



RESEARCH REPORT

Evaluating School Climate and Discipline

Tools for Parents, Schools, and Policymakers

Michael Katz

Kristin Blagg

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Executive Summary

Student discipline and school climate have entered the national discourse in recent years, catalyzed, in large part, by data on the disparities between the suspension and expulsion rates of black and white students and by high-profile incidents, such as a black high school student getting thrown to the ground by a sheriff's deputy in a South Carolina classroom. Even presidential candidates have taken notice; in February, Hillary Clinton made a \$2 billion proposal to end the "school-to-prison" pipeline.

In tandem with increased discussion on the use of suspensions and expulsions, there has been an increased focus on measuring and tracking how schools handle discipline. This data-driven approach is important for policymakers, school districts, school staff, and parents, all of whom have a need for information about school climate and discipline. In many urban school districts, parents have the option to send their children to traditional public, charter, magnet, or alternative schools, increasing the need for relevant information to compare schools. And in all districts, parents and the public need data to hold schools accountable for their policies and practices.

In this brief, we examine the school climate and discipline landscape, and assess the availability of information on these issues that parents can use to make school choice decisions and that the public can use to hold schools accountable. We first outline what information is useful for assessing a school's discipline practices. We then review how federal school discipline statistics are collected, reviewed, and disseminated by the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and how recent reporting changes may enhance the tracking and assessment of discipline trends.

To assess the use of school discipline and climate data at a local district level, we look at how information is collected and reported in Washington, DC. Over the past three years, DC schools have improved and standardized school discipline reporting, and discipline rates have dropped across the board at elementary, middle, and high schools. While the reporting and dissemination of school discipline statistics has made significant progress over this period, we find that the DC schools can further improve their reporting of school climate information.

Finally, we offer recommendations for all school districts about improving school climate and discipline reporting and monitoring to meet the needs of parents, schools, and policymakers.

Specifically, we recommend that school districts

- include school climate information in school-level reporting measures,
- use OCR data collection to refine school-level reporting on school discipline and climate, and
- monitor the impact of school discipline and school climate data publication on school behavior and parent choice.

Evaluating School Climate and Discipline

Introduction

Issues of student discipline and school climate are increasingly on the minds of parents and in the public eye. A recent Pew Research Center (2015) poll of more than 1,800 parents showed that 60 percent of US parents worry that their school-age children might be bullied in school. School discipline and climate are not just a concern for parents of school-age children. These issues are receiving increased attention in the popular press as well. A recent viral video showing a black South Carolina high school student getting thrown to the ground by a sheriff's deputy generated substantial media coverage and conversation about the role of discipline and safety officers for keeping order in schools.¹

When selecting schools for their children, parents of all backgrounds may consider the climate and discipline policies of available schools. In choice-rich districts where parents can compare and choose among several school options, how schools approach discipline could be an important consideration for parents, particularly the use of disciplinary practices that maintain order by removing misbehaving students, known as exclusionary discipline.

The Urban Institute recently conducted interviews with parents in one low-income housing community in Washington, DC. Our conversations indicated that parents prioritize school discipline and environment when choosing schools. Despite different opinions on approaches to discipline, most parents expressed concerns about exclusionary discipline. As one parent mentioned,

“Sending a child home for punishment, what’s he going to learn there? That’s failure in itself. He needs to be somewhere where everyone says ‘we learning.’ This is what school is about, getting the work done and building friendly relationships.”

Parents also spoke about their preferences for alternative discipline that kept students engaged and at the school. A few parents spoke about their experiences with, or favorability toward, schools with policies that addressed situations with a collaborative or tier-structured approach. As one parent described,

“[School Name] is pretty good. They have a no-tolerance policy, and they have different steps that they go through. They’ll talk to the kid first, and if that doesn’t work, they’ll have a parent meeting with the child, and if that doesn’t work, then they’ll have in-house suspension. So they do detention in the school, and they make up their work after school. Your work is still getting done and they’re not suspending them. If you continue on, then you do have to get a suspension.”

Research in other high-choice districts shows that parents across the income spectrum consider school climate and discipline in their school choice decisions. However, this research has also found that information available to parents can be inadequate. Studies of Denver and New Orleans reveal that parents wanted more information about schools’ discipline practices, culture, and student-teacher relationships when accessing online information about schools (Cowen Institute 2013; Gross, DeArmond, and Denice 2015).

The Relationship between School Discipline and School Climate

Schools must strike a balance between maintaining an orderly learning environment and taking an approach that is not overly punitive or exclusionary. To reduce exclusionary discipline policies, some schools in large urban districts—including Oakland, Chicago, Cleveland, and Denver—use alternative discipline policies, such as restorative justice or positive behavior intervention support. These practices attempt to resolve conflicts without resorting to exclusionary discipline actions. Early research indicates positive impacts of these alternative disciplinary efforts on improving school climate, reducing suspensions and expulsions, increasing test scores, and improving attendance (CSBA 2014; Jain et al. 2014; Osher et al. 2013; Stevens et al. 2015).² However, these approaches also have challenges. Teachers and school administrators in some districts have been frustrated by implementation issues, including a lack of funding, training, and policy clarity, which critics report have negatively affected school climate.³ Individual parents may desire different school climates and different approaches to discipline to meet the needs of their children.

Accessing Information about School Discipline and Environment

Parents often have little access to concrete information about discipline and school climate at their schools. While data on test scores, enrollment, demographics, and other factors are easy to find, most districts do not provide accessible and comparable descriptive information about school climate or the reasons for disciplinary consequences issued to students.

Qualitative information on discipline practices and school climate would likely further facilitate parent decisionmaking. For example, a description of school-level behavior support programs or intervention techniques could provide a window into an individual school's approach. Specific examples of responses to behavioral incidents—even hypothetical ones—provide context for parents and a framework for resolving issues if a behavioral incident occurs. Information about school climate could also allow parents to better understand how school teachers and staff members interact with students and how teachers and their students regard the learning environment at the school.

While informative, there are inherent challenges in relying solely on qualitative data. Discipline policies and hypothetical examples of responses to behavior may differ from the school's actual implementation. In addition, qualitative information collected and tracked at the school level may not be comparable across schools. Further, district or charter organization policies may not support the development or publication of such information for individual schools.

National Reporting

Policy analysts and researchers acknowledge the need to improve how districts report school discipline data, especially in light of studies showing large disparities in how exclusionary discipline is used with students of color versus white students (Losen and Gillespie 2012; Porowski, O'Conner, and Passa 2014). For example, in an analysis of Texas school and juvenile justice records, Fabelo and colleagues (2011) demonstrate that African American students are disproportionately likely to be removed from the classroom. The US Department of Education has led a charge to revamp school discipline policies, reporting, and analysis. In January 2014, the department released a set of resources to help districts rethink school discipline. These resources included comprehensive guidance on developing school discipline policies and research to help districts, schools, and teachers reduce discipline rates.

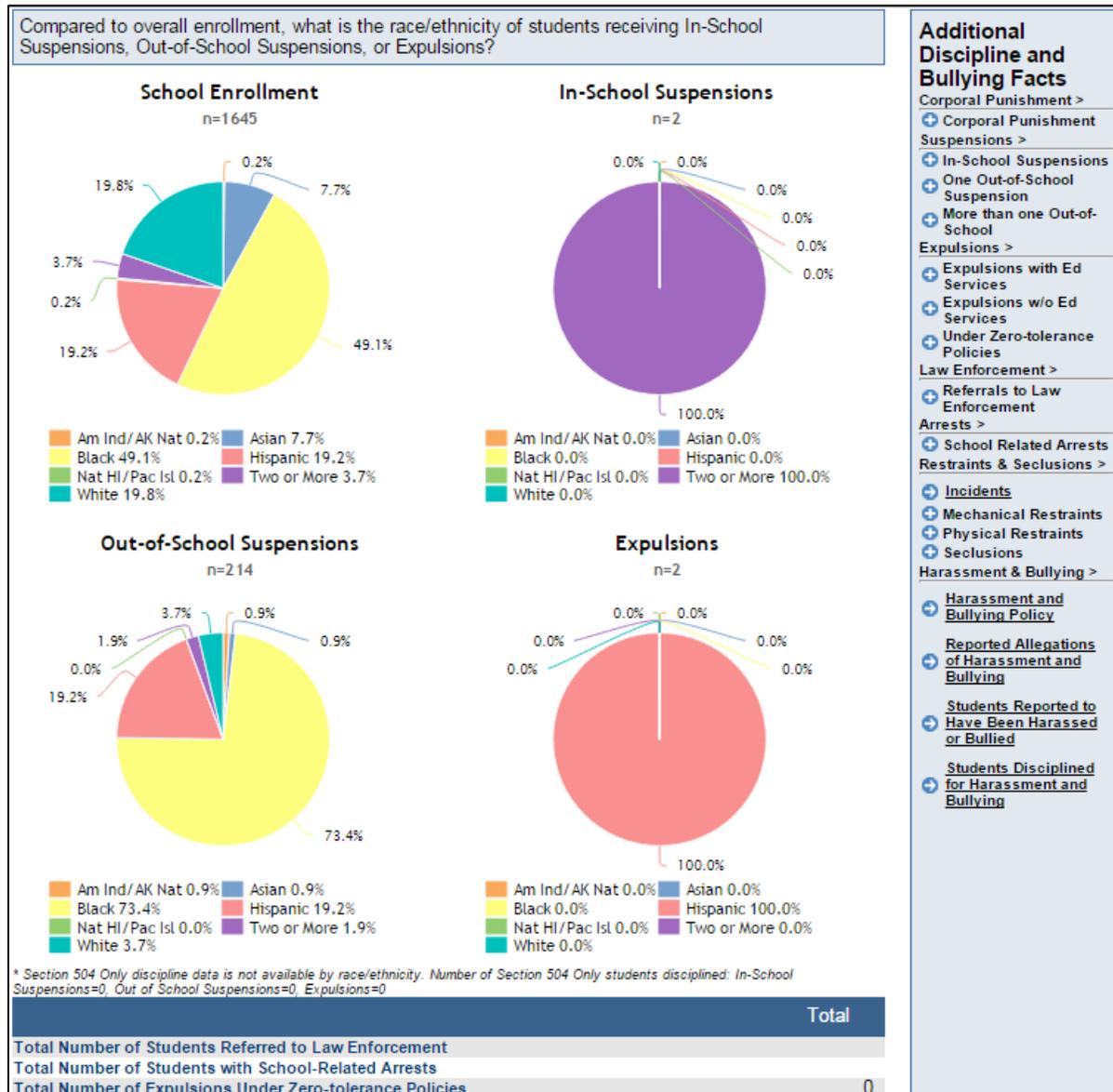
The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has expanded its discipline data collection in recent years and continues to build a more robust reporting system. Since 1968, OCR has conducted the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), which monitors several educational and civil rights issues, including discipline. Starting with the results of the 2000 data collection, school- and district-level data has been available online for parents and policymakers (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2003). The 2009-10 CRDC presents aggregate discipline statistics for a national sample of 7,000 school districts and over 72,000 schools within those districts, and the 2011-12 CRDC has information for over 98 percent of the nation's schools.

OCR discipline statistics are broken down by gender, disability status, and racial/ethnic subgroup. The data include information on the number of students receiving in-school suspensions, number receiving one or multiple out-of-school suspensions, and number receiving expulsions, as well as instances of corporal punishment, restraint, or referral to law enforcement.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the current OCR discipline statistics are presented on the department's website for a Washington, DC, public high school. Because OCR monitors disparities in school discipline, the data are provided in a default format broken down by race. Parents can see that some racial subgroups (in this case, black students) receive a disproportionate amount of out-of-school suspensions relative to their representation in the school population. The total proportion of out-of-school suspensions cannot be directly compared with other high schools, nor does the district-level data have summative discipline statistics for different school levels.

FIGURE 1

Example OCR Report for a Washington, DC, Public High School, 2011–12 School Year



Source: OCR Data website, <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/DistrictSchoolSearch#schoolSearch>.

An Important Role for Districts and Cities

Federal data reporting allows the development of common discipline measures for use by states, districts, and schools, but it cannot replace the role of cities and districts in developing and reporting their own data. Districts are best equipped to understand the needs of their schools and students and to provide school climate data that they have identified as most relevant to parents and the general public.

Washington, DC, is at the forefront of the discipline and school climate conversation. After years of trending downward, enrollment in DC schools has grown over the last seven years, and there are several school options (e.g., traditional, charter, and magnet) for parents to choose from. To support the student population growth and diversity of school options, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has improved the amount and types of information that it collects and publishes about individual schools.

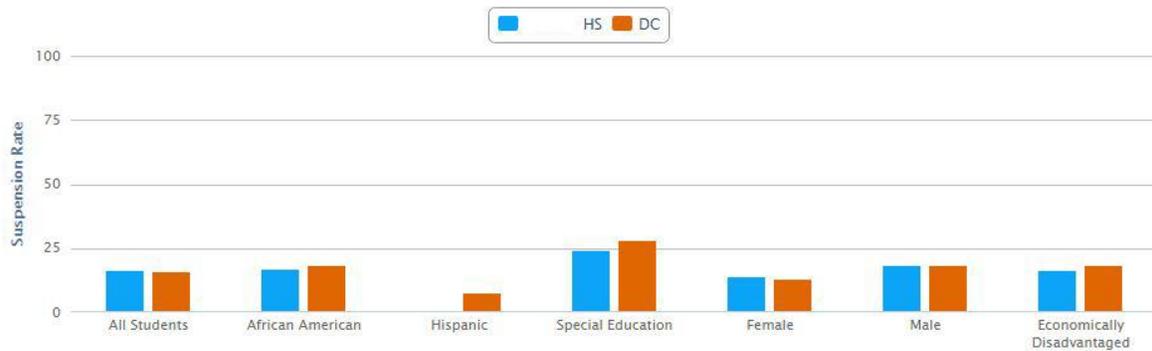
For the past three years, in collaboration with DC Public Schools and the Public Charter School Board, OSSE has published Equity Reports, school-level demographic reports with data on attendance, enrollment, student mobility, and discipline. Developing and releasing the Equity Reports is a notable stride for district education partners, who have responded to the need to produce comparable information about schools from different sectors.

Equity Reports provide information on the percentage of students receiving short-term (less than or equal to 10 days) and long-term (more than 10 days) out-of-school suspensions and the number of expelled students (figure 2). Equity Reports are the only consistent, cross-sector source for families to assess school discipline and school climate.

FIGURE 2

Students with One or More Suspensions at a Washington, DC, Public High School, 2014–15 School Year, According to an Equity Report

Percent



Students missing

ONE OR MORE DAYS

This chart shows the percentage of students who missed a given number of days due to suspension. When a student is suspended, regardless of the amount of suspension time, each absence is considered suspension-related, not an unexcused absence.

Source: Learn DC, which is operated by the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, <http://www.learnDC.org/schoolprofiles/search>.

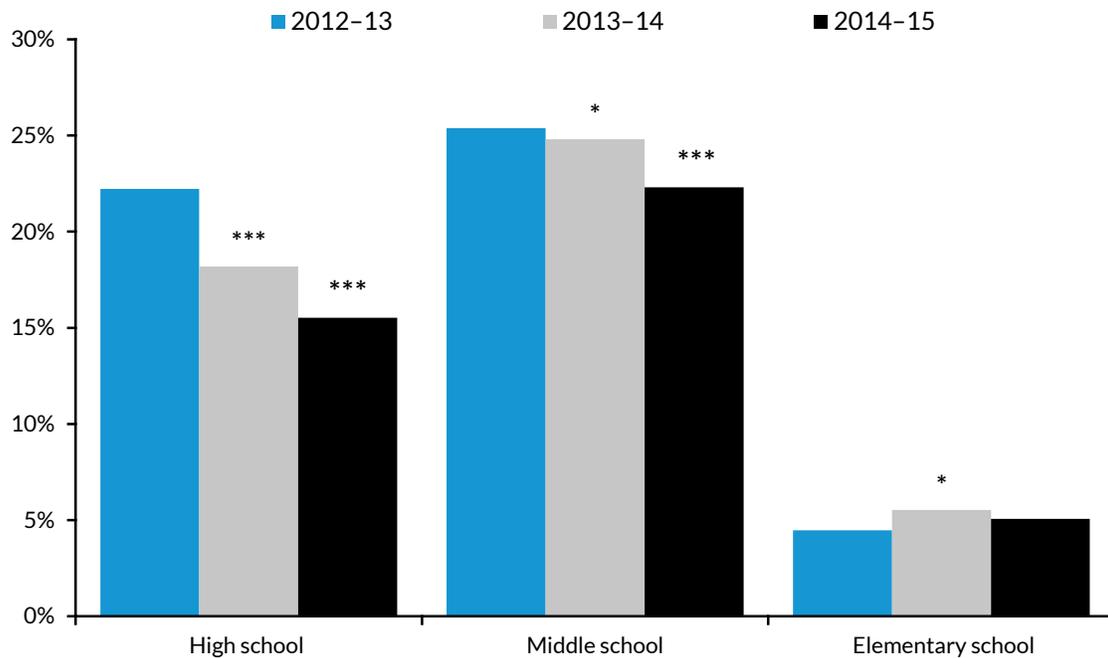
Data on the number and relative length of suspensions at a given school are a good start, but they provide an incomplete image of school discipline and school climate. Schools may have different tolerance levels for student behavior, leading to different disciplinary consequences for the same behavior. The context surrounding this data is important, but parents and policymakers are not given information on types of incidents that precipitate these disciplinary consequences.

School Discipline in DC over Time

The Equity Reports are only three years old, but we can use this data to compare discipline statistics among schools and better understand trends in school discipline over this period. We found that the percentage of students receiving short- and long-term suspensions decreased significantly across District high schools in the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years. In addition, short-term suspension rates at middle schools decreased significantly in the 2014–15 school year (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Students Receiving Suspensions Less than 11 Days in Washington, DC, by School Year



Source: The Urban Institute downloaded and analyzed publicly available Equity Report data (<http://osse.dc.gov/page/equity-data-report>) from 2012 to 2015.

Note: Asterisks indicate a statistically significant change (paired T-test) at the following levels: *= $p < .1$, **= $p < .05$, and ***= $p < .01$.

OSSE, DC Public Schools, and the Public Charter School Board have focused on school discipline by publishing this data and supplementary reports assessing school discipline, but questions remain about how these reforms and additional transparency affect the actions of different stakeholders.

Substantial decreases in suspensions at charter schools appear to undergird much of the change from the 2012–13 school year to the 2013–14 school year, but traditional and charter sectors both showed statistically significant decreases from the 2013–14 school year to the 2014–15 school year. Without student-level data, it is difficult to further estimate the underlying drivers of the trend. We speculate that some of this change may be driven by the increased focus of state and school administrators on reducing suspensions and expulsions within their schools (OSSE 2014). In addition, it is possible that providing this information at the school level for public use may have also exerted downward pressure on these rates, pushing administrators to take action to avoid appearing overly punitive compared with peer schools.

School Climate Surveys

Data on the number and types of disciplinary actions are a limited gauge for determining the level of misbehavior or disorder at schools. The level of disciplinary actions reflect both the level of student misbehavior and the level of school response but provide no simple way to separate them. Because there is considerable variation in how school officials respond to behavioral incidents and variation in the severity of student misbehavior, it is important to look at other quantitative indicators of school climate, which could help to inform parents' school choice decisions.

School climate surveys are an important quantitative data source for districts and schools. School climate surveys are conducted and school-level data is reported in many urban districts, including New York City and Los Angeles.⁴ Students, teachers, and sometimes parents, are surveyed separately. In combination, school discipline statistics and school climate survey data would present a more complete portrait than either alone.

School climate surveys ask students, teachers, administrators, and parents to respond to questions about order, learning environment, and discipline within the school. DC Public Schools, which enrolls 55 percent of Washington, DC students, conducts a climate survey of its schools annually, asking students and teachers specific questions on issues of school environment and overall order within the school. These data are not readily available at the school level, but parents can access DC ward-level data on topics such as peer-to-peer interactions (i.e., whether students get into fights, have items stolen, or are made fun of by their peers).

Parents considering DC charter schools, which enroll the other 45 percent of public school students, may be able to find an indicator of school climate for lower grades (K-3) using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) metrics on a school's Performance Management Framework report card. Aside from this specific measurement, parents must rely on details provided in a given charter school network's annual report, which may not be comparable across schools. While some charter schools in DC have taken steps to collect pertinent information on school environment and climate, there is still relatively little data to draw upon for parents who prioritize school climate information.

Because the District doesn't have universal school climate measures, it is difficult to know how observed differences in suspensions reflect different levels of student misbehavior, as opposed to differences in school disciplinary practices. This is true for both comparisons over time, as in figure 3 above, and for comparisons across schools. Some schools may use in-school suspensions or other

nonexclusionary consequences for behavior that would generate an out-of-school suspension in a previous year or at another school.

Recommendations

The federal government and local jurisdictions both have important roles to play in measuring and monitoring school discipline. Additional research on how parents use available information on discipline and school climate is important, but based on the available evidence, we make the following recommendations:

Incorporate school climate information into school-level reporting measures. School districts should report key information on school climate at the school level to help parents assess school climate side-by-side with school discipline, providing context for the data and creating a more complete picture of the school environment. One concern for this approach is response bias and variability within the survey measures. This bias could be mitigated by using an index of selected questions on a given topic or by using distinct questions for students, teachers, and parents that reflect their distinct viewpoints on the school (Nathanson et al. 2013). Several school districts, including New York City and Los Angeles, use an index of school climate and environment questions and could serve as models for collecting and reporting school-level reporting measures.

Use OCR data collection to refine district- and school-level reporting on school discipline and climate. Upcoming versions of the Office of Civil Rights survey will include more details on documented incidents at a given school—including robberies, physical attacks or fights, and threats of physical attack—broken into subcategories if the incident included use of a weapon or firearm. In addition, the new OCR survey will provide information on the exact number of school days missed by students as a result of out-of-school suspensions and contextual information describing the number of instructional aides, administrative staff, nurses, counselors, security guards, and law enforcement officers on site. Distributing these data at a comparable school level could facilitate climate- and discipline-based school decisions in districts such as Washington, DC. District leaders may find that including these detailed data in school information systems will provide additional context and cut down on duplicate reporting by schools.

Monitor the impact of publicizing school discipline and school climate data on school behavior and parent choice. Expulsions and short- and long-term suspensions have declined in the charter and public school sectors in Washington, DC, over three years of reporting and public accountability. It is

possible that by measuring and reporting these disciplinary measures, schools have increased their ability to manage them. As districts compile and make available additional metrics of school climate and discipline, it will be important to monitor the impact of increased public scrutiny. School administrators may feel pressure to prioritize discipline and school order over concerns such as curriculum, enrichment activities, and absenteeism. The introduction of new reporting measures must continue to be accompanied by other contextual information about the school.

Conclusion

Limited data on school climate and student consequences impedes efforts by parents, policymakers, and the public to incorporate these factors into their private choices and public decisions. The federal government and some individual jurisdictions such as Washington, DC, have made significant strides in reporting school-level information to the public. At the same time, there are opportunities to increase the quality and types of data that are recorded and reported, allowing parents to gain a better, more comparable view of school discipline and school climate.

Notes

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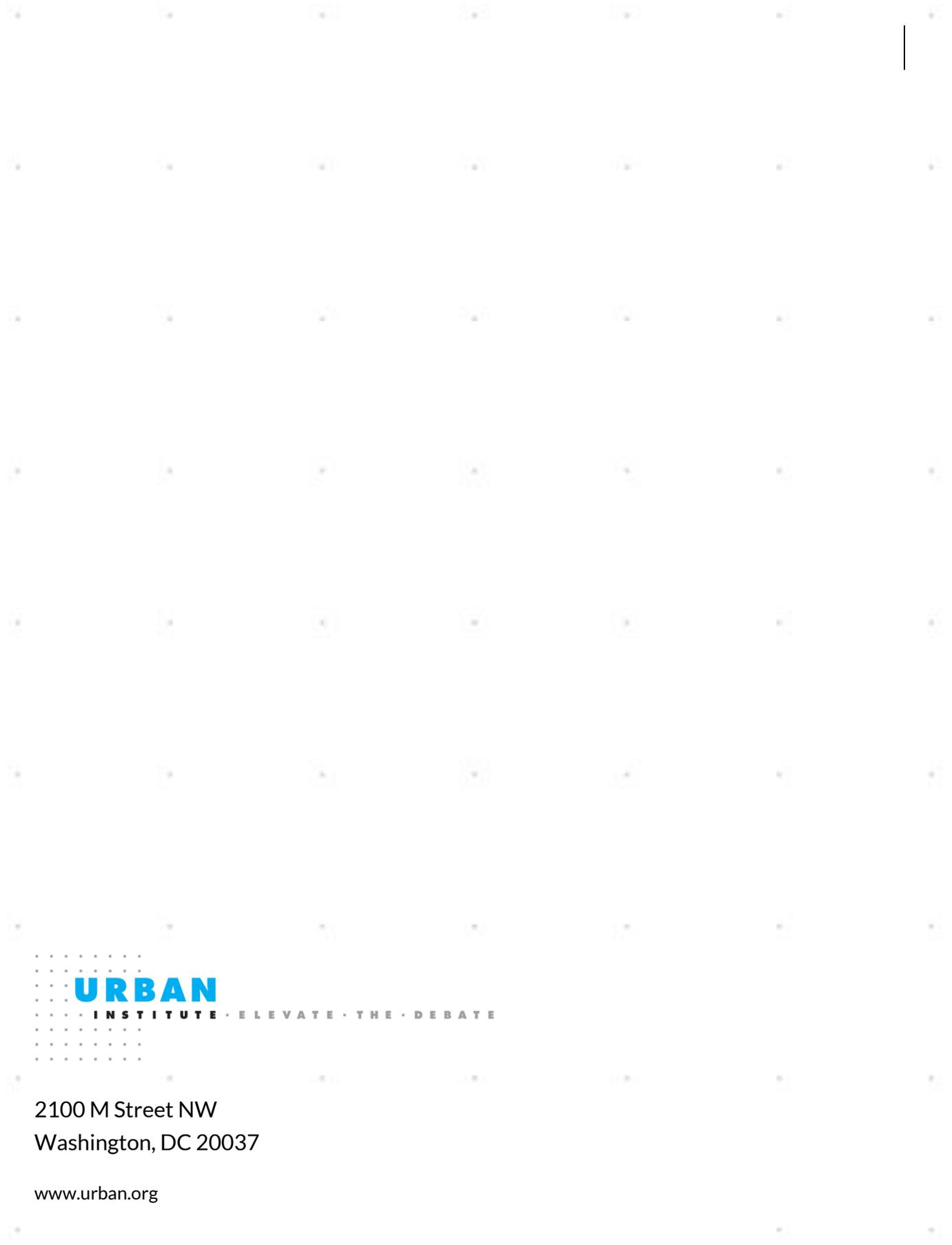
About the Authors

Michael Katz is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, where his research focuses on early childhood education, school choice, and government programs that serve low-income families.

Kristin Blagg is a research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute, focusing on education policy.

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