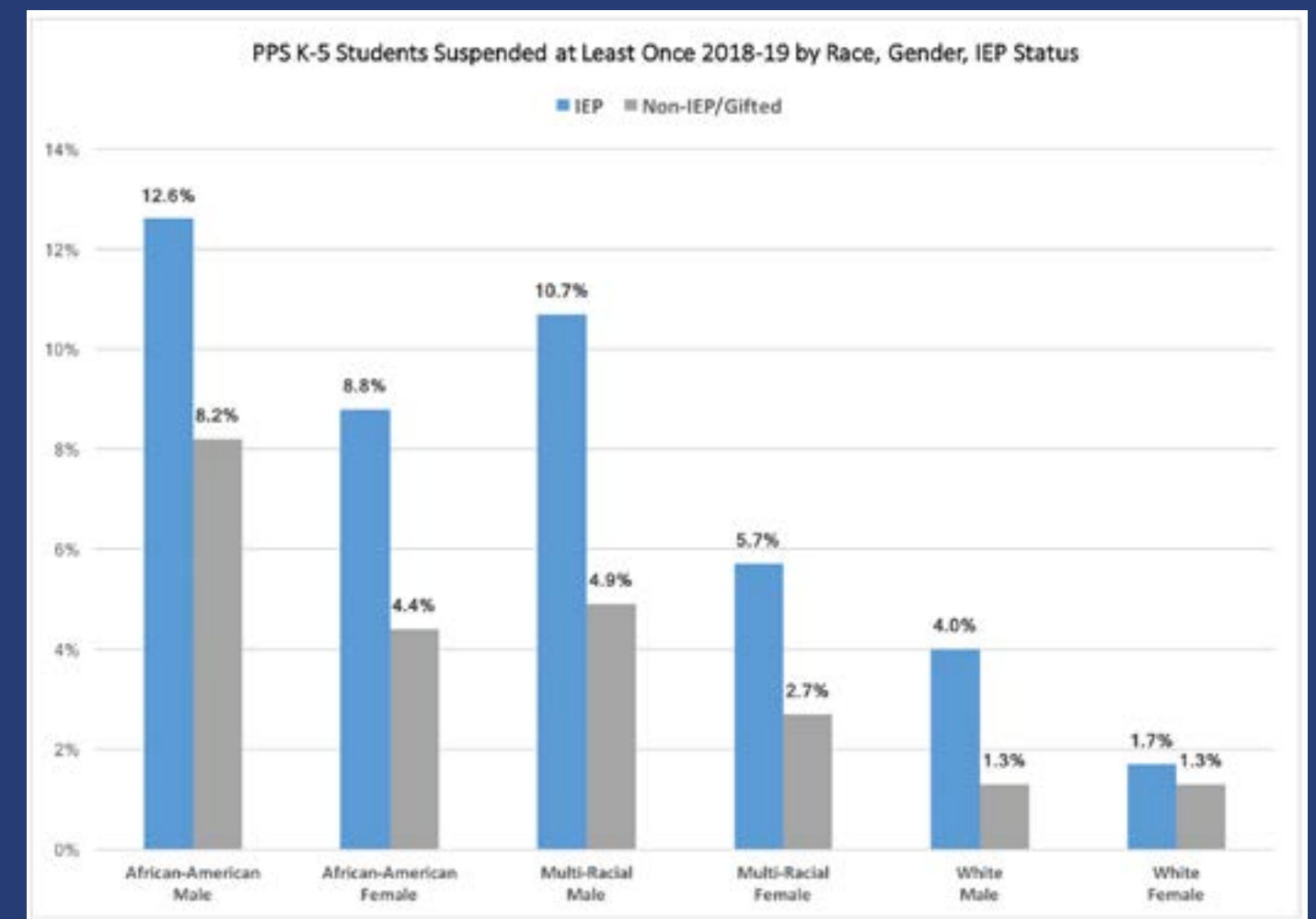
African-American males in fourth grade had the highest suspension rate in grades K-5. In 2018-19, 16% of African-American males (77 unique students) in fourth grade were suspended at least once, for a total of 232 days suspended.

Students with disabilities, who have Indi-

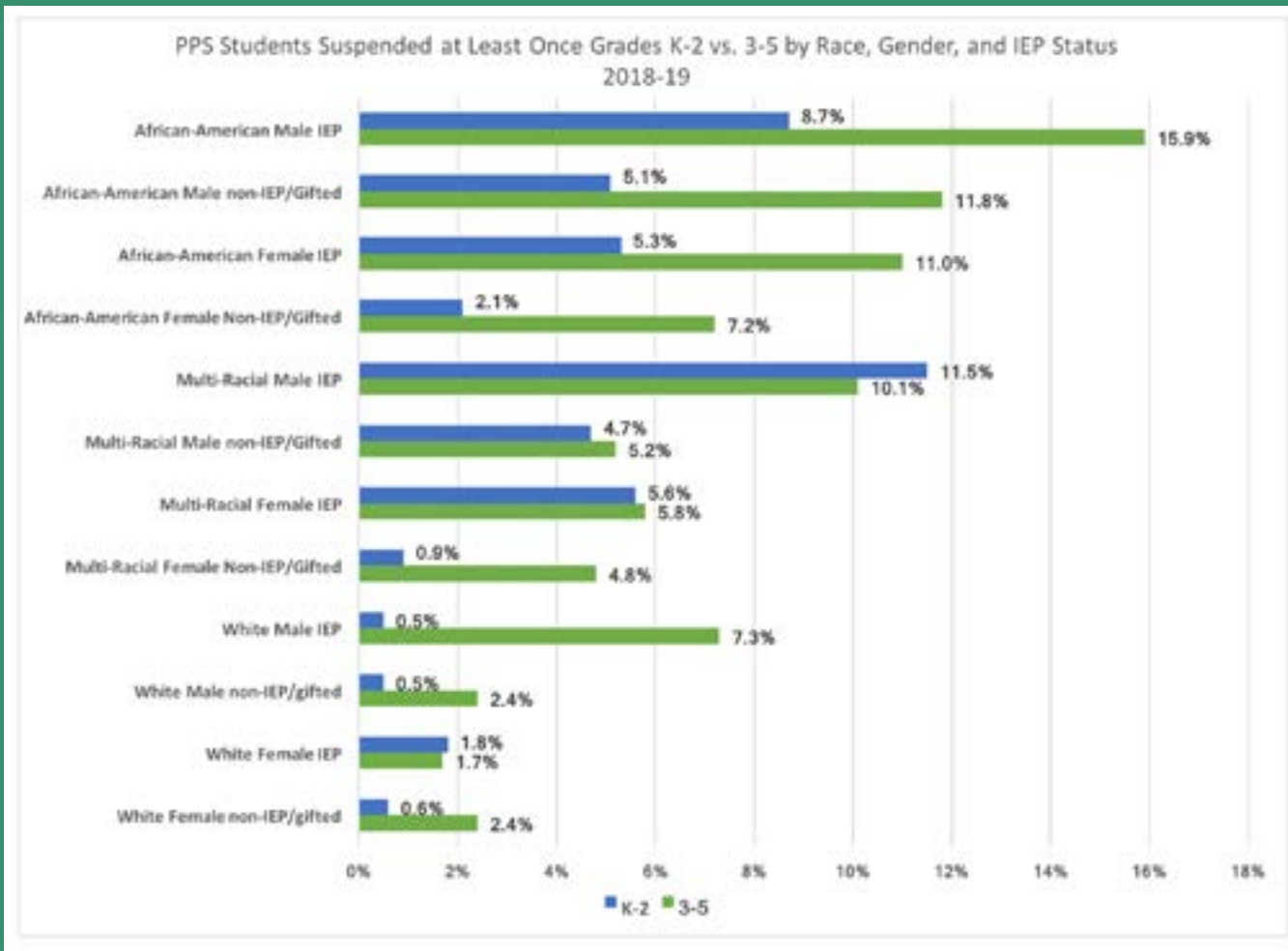
vidualized Education Programs (IEPs) for special education, are at greater risk for exclusionary discipline than their peers without disabilities. As evident in Chart 6, in 2018-19, K-5 students with disabilities in all race and gender groups were suspended at rates higher than their peers without disabilities. In total, 204 K-5 students with disabilities missed 512 days of instruction due to suspension in 2018-19. African-American students accounted for 159 of these students with IEPs, and missed 410 days of instruction due to suspension.



Chart 6: PPS K-5 Students Suspended at Least Once by Race, Gender, IEP Status, 2018-19



**Chart 7: PPS Students Suspended at Least Once, Grades K-2 vs. 3-5, 2018-19**



As evident in Chart 6, when race, gender, and IEP status are viewed together, disparities become more prominent. Chart 7, on next page, shows the percentage of students suspended at least once in grades K-2 versus grades 3-5, broken down by race, gender, and IEP status. In most cases, students in grades 3-5 have a higher rate of suspension. Nearly 16% of African-American males with IEPs in grades 3-5 have been suspended at least once in 2018-19. While this marks a decrease of about four percentage points since 2016-17, it is over double that of white males with IEPs in grades 3-5.

As noted earlier in this report, suspensions have decreased substantially since 2016-17, including for students with IEPs. However, data for the 2018-19 school year show that disparities based on race, gender, and disability remain.





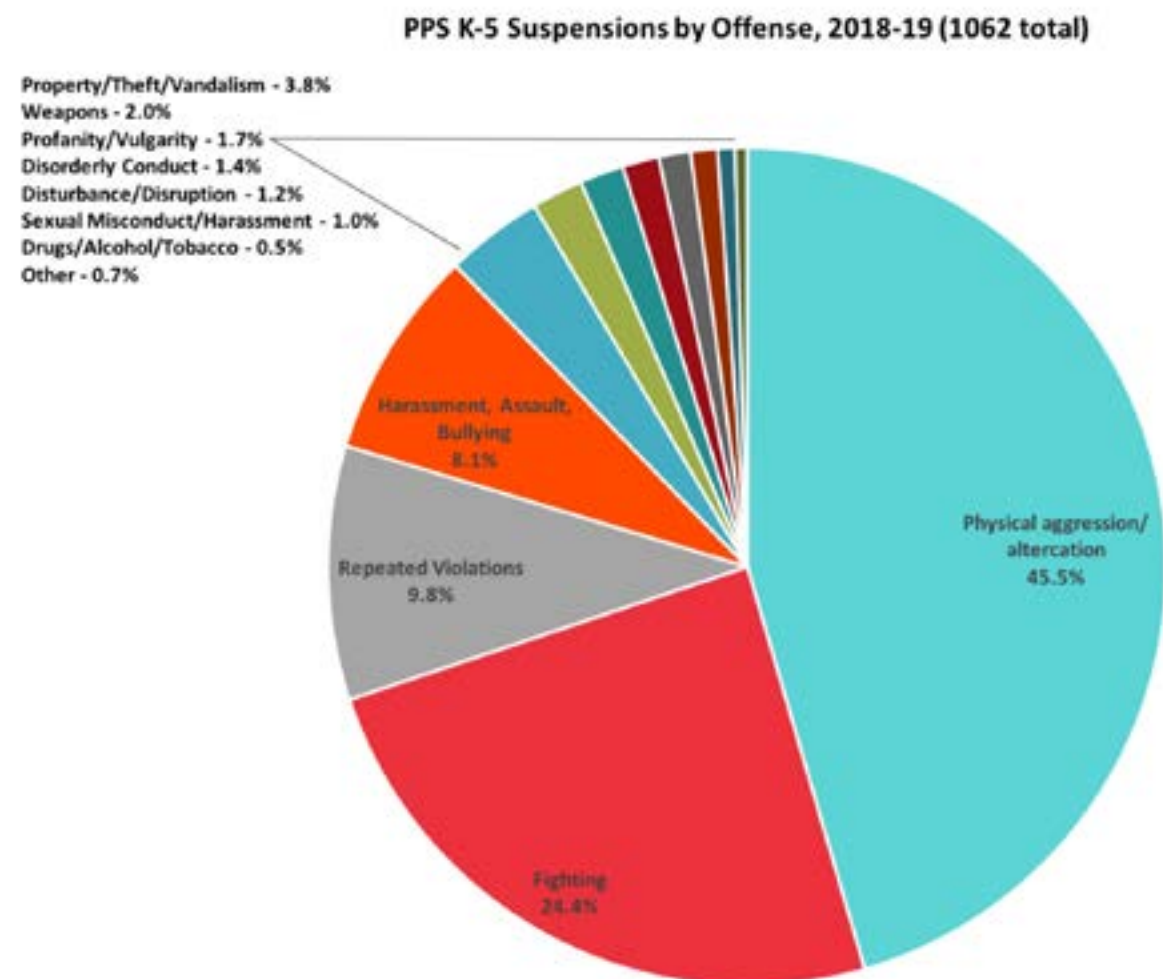
## TYPES OF OFFENSES

Over the past several academic years, the PPS K-5 Student Code of Conduct has changed to help transition from “reactionary and exclusionary practices” toward “proactive approaches that focus on building student and staff skills and competencies” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2019). Interventions that serve to understand and address root causes of behavior (which may be related to environment) are emphasized, and exclusionary discipline, such as out-of-school suspensions, are to be used only for “the most serious situations.”

*Unless there is a threat to self, others, or property (“damage, destruction or vandalism of property” is considered a violent offense), the child must remain in school and learning.*

The Code of Conduct details three levels of offenses and classifies which are considered non-violent (generally not behavior that leads to suspension except in the event

of repeated violations) or violent. In 2016-17, over 70% of suspensions were for “Disruption of School,” a minor, non-violent category that was all but eliminated in the 2018-19 school year. However, a category entitled “Physical Aggression/Altercation” was added to the Code of Conduct, and over 45% of the 1062 K-5 student suspensions fell into this offense category in 2018-19.

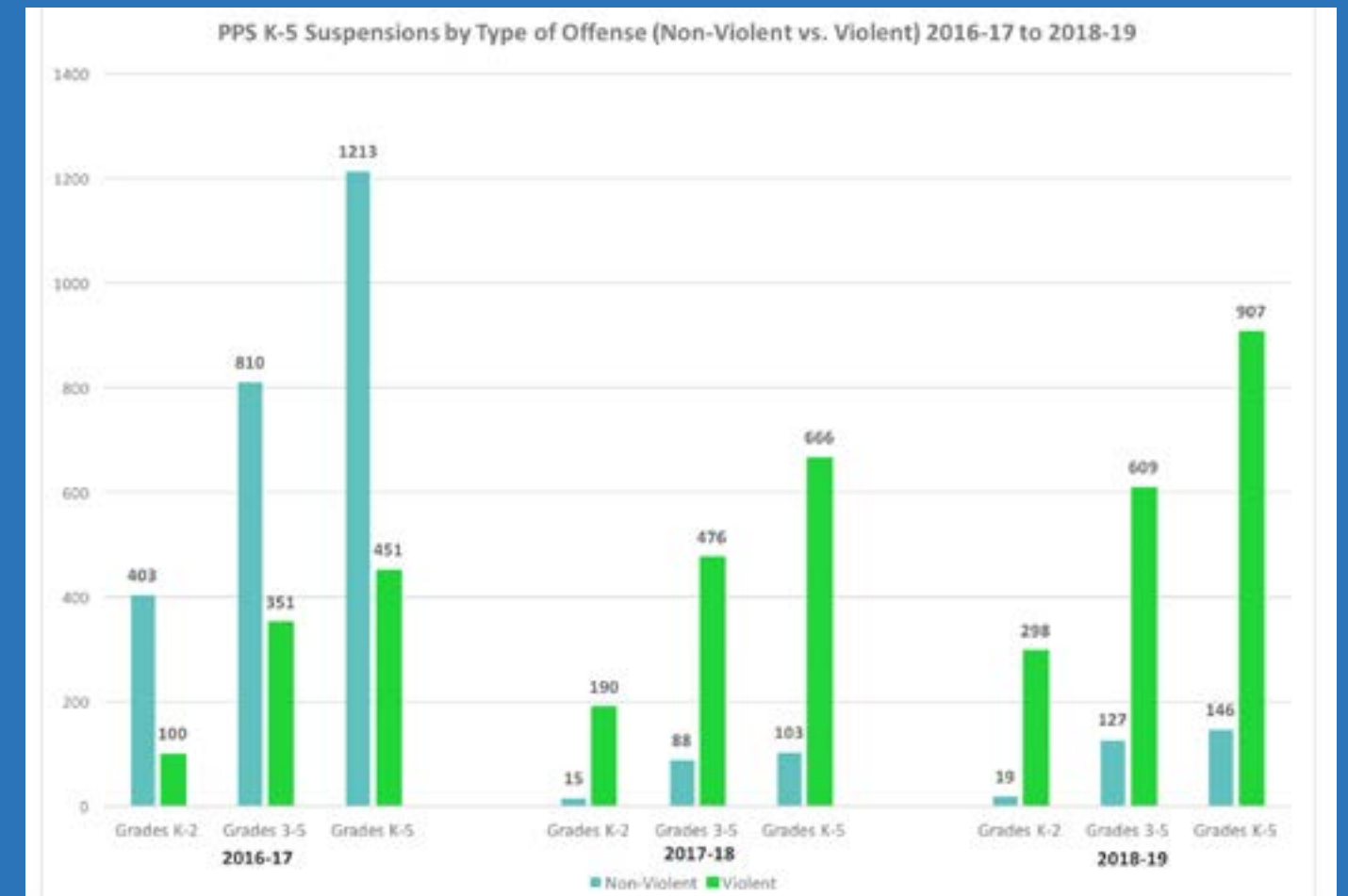


**Chart 8: PPS K-5 Suspensions by Offense, 2018-19**

The code “Physical Aggression/Altercation” is considered a violent offense. In 2018-19, “Physical Aggression/Altercation” was defined in the PreK-5 Code of Student Conduct as, “Threatened or actual use of violence by a student on another person when there is no major injury as determined by the school

administrator. Administrators may use professional judgment in cases where the investigation yields a clear aggressor/initiator and may differentiate consequences accordingly” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2019). The most recent 2020-21 Code of Conduct has removed the word “threatened.”

**Chart 9: PPS K-5 Suspensions by Type of Offense (Non-Violent vs. Violent), 2016-17 to 2018-19**



Given the high percentage of offenses coded as “Physical Aggression/Altercation,” further investigation is needed to better understand the types of incidents classified within this category. As Chart 9 below shows, even as suspensions overall have gone down, suspensions for offenses categorized as violent (which include the “Physical Aggression/Altercation” code) in elementary grades have steadily risen.

K-5 suspensions for offenses categorized as violent have doubled since 2016-17, and nearly tripled for students in grades K-2. While there has been about a 7% increase in K-5 enrollment overall from 2016-17 to 2018-19, the increase in suspensions categorized as violent has clearly outpaced increases in enrollment.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help enact “Solutions, Not Suspensions” in PPS, the Education Rights Network, a parent-led organization that works to achieve inclusion and equity for all students in Pittsburgh, recommends that Pittsburgh Public Schools take the action steps detailed below.

# INVEST IN COUNSELORS NOT COPS

Police should not be stationed in schools or involved in minor behavioral infractions. An agreement with the Pittsburgh Police Department must be in place to specify the rare cases when law enforcement can be called into a school, with safeguards in place to ensure students’ rights to education and dignity are pro-

tected along with their constitutional rights to counsel and due process. Additionally, physical restraint designed to restrict a student’s freedom of movement should be ended outside of emergency contexts. Restraint is dangerous and dehumanizing, placing students at risk of serious physical and psychological harm while violating their dignity and right to be free from abusive treatment. In PPS’s 2019 General Fund Budget, \$7.2 million was budgeted for school safety -- nearly \$6.5 million of this was for security personnel salaries and benefits (Board of Public Education, 2018). District funding should prioritize greater investment in counselors, social workers, restorative justice/school climate coordinators, and other support staff to promote safe and positive school environments and address root causes of problems without criminalizing students.



## BAN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS/ EXPULSIONS IN GRADES 3-5 FOR MINOR MISCONDUCT & REVISIT WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

**The ban on non-violent suspensions in grades K-2 should be extended to grades 3-5.** Additionally, recommendations from the Working Group on Reducing Exclusionary Discipline for Early Learners should be revisited with an assessment of which have been implemented, the state of implementation, and which suggestions the District will prioritize moving forward. Recommendations include staffing each school with adequate disciplinary supports such as one counselor, one social worker, and one Restorative Practices/School Climate Coordinator to help educators implement more positive disci-

plinary approaches; training and professional development for educators and other staff in areas such as de-escalation, promoting equity and inclusion, trauma, culturally relevant pedagogy, systemic racism and bias, and student agency; and enhancing system-wide use of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices. A comprehensive list of recommendations can be found at [https://www.pghschools.org/cms/lib/PA01000449/Centricity/Domain/19/Working%20Group%20Recommendations\\_Supports\\_Oct%2026.pdf](https://www.pghschools.org/cms/lib/PA01000449/Centricity/Domain/19/Working%20Group%20Recommendations_Supports_Oct%2026.pdf)

# CONDUCT A DEEPER DIVE INTO DISCIPLINE REFERRALS

While the discipline data featured in this report outline important trends across grades K-5, there are limitations to what they can tell us. The significant rise in the number of suspensions categorized as violent in grades K-5 is troubling, and additional investigation into student discipline referrals is required to understand underlying causes. Findings from



this investigation should be shared publicly. The "Physical Aggression/Altercation" code, which accounts for nearly half of K-5 suspensions, deserves a particularly close look to understand how it is being interpreted by administrators. In 2018-9, the infraction code was defined as, "Threatened or actual use of violence by a student on another person when there is no major injury as determined by the school administrator." "Threatened violence" -- language that is ripe for interpretation, bias, and overuse -- has been removed in the District's most recent Student Code of Conduct, which is a positive step. However, research suggests that the disproportionate representation of African-American students in disciplinary referrals generally reflects subjective perception and interpretation of student behavior on the part of staff, as there is no evidence that students of color engage in more serious or disruptive behavior than white students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Additionally, about 10% of K-5 students are suspended for "Repeated Violations" of non-violent infractions, a code which should be eliminated.

A review of elementary discipline data by school shows that a few schools have relatively high suspension rates for elementary grades as well as notable increases in suspensions in grades K-5. Most prominent among these are Spring Hill K-5, Arlington PreK-8, and King PreK-8. In all cases, suspension rates have risen sharply since 2017-18, and in some cases are higher than in 2015-16. Efforts should be made to understand why this is happening, address root causes, and provide appropriate supports to help reduce exclusion.



# INCREASE TRANSPARENCY OF DISCIPLINE DATA

The PPS discipline data dashboard has made information on three years of out-of-school suspensions available to the public in an interactive format, which is an important step for District transparency. Recommended adjustments to make the dashboard more comprehensive and user-friendly include: 1) Including number of suspensions in addition

to number of unique incidents (which may entail more than one suspension per incident); 2) Adding in-school suspension data; 3) Allowing multiple-grade selection. Additionally, public reports on discipline to the PPS Board of Directors should include the intersection of race, gender, and disability.



## REPORT APPENDIX

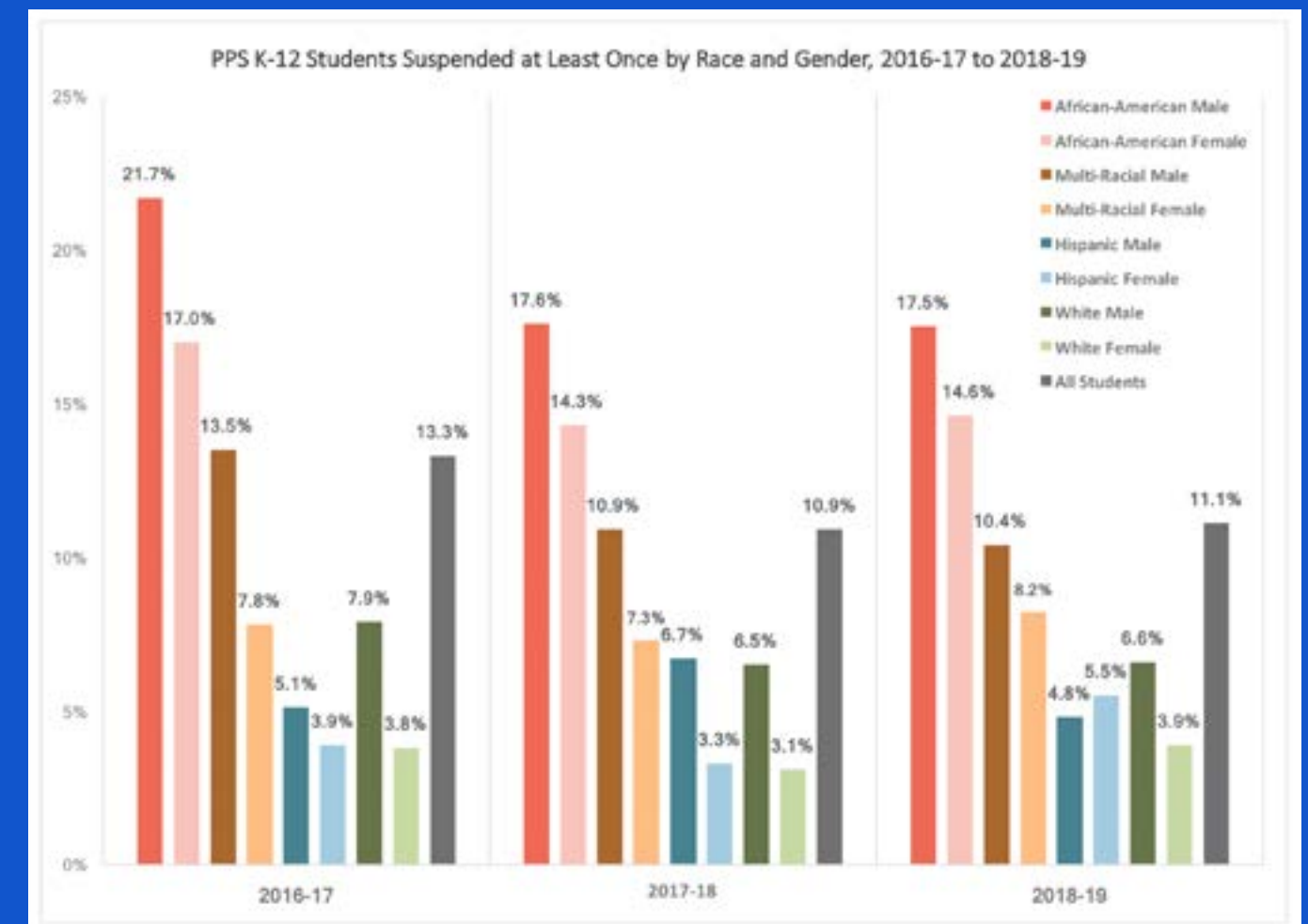
### Appendix I: Pittsburgh Public Schools K-12th Grade Suspensions

While this report has a focus on suspensions in grades K-5, information about K-12 suspensions gives helpful context. The charts below show trends in overall suspension data from 2016-17 to 2018-19, as well as percentage of students suspended at least once in grades K-12 broken down by race and gender.

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
# of K-12 students suspended at least once	3,241	2,616	2,582
% of K-12 students suspended at least once	13.3%	10.9%	11.1%
# of K-12 unique incidents <sup>4</sup>	4,804	3,203	3,461
# K-12 days of school missed due to out-of-school suspensions	11,929	11,370	10,445

<sup>4</sup> "Unique Incidents" includes the number of incidents that resulted in student suspension(s). One incident may result in multiple student suspensions.

Though suspension rates have gone down since 2016-17, African-American students remain particularly at-risk for out-of-school suspensions. African-American and multi-racial students are also much more likely than their white peers to be suspended at least once.



## REPORT SOURCES

Out-of-School Suspension data pulled from the Pittsburgh Public Schools Data Dashboard (<https://www.pghschools.org/dashboards>). Additional data provided by the Pittsburgh Public Schools Office of Data, Research, Evaluation, and Assessment.

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**Thank you to all the parent advocates, community members, teachers, staff, students and partner organizations rising with dedication to achieve Equitable Public Schools.**

## **JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO BRING SOLUTIONS, NOT SUSPENSIONS TO PITTSBURGH!**

The Education Rights Network is comprised of a dedicated group of parents and caregivers who are working to ensure equity and inclusion for all students in Pittsburgh Public Schools. In addition to reviewing and analyzing suspension data and raising awareness of the issue, ERN works to educate and support parent leaders via “Know Your Rights” workshops and provides direct help in navigating the District’s Code of Conduct and discipline procedures. ERN has successfully mobilized and supported parent leaders to rally for necessary changes to the District’s discipline policies and practices, and has achieved wins including the ratification of some recommended changes to the district’s Code of Conduct.

**For more information or to become involved, visit [412Justice.org](http://412Justice.org)**