



MAKE THE CASE  
**POSITIVE & INVITING  
SCHOOL CLIMATE**

A positive and inviting school climate is a prerequisite for **student academic learning, student well-being, and school safety**. Students learn best in environments where they feel they belong, are safe, and have strong relationships.

Safe and emotionally supportive classrooms, as well as fair and consistent rules and discipline policies, are fundamental to creating positive learning environments.

Schools that integrate social-emotional development opportunities and meaningfully engage families can support students' holistic needs.



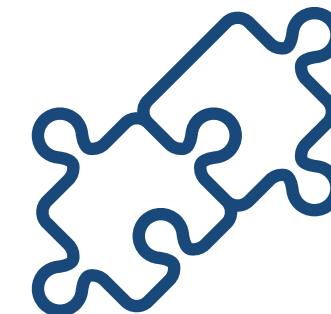
Approaches to school discipline that (1) are racially and culturally conscious, promote accountability for students and educators to create a safe, healthy, and inclusive environment, and provide supports (increased access to counselors, restorative justice practices, multi-tiered systems of supports [MTSS]) **can reduce racial gaps in discipline referral rates.**<sup>1</sup>



**Integrating culturally relevant, holistic supports to promote social-emotional development in students** — including positive identity development, relationship building, and social and cultural awareness — **can improve academic outcomes and overall student well-being.**<sup>3</sup>



School safety depends on **creating inclusive learning environments that foster a sense of belonging and prioritize positive relationships**. When students feel that they belong and are accepted, supported, and connected to their school community, they perform better **academically and have better social-emotional and behavioral outcomes.**<sup>2</sup>



When school staff **meaningfully engage with families**, they are more aware of the **needs and strengths of students and their families**, and can provide them with more appropriate social, emotional, and academic supports.<sup>4</sup>

Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and other students from underserved backgrounds are less likely to experience equitable and safe learning environments. This can undermine their social, emotional, and academic development.

Students of color and students with disabilities are [disproportionately excluded](#) from school, due to harmful discipline practices and policies. This results in missed learning opportunities and harms their sense of belonging in school.

**2X**

Black male students receive in- and out-of-school suspensions at rates nearly two times their share of total student enrollment.<sup>5</sup>



**11 million**

estimated instructional days lost due to total disciplinary suspensions in SY 2015-16.<sup>6</sup>

**103**

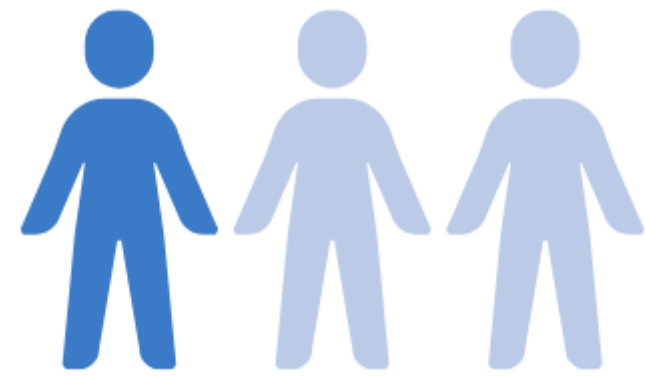
vs.

**21**

estimated instructional days lost for Black students, per 100 students.

estimated instructional days lost for White students, per 100 students.<sup>7</sup>

*Students of color and students with disabilities are significantly more likely to (1) attend schools that have enforced hardening measures and (2) be targets of these **measures** (e.g., metal detectors and school police) and **exclusionary discipline policies**, such as suspensions and expulsions. While these stringent disciplinary actions are intended for serious offenses only, they may often be employed for minor and subjective instances (e.g., dress and hair code violations, talking in class, tardiness). Overuse of strict disciplinary actions can significantly harm students' academic and psychological development and reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>8</sup>*



more than  
**1 in 3**  
students  
perceived racism

*Experiencing racism prevents the formation of trusting relationships at school and can harm student mental health, as well as hinder a student's ability to concentrate, remember, and make decisions.<sup>9</sup>*

# Nearly 53,000

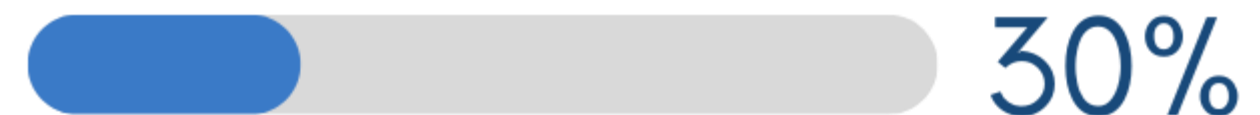
children were subjected to physical restraint, mechanical restraint (use of devices to restrict freedom of movement) and/or placed in seclusion in schools, based on 2020–2021 data. Nationally, **Black children and students with disabilities were significantly more likely to be restrained and/or secluded in school compared to White children and children without disabilities**, though the state landscape varies significantly.<sup>10</sup>

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Parents — especially parents of students of color — said they feel uninformed about their child's academic and nonacademic school experiences.<sup>11</sup>



of Black parents who said they DO NOT receive regular updates about their child's academic progress.<sup>12</sup>



of Black parents who said they DO NOT receive communication about how their child is doing socially and emotionally.<sup>13</sup>

Making the case for improving access to **Positive & Inviting School Climate** hinges on effectively communicating their importance, urgency, and connection to your community.

## 3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging



Keep it simple.



Know your audience.



Make an emotional connection.

# 3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging

Know your audience.

## Who is your audience?

- District leaders and policymakers?
- School board members?
- Other advocates?
- Parents, students, families?

## What publications do they read? What media do they consume?

- Education Week?
- Boston Herald?
- Dallas Morning News?
- TikTok? Twitter/X?

## What does your audience care about?

- Start with what they value.
- Connect their values with your advocacy message.

Make an emotional connection.

## Don't rely on statistics to make your point.

"Show, don't tell" how this issue (or your proposed policy solution) impacts students.

- Create an emotional response — make it clear why we all need to care!
- Use real stories about students and highlight the urgency of addressing inequities.

## Tell your personal story.

- Why do you care about this issue? Did you have a similar experience in school?
- How does this impact you as a parent, advocate, or community member?
- Ultimately, who are the people on the ground being affected, and how can you lift up those voices and stories and move people to act?

Keep it simple.

## Your messages need to be short.

- Describe each of your advocacy points in 10 words or less.
- Make them easy to remember and quotable.
- Think of what you would say in a tweet.

## Avoid jargon and education speak.



# Message Triangle Fast Facts

- Based on the principle that it is easier to visualize an image than it is to memorize a lot of words.
- Structured specifically for **social change and advocacy messages**: provides a structure to frame issues in a way that resonates with people's core values, makes the message personal, and can be tailored to a specific audience.
- Helps identify and home in on **1 core message and 3 supporting, key messages** that are compelling, credible, and concise.
- Offers structural focus but is not intended as a script.

**Your core message is the North Star message you are trying to get across.**

Your 3 key messages should be designed to move your audience toward your objective.



# Creating a Message Triangle to Tell Your District's Story



## Review Key Questions

Review the Alliance for Resource Equity's Key Questions on Positive, Inviting School Climate:

- **Key Question 6.1:** Does each student experience a safe school with transparent, culturally sensitive, and consistently enforced rules and discipline policies?
- **Key Question 6.2:** Does each student have positive relationships with staff and other students?
- **Key Question 6.3:** Does each student have access to effective social-emotional learning opportunities?
- **Key Question 6.4:** Does each student attend a school that actively and meaningfully engages families?

## Identify your "North Star" or Core Message

Determine what you want to communicate. What is the underlying vision?

- Consider reiterating the Alliance for Resource Equity's vision:

Each student has a physically safe and emotionally supportive environment at school, including fair and consistent rules and discipline policies, positive relationships with staff and students that foster belonging, effective social-emotional learning opportunities, and meaningful family engagement that meets students' needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

## Support Messages With Data

Use available data to form 2 messages that outline the problem and its impact or relevance.

- See Appendix A for list of data metrics.
- Prepare a powerful data metric, soundbite, and narrative for your key messages.

## Create a Call to Action

The last key message should prompt people to act.

- What action are you requesting from your district?
- What is the most immediate next step?
- What do you want your audience to do?



# Forming Key Messages 101

1

**Start by analyzing metrics (Appendix A) to help answer the key question in the dimension.**

For instance, looking at the % of suspended/expelled students by school poverty level and by % who are students of color could help determine the answer to **Key Question 6.1: “Does each student experience a safe school with transparent, culturally sensitive, and consistently enforced rules and discipline policies?”**

2

**Consider the available data points.**

What story do they tell? How directly do they speak to the issue?

Let’s suppose we learn that Black students and students from low-income backgrounds are suspended and expelled at significantly higher rates than their White and more affluent peers. **We can use these data points to inform our key messages.**

3

**Solidify the message.**

- **Key Message 1 identifies the issue:** “Schools with more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds suspend and expel students at higher rates than Whiter, more affluent schools.”
- **Key Message 2 explains why this matters:** “Stringent discipline policies result in missed learning opportunities and harm students’ sense of belonging in school.”
- **Key Message 3 advances a call to action:** “Our district must prioritize racially and culturally conscious approaches to discipline instead of continuing to invest in harmful, zero-sum practices.”

4

**Use additional elements to support each of your key messages.** For Key Message 1, this could look like:

- **An illustrative data metric:** “On average, Black students are suspended and expelled at twice the rate of their White peers in the district, and schools with higher proportions of students from low-income backgrounds have significantly higher rates of suspension/expulsion than more affluent schools.”
- **A punchy soundbite to use for an interview:** “Stringent discipline practices disproportionately impact our students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, removing them from the classroom and restricting their ability to receive instruction.”
- **A powerful narrative element:** Share an example of how a suspension or expulsion made it harder for a student to catch up on missed instruction.

# District X Example

## Key Message 1

Schools with more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds suspend and expel students at higher rates as compared to Whiter, more affluent schools.



**DATA METRIC:** On average, Black students are suspended and expelled at double the rate of their White peers in the district, and schools with higher proportions of students from low-income backgrounds have significantly higher suspension/expulsion rates than more affluent schools.



**SOUNDBITE:** “Stringent discipline practices disproportionately impact our students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, removing them from the classroom and restricting their ability to receive instruction.”



**NARRATIVE:** Share an example of how a suspension or expulsion made it harder for a student to catch up on missed instruction.



**DATA METRIC:** When students feel that they belong and are accepted, supported, and connected to their school community, they perform better academically and have better social-emotional and behavioral outcomes.



**SOUNDBITE:** “Instead of ‘hardening’ our schools, our district must double down on evidence-based policies that are restorative and relationship-focused, which are critical to students’ holistic development and their academic learning.”



**NARRATIVE:** Ask the district to examine alternative approaches to stringent discipline policies and explore multi-tiered supports.

## Key Message 2

Stringent discipline policies create missed learning opportunities and harm students’ sense of belonging in school.

**DATA METRIC:** Studies indicate that overuse of strict disciplinary actions can significantly harm students’ academic and psychological development and reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline.



**SOUNDBITE:** “School safety depends on creating inclusive learning environments that foster a sense of belonging and prioritize positive relationships.”



**NARRATIVE:** Share how stringent policies have failed to improve a student’s sense of safety and undermined their sense of belonging.



## Core Message (“North Star”)

Each student has a physically safe and emotionally supportive environment at school, including fair and consistent rules and discipline policies, positive relationships with staff and students that foster belonging, effective social-emotional learning opportunities, and meaningful family engagement that meets students’ needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

## Key Message 3

Our district must prioritize racially and culturally conscious approaches to discipline instead of continuing to invest in harmful, zero-sum practices.

# Message Triangle Checklist

Does your message triangle do ALL of the following?



## **Align with the shared values of your audience?**

- Shared values allow the conversation to start from a place of agreement.
- This requires knowing your audience first!



## **Define the impact?**

- Do your supporting facts (data metrics, narratives, soundbites) explain how those shared values are being undermined? Clearly outlining the consequences and inequities helps convey a sense of urgency without exaggerating the problem.



## **Asset-frame the issue?**

- Define the scope of the issue in terms of systems and structures, not students, and avoid defining marginalized communities in deficit-based language.



## **Highlight the benefits?**

- After establishing the issue/problem, explain how your solution SUPPORTS your shared values. Explicitly stating the value helps reaffirm tangible outputs your stakeholder cares about.

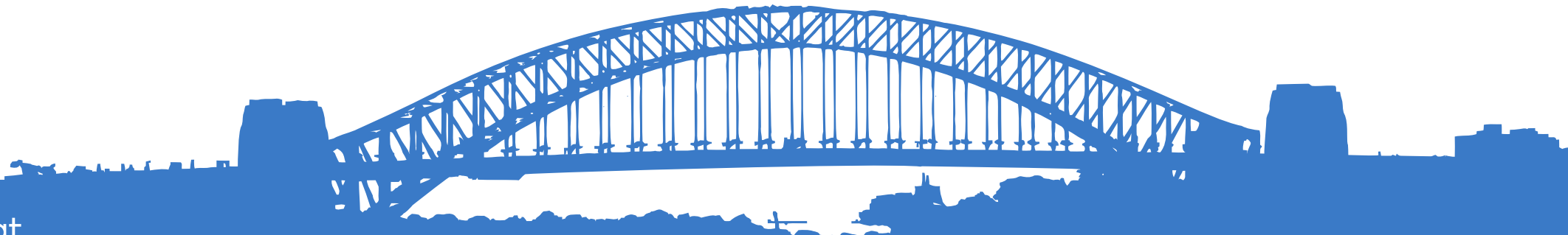


## **Include a call to action?**

- A positive vision helps your audience realize what's possible and recognize the role they play in sparking the change.

# Dismantling Opposition and Avoiding Traps

- **Bad information:** Don't repeat negative, incorrect, or inflammatory language. Instead, find a positive spin in your response and/or calmly correct misinformation before moving to your positive response.
- **Speculation:** Instead of trying to predict the future, reiterate the information you know and your key message.
- **Irrelevant Question:** Use a bridging statement to connect back to your key message.



Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

## BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response, which hits on your key messages in service of core "North Star" message

- “I find the more important issue to be...”
- “Let me emphasize again...”
- “What matters most in this situation is this: ...”
- “What I’ve said comes down to this...”
- “And that reminds me...”
- “Here’s the real problem...”
- “I think it would be more accurate (or correct) to say...”
- “It all boils down to this...”
- “While \_\_\_ is important, it’s also important to remember that...”
- “Before we leave this subject, I need to add...”





Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

## BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response, which hits on your key messages in service of core "North Star" message

When students misbehave, we need a way to hold them accountable for their actions. Stringent policies ensure safety and security in the classroom so our students can learn.

While I agree that students should be held accountable for their actions, research shows that these stringent policies do not improve school safety and can even make students feel less safe. What we do know from research is that...

Ultimately, school safety depends on creating inclusive learning environments that foster a sense of belonging and prioritize positive relationships. Therefore, we need to be doubling down on evidence-based policies that are restorative and relationship-focused, which are critical to students' holistic development and their academic learning.

Restorative justice practices just won't work in our school, especially as compared to more stringent measures.

Let's be clear: stringent policies don't "work" now. I feel compelled to clarify that...

Harmful exclusionary discipline policies have not been shown to increase school safety; instead, they have disproportionately negative impacts on underserved students, exacerbating school discipline disparities and increasing risks to students' mental health and well-being. These policies can attack students' cultural identity and have been linked to the school-to-prison pipeline. Additionally, they remove students from the classroom and cut students off from instruction.

Parents also need to be invested in their child's behavior at school. If parents don't care, it's hard for discipline of any kind to take hold.

While I agree that parents play an important role in signaling appropriate behavior at school, it's important to recognize that...

Engagement is crucial for students and their families, and must be authentic. Developing genuine, strong relationships, and regular communication channels between educators and families that center student success and high expectations helps to create a positive and inclusive school climate that helps to decrease discriminatory discipline practices (among other benefits).

# FAQ's

## Why does this example message triangle work?

- All key messages connect to one another.
- Each key message includes a data metric, soundbite, and narrative element.
- Each element is concise and uses asset-framing.
- Each key message speaks directly to the core message in center of triangle.

## What if we don't have access to the information we need for the data metrics?

- Ask your district if they will provide the data to you.
- Use the message triangle to push for better data transparency.
- In the meantime, rely on national data trends instead.

## What makes for an effective narrative element?

- The best story to share is your own!
- But don't get bogged down by the details. Ask yourself what you are trying to communicate, what emotions you want to evoke, and why this specific issue matters to you.

## What makes for a compelling sound bite?

- Define your objectives — what do you want others to remember?
- Be concise (aim for 10 seconds or less), clear (avoid jargon, acronyms, technical terms), and catchy (consider using a quick story, anecdote, metaphor, etc. to help illustrate your point).
- Practice! The best sound bites are authentic but not off the cuff.

## What do you mean by asset-framing? How do I do that?

- Data doesn't frame itself...and is susceptible to misinterpretation.
- This misinterpretation is especially harmful to historically marginalized communities.
- Key messages should highlight the systems and structures within your district that act as barriers to equitable opportunities and outcomes. This "structure-not-student" approach is known as **asset-framing**.
- Asset-framing places the responsibility on leaders and systems, emphasizing system-level action, and does not blame or fault students.

## How do I use this message triangle?

- Make it the backbone of your messaging efforts.
- Use it to practice, practice, practice articulating the issue.
- Use it to stay focused on key points, especially when opposition tries to throw you off course.
- Use it alongside the Alliance for Resource Equity [diagnostic tool](#) to more thoroughly assess the state of [school climate](#) in your district, as well as in combination with the [guidebooks](#) to dig deeper into root causes and potential actions.

## What is the Alliance for Resource Equity? How do I learn more?

- The Alliance for Resource Equity is a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies.
- We focus on 10 key dimensions of resource equity — providing tools and resources to help advocates and districts work together to consider how resources (people, time, and money) are spent and distributed.
- Learn more at [www.educationresourceequity.org](http://www.educationresourceequity.org).



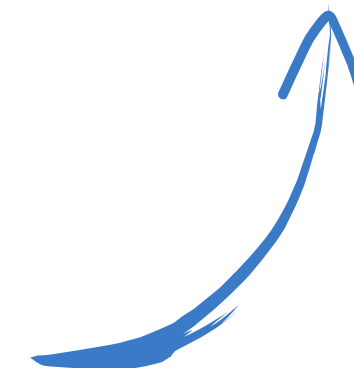
# Endnotes

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9. Mpofu, J.J., Cooper, A.C., Ashley C, et al. *Perceived Racism and Demographic, Mental Health, and Behavioral Characteristics Among High School Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021. *MMWR Suppl* 2022;71(Suppl-3):22–27. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a4>
10. Wriston, B., Duchesneau, N. (2023).
11. Mays. (2023).
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

## Appendix A: Data Resources Chart

Key Question	Data Metric	Data Notes	Data Source
<p><b>Key Question 6.1</b> Does each student experience a safe school with transparent, culturally sensitive, and consistently enforced rules and discipline policies?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• % of students suspended/expelled by race/ethnicity, special education status, and economic status</li> <li>• % of students subject to seclusion or restraint, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, special education status, and economic status.</li> <li>• Number of sworn law enforcement officers and security guards present in schools, and scatterplot comparison between FTE (x-axis) and proportion of students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income-backgrounds attending each school (y-axis).</li> </ul>	<p>NCES data includes suspensions and expulsions. Depending on your district's context, you could consider them separately or together. For messaging purposes, together is likely easier.</p>	<p><a href="#">Urban Institute/NCES</a></p>
<p><b>Key Question 6.2</b> Does each student have positive relationships with staff and other students?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of total reported "offenses" (such as incidents of physical fights, sexual assault, or attacks with weapon) by school, and scatterplot comparison between rate of incidents by school (x-axis) and proportion of students of color or students from low-income backgrounds attending each school (y-axis).</li> <li>• Number of total reported incidents of bullying/harassment by school, disaggregated by proportion of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, and school type (elementary, middle, high).</li> <li>• Number of chronically absent students by school, and scatterplot that compares rates of chronic absenteeism (x-axis) by proportion of students of color or students from low-income backgrounds (y-axis).</li> </ul>	<p>While there are many factors that contribute to chronic student absences, this measure provides an important snapshot of the strength of relationships and sense of belonging for a student at school.</p>	<p><a href="#">Urban Institute/NCES</a></p>
<p><b>Key Question 6.3</b> Does each student have access to effective social-emotional learning opportunities?</p>	<p>% of students that report having access to social-emotional learning opportunities, and the quality of these opportunities, by race/ethnicity status, school poverty level, and school type (elementary, middle, high).</p>	<p>No federal data sources here. Your district or state may have publicly available student survey data that can help answer this question. Check DOE school report card.</p>	
<p><b>Key Question 6.4</b> Does each student attend a school that actively and meaningfully engages with families?</p>	<p>% of families that report feeling engaged by their school, by racial/ethnic status, school poverty level, and school type (elementary, middle, high).</p>	<p>No federal data sources here. Your district or state may have publicly available family survey data. Consider also looking at the availability of parent resources (including in multiple languages) that are available on school/district websites.</p>	

For Key Questions 6.3 and 6.4, there are no strong federally-maintained data sources. Rely more heavily on your own personal experiences, general knowledge, and popular news sources to help fill out the gaps in data. While this lack of data may lead to only an imperfect data metric in your message triangle, it may still be sufficient in surfacing foundational information and lines of inquiry where a key message becomes clear.



YOUR DISTRICT:

### Key Message 1

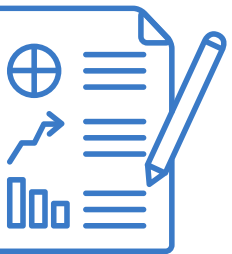
### Key Message 2

Core Message  
("North Star")

### Key Message 3



DATA METRIC:



DATA METRIC:



SOUNDBITE:



SOUNDBITE:



NARRATIVE:



NARRATIVE:



DATA METRIC:



SOUNDBITE:



NARRATIVE: