

The 'naturally disappointing' results of new Wyoming study: Native American students face greater discipline

[Kristin Lam](#) Updated 9:50 p.m. ET Sept. 9, 2019

According to a new study, story time isn't engaging enough for preschoolers, and teachers should try new techniques. Buzz60

Wyoming teachers disproportionately suspend [Native American students](#) from school compared to their peers, especially in cases where educators use their own judgment, according to a new state study.

[Schools discipline indigenous students at higher rates](#) for their share of the enrollment, according to the report by the Wyoming Community Foundation, suggesting that teachers' unconscious assumptions hurt some students' academic performance.

Both in and [out-of-school suspensions](#) can make students more likely to disengage with their classes, repeat a grade and drop out of school, the study said.

In federal data on Wyoming school suspensions for the 2015-16 school year, the foundation found Native American students were over-represented by 5.5%. They comprised 3.3 percent of the Wyoming's 94,000 students enrolled that year, according to the state's department of education.

'Historical trauma': [Suicide rate for Native American women is up 139%](#)

White students, by comparison, were 12.5% underrepresented, meaning they received suspensions at a lower-than-expected rate. They made up 78% of the

state's students.

Hispanic, black, and students of two or more races also faced higher rates of suspension for their population, the study found. Hispanic students were over-represented by 3.8% and black students by 1.9%.

"We try to treat every student the same regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation – that's really important to us as a school," Riverton High School Principal John Griffith [told Wyoming Public Media](#). "So to see data like that represented at the state level is naturally disappointing."

Rebuild the system: [What can be done to stop the criminalization of black girls?](#)

The racial differences in disciplinary rates, the study said, weren't as high when students broke clear-cut rules compared to when educators used their own judgment. The foundation determined [implicit bias](#) – unconscious and unintentional assumptions about people based on disability status, race and other identities – causes the differences.

To reduce suspensions of Native American and other racial minority students, the Wyoming Community Foundation advised schools to reevaluate their disciplinary actions. The state department of education also gives school districts alternatives to suspensions in its [Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports](#) program.

The lax disciplinary policies that caused Parkland massacre may have spread to your school

The Parkland shooter never should have been in the same school as my daughter. But his misbehavior and warning signs went unpunished and ignored.

As students settle in for the new school year, parents must ask: Do I really know what's happening in my kids' school? Do I really know whether they are safe?

I didn't know. But I want to be the last father in America who can honestly make that excuse.

After my daughter, Meadow, was murdered in the February 2018 [school shooting in Parkland, Florida](#), I wanted every answer. As I investigated, I realized that it was the most avoidable mass murder in American history. And I learned something else that keeps me up at night: The policies that made this massacre inevitable have spread to schools across America.

A few weeks after the massacre, I asked whether the Broward school district's disciplinary leniency policies enabled the shooter to slip through the cracks. Broward Superintendent Robert Runcie called questions like mine "[fake news](#)" because, he said, the shooter had never been referred to the school district's PROMISE diversionary program "while in high school." The program allows students who commit certain misdemeanors to avoid getting involved with the criminal justice system.

People before politics: [Why I left the Colorado school shooting vigil? Students want change, but first let us mourn](#)

Later, the news broke that he had been referred to PROMISE [while in middle school](#). But the superintendent's carefully crafted denial obscured the unmistakable fact that the school district's failure to properly handle the shooter happened by design.

The most avoidable school shooting

The confessed shooter allegedly [threatened to kill other students](#) and [threatened to rape](#). He threatened [to shoot up the school](#), according to the sheriff's office. Classmates said he brought [knives](#) and [bullets](#) to school. He wrote hideous [racial slurs](#) on his backpack. He [carved swastikas](#) in the lunchroom tables.

But the assistant principals at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School didn't have him arrested. Rather, they simply banned him from bringing a backpack to school and [frisked him every day](#), according to the sworn testimony of the security guard who searched him, for fear he'd bring a deadly weapon and kill.

Broward's [policies allowed juveniles convicted of crimes](#) as serious as murder and rape to go back into normal classrooms. Broward's "Policy 5006" said that [referring serious felonies like sexual assault and arson](#) to the police was optional. Principals were trained to [not cooperate with law enforcement](#), refusing to even tell officers whether suspected felons were on campus.

Disorder and violence ran and seem to still run rampant. A [2019 poll of Broward teachers conducted](#) by the Broward Teachers Union found that 50% feared for their personal safety in the past two years and 13% had been assaulted in the current school year. Only 18% of teachers believe that if a student assaults them, he will be expelled or sent to a special school; just 39% expect that the student would even be suspended. (Three participants in the poll expected an arrest, compared with seven participants who would expect the student to be given a treat.)



A photo of Meadow Pollack, 19, was set up at one of the crosses that has been erected at the Parkland, Florida, amphitheatre in February 2018. (Photo: Andrew West, *The News-Press-USA TODAY Network*)

In this environment, it was no surprise that the Parkland shooter’s crimes went unpunished. And that his subcriminal misbehavior, which could have earned him a ticket to the specialized school he so badly needed to be in, went ignored.

Beyond the fact that my daughter was murdered in the most avoidable school shooting in history, what keeps me up at night is the fact that Broward’s anti-discipline policies have spread to schools nationwide.

Negligence goes nationwide

Superintendent [Runcie told Scholastic magazine in 2014](#), “Some of my staff joke that the Obama administration might have taken our policies and framework and developed them into national guidelines.” But it wasn’t a joke. And they weren’t guidelines. Earlier that year, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan— Runcie’s former boss from [Chicago Public Schools](#) — used a “Dear Colleague” letter to [threaten and coerce school districts](#) to follow

Runcie's lead on disciplinary leniency or else lose their federal funding.

Hundreds of school districts serving millions of students were directly pressured, and many more adopted them for fear of investigation or just because fighting the "school-to-prison pipeline" by decreasing suspensions, expulsions and arrests was the new, politically correct thing to do.

Stop scaring our kids: [My school's lockdown drills, active shooter training are security theater. Yours are, too.](#)

According to a recent national poll, more than 70% of teachers believe that the [decrease in suspensions](#) in their school was at least somewhat due to a higher tolerance for misbehavior, and almost half believe it was due to underreporting issues.

About two-thirds of teachers in high-poverty schools say there is a student in their class who [should not be and is chronically disruptive](#). In part, this is because of another dangerous policy: Students get labeled as having an emotional and behavioral disability and then receive an Individualized Education Program.

In middle school, the shooter held his [students and teachers in a state of constant terror](#) until the school could finally complete the complicated referral process to send him to a specialized school. He told a therapist at that specialized school that he dreamed of killing people and [being covered in blood](#).

But after a [few calm months](#), they decided not only to send him to school next to my beautiful daughter, but school officials [even let him join the junior ROTC](#) organization at school, although psychiatric notes said it was "[not advised](#)."

How white nationalists think: [I grew up a white nationalist. We never blamed ourselves for mass shootings like El Paso.](#)

About a year before the shooting that took my daughter's life, [he was finally expelled](#) from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High. But by then it was too late.

Our schools are funneling disturbed students into normal classrooms and systematically covering up their misbehavior by design. I didn't know that. Now you do.

My mission in life now is to educate parents. That's why I wrote my new book about Meadow's murder and what I discovered about school policies that put student safety at risk. Talk to your teachers to find out what's really going on. Is there a kid in your child's classroom who everyone knows shouldn't be? Are principals sweeping problems under the rug?

President Donald Trump [repealed](#) the Obama-era leniency policies at the federal level, but they aren't going anywhere at the local level unless parents take action. If teachers tell you that these policies are causing problems, talk to your school board members and push back against them. The only way to keep kids safe at school is for parents to get informed, get involved and fix it.

Andrew Pollack's daughter, Meadow, was murdered in the Parkland school shooting. He is co-author of "[Why Meadow Died: The People and Policies that Created the Parkland Shooter and Endanger America's Students.](#)" Follow him on Twitter: [@AndrewPollackFL](#)

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