What are our Schools Teaching?: A Narrative Analysis of Long Term Punitive Discipline and Mental Health

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Abstract: This capstone project explores how students who were high achieving in K-12 no-excuses charter schools understand the long-term relationship between mental health and punitive discipline used at no-excuses charter schools, based on their own experiences. To answer this question, this paper engages in a detailed review of existing literature on mental health, punitive discipline, and any relationship between the two as well as an analysis of interviews conducted with former high achieving students of no-excuses charter schools. The aim of this study is to discover whether or not, or in what ways, students perceive a relationship between their mental health and punitive discipline policies used in schools, specifically from a long-term perspective, and to serve as an initial review of information on the topic to encourage more in-depth research to be done in this area.

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Introduction

For eight years, I attended a school known as a “no-excuses charter school,” at which I had experiences that I strongly believe were extremely detrimental to my mental health both during and after my time spent there. My mother enrolled me in this school in 5th grade, drawn in by the promise of rigorous classes and preparation for college success. As a low-income student of color from an urban city, it was enticing to find a school that would keep up with the way I voraciously consumed knowledge, which would not have been supported and encouraged at the other local school options available. This school served a population of primarily students of color from disadvantaged backgrounds in the city who were also lured in with promises of a bright future.

Unfortunately, underneath the shiny packaging was an experience that neither my mother nor I could have predicted. My school had draconian, pedantic rules concerning extremely high expectations for obedience, performance, and behavior. For instance, students could not attend class if they were out of uniform, and uniform violations could be as minor as wearing the wrong-colored socks or not wearing a belt with their uniform pants. Even though school days and the school year were extended, because of these draconian rules, students were not necessarily spending an equivalent amount of time in class as in a “normal” school. Students who fell short of these expectations were met with disciplinary action ranging from public corrections and call outs, to being suspended, to being required to give a public apology in front of the entire school explaining how they broke the core values of the school with their behavior. While I was learning an accelerated curriculum in my academic classes, much of my brain space was occupied by the laundry list of rules, regulations, and standards that I was expected to follow and conform to, and fear of the punishment I would incur for failing to meet those expectations.
Unlike typical neighborhood public schools, charter schools are unique in that they are held to different expectations and have different regulations. Like neighborhood public schools, charter schools receive public funding—but they are run independently\(^1\), meaning that they have more freedom regarding staffing, curriculum, and budgeting requirements\(^2\) than state or district regulated schools. Therefore, charter schools have much more flexibility in the way that they craft their student experience and what values they prioritize. Among the general category of charter schools, some fall into the description of no-excuses charter schools, which follow a specific “no-excuses” framework and methodology of enforcing that framework. No-excuses charter schools have been demonstrated to be effective in improving academic achievement of their students and some have been shown to increase the likelihood of college enrollment\(^3\), with particularly notable gains for Black and Hispanic students and students from low-income families.\(^4\) These qualities make charter schools that implement a no-excuses model appealing to families who are seeking strong education options for their children, especially for low-income families of color which show the highest gains in this system compared to their peers not enrolled in no-excuses charter schools. As of 2020, the KIPP network served 110,000 students in 255 schools across the United States and thirteen other similar branded networks collectively enrolled an additional 200,000 students in 433 more schools across the country.\(^5\) Since the

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4 “No Excuses Charter School Model.”
founding of the first KIPP school in 1994, one of the schools originating the no-excuses charter model, the scope of the no-excuses model has expanded significantly, with a sweeping reach across the nation.6

A no-excuses charter school is one that typically focuses on improving math and reading test scores and achieves this through a very rigorous curriculum and enforcing rigid behavioral expectations with a formal disciplinary system.7 No excuses charter schools focus heavily on student academic performance and some claim to prepare students for college success by enforcing these high behavioral expectations.8 Most no-excuses charter schools implement a longer school day—approximately nine and a half hours compared to the average school day of around just under seven hours9—which was part of the no-excuses model of requiring unyielding commitments of parents and teachers in the name of student success, even when those commitments do not necessarily serve the interest of stronger learning. Proponents of charter schools argue that these schools offer more choices to families by providing high quality, tuition free education.10 Other supporters assert that charter schools allow for more flexibility in creating a school culture that promotes student performance.11

My school enforced its expectations with militant stringency, and no excuses were tolerated for any failures to meet them—hence the name, “no-excuses” schools. During my time

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6 Abrams.
7 “No Excuses Charter School Model.”
as a student, I performed extremely well academically and was generally a reasonable, rule-abiding student, graduating as salutatorian of my class, but I had numerous anxiety attacks due to the extreme amounts of pressure and genuine fear of the punitive discipline policies implemented by the school. After graduation from high school, I am still facing several mental health challenges that I tie back to my experience, including symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Though my exceptional performance gained me admission to all eleven of the highly selective colleges and universities that I applied to, I question whether this “success” was worth the deterioration of my mental health.

My experience has made me curious how other students who attended these schools and are now in college understand the impact of their experiences at no-excuses charter schools on their wellbeing today. This capstone investigates what other students with a similar experience think or feel are the lasting psychological legacies of their time at a no-excuses charter school. This capstone will explore how high achieving students perceive the mental health consequences of the disciplinary policies utilized by no-excuses charter schools. I particularly wanted to focus on students like me, who were thought to be “successful” or “college ready,” to see how they would understand and narrate their mental health experience both in this environment and outside of it once they graduated.

Joanne Goalnn, a professor of public policy and education, observed a no-excuses charter school for a year and a half to conduct a sociological case study of this school model in 2012. This case study highlighted several significant features or aspects of the no-excuses approach that appear to be common among many of the schools. Some of these include teachers having very high attention to small details, resulting in students in the school observed receiving one infraction every three days on average for behaviors such as not following directions or making
unnecessary noise.\textsuperscript{12} For some the stress and pressure to perform that was put on students by no-excuses charter schools were occasionally too much for the students to handle.\textsuperscript{13} Students were also noted to form unrealistic expectations about the structure and rigidity of college, believing that college would be stricter and more demanding than what they actually ended up encountering. This sometimes resulted in students struggling to perform as well as they did at their charter schools.\textsuperscript{14} Looking beyond the student experience, the observed no-excuses charter school had high teacher turnover rates, a fragile school order, and expected students and families to conform to the methods of the school rather than adapting to individual community needs.\textsuperscript{15} Even though no-excuses charter schools help increase student performance which is appealing to many families, there are aspects of these schools that also did not serve families well. The high demands made of students extended to their families who had to adjust their schedules to accommodate the extended school day and ensure their children were keeping up with the fast-paced curriculum. Despite the optimistic outcome offered by no-excuses charter schools, Black and Latine parents wanted their children to develop self-discipline and a caring, structured environment for learning, but what these schools facilitated was stringent rule following.\textsuperscript{16}

There are already a number of existing critiques of the policies at no-excuses charter schools. Some have challenged these schools as racist\textsuperscript{17}, given that they disproportionately

\textsuperscript{13} Golann.
\textsuperscript{14} Golann.
\textsuperscript{15} Golann.
enroll, and therefore dole out punishment to, students of color, closely mirroring the school to prison pipeline—a phenomenon of funneling students out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems through frequent suspensions or expulsions.\(^{18}\) Because these punishments often remove students from class in the form of send outs or suspension, they reduce the amount of time that students of color are able to spend in the classroom learning and allow students to fall behind. These schools very strictly dictate what these students wear, how they walk down the hallway, and how they sit in class, with harsh punishments for students that fall outside of their rigid expectations.\(^{19}\) Others say that the discipline model teaches obedience rather than genuine critical thinking skills.\(^{20}\) Clearly, despite the loud advocates of no-excuses charter schools saying that they offer parents and families choices\(^ {21}\), many people disagree with their practices.

The critique I engage with most extensively in this capstone is the concern for the mental health of the students at these no-excuses charter schools. Research has already shown that similar environments to those created by these schools have negative effects on mental health. A study has demonstrated that using active punishments, like spanking or yelling, as well as less active punishments, like withdrawal of rewards, can indicate or influence emotional problems in the children studied.\(^ {22}\) Research has shown that environments that foster positive mental health


\(^{19}\) Kerstetter, “A Different Kind of Discipline.”


are ones in which children’s physical needs are taken care of, there is time for social connection, and positive words are present, which are all things typically lacking in no-excuses charter schools. Clearly, there are some forms of discipline that are already established to have negative consequences on the mental health of adolescents. Therefore, it makes sense to further investigate the potential impacts of the discipline policies of no-excuses charter schools, which often include harsh measures such as verbal abuse and withdrawal of rewards to enforce their strict behavioral expectations, on student mental health.

**Scope of Research and Research Questions**

The research question that is addressed in this capstone is: How do high achieving graduates of no-excuses charter schools understand and perceive the long-term mental health ramifications of the disciplinary and punitive policies used in their K-12 education? This is the question that I will try to answer in this paper by analyzing student responses in the context of existing research on student mental health and school discipline policies.

To answer this question, I conducted interviews with college students that currently or formerly attended a highly selective college or university who are also alumni of a no-excuses high school. I am choosing to focus on these students to limit the scope of interviewees to those who were designated particularly “high achieving” in their K-12 schools.

This capstone does not seek to make any definitive and causal claims about the relationship between mental health and punitive discipline and is not able to do so based on the

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24 The distinction “highly selective” for the purposes of this capstone denotes a college or university that has an acceptance rate of 25% or less.
methodology being used for this project. To make more direct relational claims on this topic, much more extensive research needs to be done, involving a wider variety of students from no-excuses charter schools in different states.

**Methodology**

Part 1 of this paper consists of a literature review of existing studies regarding the mental health of students at no-excuses charter schools and environments with similar discipline models.

Part 2 examines interviews with high achieving graduates of no-excuses charter schools. The students interviewed were all students that currently or formerly attended a highly selective college or university, and they will represent some of the top performing students that came out of environments like those described above. Focusing on students who were high performing at their respective schools is important to the research of this paper because if students were successful in their schools, they must have bought into the system to a certain extent to meet the expectations of the school. Studying this population will allow us to see the potential consequences of what happens because of these policies and expectations, as perceived by the students the schools claim to have best served. The student perspective is necessary here because although students’ perceptions of what is good for them may not align with their parents, these students are able to expand on a more complete story of whether the outcomes they got were worth the experience they had. My analysis of these interviews will help to cultivate an understanding of the long-term impact of these schools, especially on the students that seemed to thrive in them. The findings of this paper are not meant to be representative of all students at all no-excuses charter schools. This simply can serve as a preliminary investigation of some of the possible long term mental health impacts of these schools on a specific population that is
considered to be the strongest example of these schools succeeding. Following the analysis of student testimonies will be recommendations for what potential future research needs to be done for conclusive arguments to be made about the causal impacts of no-excuses charter schools on students’ mental health.

Sample questions used in the interviews are in the Appendix (Section A). Four total interviewees were selected to participate in this study. Interview subjects were identified through online social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook where a flyer advertising this research was circulated as well as through distributing said flyer in email newsletters and student organization group chats.

This is the best methodology for this project because the goal of this project is to gain a narrative understanding, based on lived experiences of students in no-excuses charter schools, of the relationship between mental health and school discipline. Even though the stories of these students may not be representative of all students in no-excuses charter schools, gaining a clearer picture of the themes that arise in these interviews can provide a direction into what generalizable claims can be made. Through interviews, my goal is to construct a story about how students understand the impact that punitive school discipline may have had on their mental health over the long term. Hopefully, this story will be an impetus for more research so that in the future claims can be made that will ideally lead to policy and systemic changes that will improve the school experience for students.

**Literature Review**

There is already existing information on no-excuses charter schools as well as research on how discipline and mental health interact. However, there is a lack of studies on how punitive
discipline policies in schools might impact the mental health of students specifically in the context of students who were high achieving. Through an analysis of the following sources, this section will provide clarity on what is already known about mental health and punitive discipline while also holding space for future research to be done on the topic.

What is the existing knowledge of the impact of No-Excuses Charter Schools?

There are critics of no-excuses charter schools, who cite problems with the school format and its failure to provide adequate preparation for life outside of these schools. Analysis of these schools reveals that skills that would be beneficial later in life such as self-assertion, independence, negotiating authority, and taking initiative are absent from no-excuses schools in favor of emphasizing submission to authority, rote behavior, and self-constraint.25 Frequently, charter schools use deficit-based language, which positions Black students and their communities as a problem to be solved, particularly by white-led intervention26 This is immoral because it means that a core belief underlying the foundation of these schools is that students of color are inherently worse than their white counterparts.

Part of the reason why racism underlies much of the policies and practices at no-excuses charters is because there is a cultural disconnect between white educators and students and families of color. In many urban charter schools, a large majority of the teachers and administrators are white, while almost all of the students are young people of color.27 This means that no-excuses charter schools are “marked by a cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic

26 Sondel, Kretchmar, and Hadley Dunn, “Who Do These People Want Teaching Their Children?”
mismatch between those who are in charge of discipline and the student body”28. It is therefore unsurprising that in this environment, the issues of racism and racial bias outlined above are allowed to constantly take place. Teachers and administrators in these schools “lack an adequate awareness of and empathy for students’ lives outside the school setting. Indeed, they perceive any kind of conflict as causing mayhem and threatening everyone’s physical security”29. Conflict could present itself as obviously as a physical fight or as subtly as disagreeing with or talking back to a teacher in class. This shows that no-excuses schools are more interested in controlling student behavior than they are in understanding their students and creating policies centered around the communities they are entering. This is also unethical, because it illuminates the racial bias in assuming that students of color will automatically turn to violence and chaos if they are not strictly controlled.

In relying on the no-excuses model, these schools put the responsibility of changing social standing on victims of poverty and institutional racism and conveys the idea that “failure in this society will solely be a reflection of not working long and hard enough, or simply not complying with rules set by those with authority”30. By focusing on high standards for student behavior, students may not learn to grapple with the realities of racism they might face in the world. Many white educators at no-excuses schools believe that external circumstances such as a student’s class or race should not be used as “excuses” for why the student is not succeeding—this mentality overlooks manifestations of systemic injustice that can occur regardless of a student’s merits or hard work. On top of this, there is a “permeating ideology of White saviorism, cultural racism, and anti-Blackness” that exists in these schools, and this ideology

28 KULKARNI.
29 KULKARNI.
underlies “exclusionary hiring practices, a narrowly defined view of success, the criminalization of Black students, and educators prioritization of their own needs over students” that is noted to occur in urban no-excuses charter schools. Charter schools have already been criticized because of the surveillance, harsh consequences, and public humiliation tactics used in some schools, which disproportionately impact Black male students.

In addition to many of these complaints, the punitive strategies that no-excuses charter schools employ to ensure high academic performance may actually hurt them in the long run by not preparing them for college and the workplace. Some common aspects of no-excuses charters are “an extended school day and year, an exacting focus on improving standardized test scores, the intentional enculturation of students in middle-class norms, and harsh and behavioristic discipline policies.” Many of these schools boast of high test scores for Black and Latino students, however the strategies used to get these test scores may not support the development of students in the long term. Dr. Golann notes that “as students learn to monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority, they are not encouraged to develop the proactive skills needed to navigate the more flexible expectations of college and the workplace.” Other critics note that the principles and practices that form the foundation of the missions of no-excuses charter schools “are founded upon capitalistic and militaristic ideals that run counter to the ideals of democratic education.”

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31 Sondel, Kretchmar, and Hadley Dunn, “Who Do These People Want Teaching Their Children?”
32 Sondel, Kretchmar, and Hadley Dunn.
33 Sondel, Kretchmar, and Hadley Dunn.
34 Golann and Debs, “The Harsh Discipline of No-Excuses Charter Schools.”
36 Golann.
37 Lack, “No Excuses.”
of student conduct is not compatible with cultivating autonomous decision making.\textsuperscript{38} No-excuses schools do not make explicitly clear “how students will be able to apply behaviors acquired in the educational context to future settings”\textsuperscript{39}. In fact, this high focus on behavior and discipline “reinforc[es] inequality in cultural skills”\textsuperscript{40} by denying students the opportunity to form valuable skills necessary to flexibly interact in spaces outside of the K-12 classroom such as higher education or the workplace.

Finally, many proponents of no-excuses charter schools respond to these critiques with evidence of parent demand\textsuperscript{41}, when in reality, the practices used by these schools are not what parents say they want for their children. Some parents choose to “swallow their pride” and allow the treatment of their students to endure because of their children’s academic growth, even if those parents were uncomfortable with the methods being used\textsuperscript{42}. Parents of students at a no-excuses school were interviewed and expressed concern that their children would only be good at rule following and not develop self-directed learning skills.\textsuperscript{43}

In fact, the goals of the no-excuses charter school model may be met with less harsh punishments, shown by the improvement in reading scores by Black students in a Montessori school compared to their counterparts in magnet schools.\textsuperscript{44} This demonstrates that the policies used by no-excuses charter schools could be unnecessarily harsh and actively counterproductive on this demographic of students of color. No-excuses policies are “cultivated and defended with

\textsuperscript{38} Dishon and Goodman, “No-Excuses for Character.”
\textsuperscript{39} Dishon and Goodman.
\textsuperscript{40} Golann, “The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School.”
\textsuperscript{41} Golann and Debs, “The Harsh Discipline of No-Excuses Charter Schools.”
\textsuperscript{42} Golann and Debs.
\textsuperscript{43} Golann and Debs.
the primary purpose of maintaining order and ensuring the smooth functioning of everyday life at school”\textsuperscript{45}. If this is the goal of no-excuses schools, the policies they are using are not inherently necessary because Montessori schools are appreciated by Black and Latino parents who valued “structure” and “high academic expectations,” but liked that “their children were not being punished and had the freedom to choose their work and collaborate with peers on projects”\textsuperscript{46}. Based on this, other types of schools can maintain orderly conduct without such an intense focus on behavioristic and punitive discipline. Even Black and Latine parents who value discipline, with children enrolled in a no-excuses charter, wanted “demanding academic expectations alongside a caring and structured environment that would help their children develop the self-discipline to make good choices”\textsuperscript{47}. This means that they want their children to develop good values to make the right choices rather than mindlessly follow rules because they are told to. At no-excuses charter schools, students can face “serious consequences” that range from “suspensions to referrals to law enforcement” even for “minor offenses such as disorderly conduct”\textsuperscript{48}. Additionally, “recent research indicates a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and school-wide academic achievement, even when controlling for demographics such as socioeconomic status”\textsuperscript{49}. Not only is the highly punitive nature of discipline at no-excuses charter schools not necessary to reach the goals of high student achievement and orderly school spaces, but the punishments chosen are incredibly severe and often do not match the order of the student misdemeanor. This causes Black parents to call into question “why is it that a certain population has to have so much structure in order to be

\textsuperscript{45} KULKARNI, “The Fight.”  
\textsuperscript{46} Golann and Debs, “The Harsh Discipline of No-Excuses Charter Schools.”  
\textsuperscript{47} Golann and Debs.  
\textsuperscript{48} KULKARNI, “The Fight.”  
\textsuperscript{49} Reynolds et al.
successful compared to another population”\textsuperscript{50}. Again here, we see the unfortunate racial bias in the discipline policies at no-excuses schools.

**What is the existing knowledge on student mental health in No-Excuses Charter schools?**

Not much has been specifically studied on the mental health of students attending no-excuses charter schools, however researchers have offered some hypotheses on the potential status of mental health in these schools.

It is estimated that “more than seven million children in the United States have a mental health disorder; less than half of those diagnosed actually receive treatment, and of those who do receive treatment, over 75\% receive this treatment at schools”\textsuperscript{51}. This means that students widely are already suffering from mental illness in significant quantities, and there is information to suggest that no-excuses charter schools have aspects to them that might exacerbate these issues, though no causal research study has been conducted yet. For one, schools with harsh punishments such as suspensions and expulsions tend to report “less satisfactory ratings of school climate, less satisfactory school governance structures, and to spend a disproportionate amount of time on disciplinary matters.”\textsuperscript{52}. Based on this, zero-tolerance policies used in schools have a negative effect on school mood and climate as well as on overall achievement. This could be because “certain characteristics of secondary schools often are at odds with the developmental challenges of adolescence, which include the need for close peer relationships, autonomy,

\textsuperscript{50} Golann and Debs, “The Harsh Discipline of No-Excuses Charter Schools.”


support from adults other than one’s parents, identity negotiation, and academic self-efficacy”\textsuperscript{53}. Students have a need for close relationships and autonomy at this stage in their lives, which they are not able to access with the strict and punitive nature of no-excuses charter schools. Therefore, zero tolerance policies can exacerbate challenges that already exist within early adolescence, which could impact students’ mental health.\textsuperscript{54} A task force specifically created by the American Psychological Association to examine zero tolerance policies in schools wrote in their report, “although the research in this area is insufficient to make strong statements, to the extent that zero tolerance policies are related to student shame, alienation, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds, there are a number of reasons to be concerned that such policies may create, enhance, or accelerate negative mental health outcomes for youth”\textsuperscript{55}. In other words, the very nature of zero tolerance or no-excuses policies are based in practices that could worsen existing mental health challenges in students or possibly even create mental health challenges where there were none before. Though no studies have yet been conducted on the specific overlap of mental health and punitive discipline in schools, experts believe that it would not be surprising for punitive, zero tolerance discipline to have a negative impact on the mental health of students.

\textbf{What is Known about Punitive Discipline and Long-Term Impacts?}

Outside of the knowledge on zero tolerance policies, there is some information on how different types of discipline impact children over time, though not necessarily in the context of schools. A study was done investigating the impact of different disciplinary types on children by evaluating children at age 3 and later at age 11, noting the type of discipline parents used with

\textsuperscript{53} Reynolds et al.  
\textsuperscript{54} Reynolds et al.  
\textsuperscript{55} Reynolds et al.
the child. This study describes active punishments as things “including smacking, shouting, and telling off” and withdrawal punishments as “including ignoring, removal of privileges, and sending to the bedroom”\textsuperscript{56}. According to these researchers, “negative parenting appears more consistent with harsh or punitive approaches incorporating elements of hostility and psychological control,” and “high rates of negative parenting correlate with high rates of depressive symptoms in children”\textsuperscript{57}. The discipline systems used in no-excuses charter schools are punitive in nature, meaning that the punishment they use is like negative parenting, which is correlated with higher rates of depressive symptoms in school aged children. The goal of punishment is to “weaken or eliminate an undesirable behavior by producing a stimulus (e.g., criticizing a child for bad behavior) or by removing a reward,” such as not being able to play with friends after bad behavior\textsuperscript{58}. This study found that “active discipline approaches were associated with an increase in emotional problems and a decrease in prosocial behaviors,”\textsuperscript{59} which means that while the use of active discipline can externally improve behavior, it may be at the risk of a child developing emotional problems later. Other studies and literature show that active or harsher parenting practices are associated with later aggression and antisocial behavior in children as well as later adult outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse.\textsuperscript{60} This study and similar ones demonstrate that harsh discipline used with children is associated with mental illness and emotional problems in those children later. Additionally, experiencing extreme stress, like chronic abuse, can cause an imbalance of cortisol in the brain\textsuperscript{61}, which can

\textsuperscript{56} Rajyaguru et al., “Disciplinary Parenting Practice and Child Mental Health.”
\textsuperscript{57} Rajyaguru et al.
\textsuperscript{58} Rajyaguru et al.
\textsuperscript{59} Rajyaguru et al.
\textsuperscript{60} Rajyaguru et al.
lead to “memory lapses, anxiety, and an inability to control emotional outbursts,” and alter the brain’s ability to regulate attention and discriminate among various stimuli. Essentially, a child under these conditions may be later unable to navigate stressful situations like those in “difficult peer relationships, in a socially ‘acceptable’” way. Given that the types of discipline discussed in this study are like those at no-excuses charter schools, it would not be surprising if there were similar outcomes of the discipline practices at no-excuses charter schools.

Regarding discipline taking place in schools, there has been research done showing that certain types of discipline have more negative effects on students than others. For example, under a “highly regulated” system, students “learned to monitor themselves, repress their opinions, and defer to authority, rather than to take initiative, assert their needs, and negotiate with their teachers,” which shows that students in highly regulated and punitive environments are not learning the skills they will need later in life. This works against the stated goals of no-excuses charter schools because they are not preparing students with the skills they need to succeed in college. Other forms of discipline encourage teachers to understand the underlying or root causes of a problem behavior and individualize their response to address that issue rather than the behavior itself because this is thought to be better for encouraging positive behavior in the long term. Even though some discipline policies, such as the implementation of punitive or negative punishment, may help teachers manage their classrooms better, there are ways to

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62 Mohr and Anderson.
63 Mohr and Anderson.
65 Golann and Torres.
66 Golann and Torres.
achieve the same outcome by using disciplinary models better supported by theory and research.67,68

**Interview Analysis**

Following with the methods listed earlier in this paper, I interviewed three former students of no-excuses charter schools to investigate how these students narrate their experiences at these schools and how those self-described experiences address the research question: How do high achieving graduates of no-excuses charter schools understand and perceive the long-term mental health ramifications of the disciplinary and punitive policies used in their k-12 education? For this analysis, each interviewee will be given a profile based on their responses in the interview, and these profiles will be compared based on the similarities and differences between their experiences and what those similarities and differences may signify. Additionally, I will be including myself as a fourth profile, given that I am also a high achieving graduate of a no-excuses charter school, and my responses to the same questions asked of the other interviewees are relevant to the discussion and further contextualize my interest and investment in this topic. All these profiles will be referred to with pseudonyms, and any identifying information from the student responses that comprise these profiles will be adjusted to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

First, let’s introduce the profiles of the students interviewed for this capstone. The first profile is Shaye, a current college student who attended a no-excuses charter school in a city suburb of Phoenix, AZ for eight years, from grades 5 through 12. The second profile is Azure, a

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67 Golann and Torres.
68 Kerstetter, “A Different Kind of Discipline.”
recent college graduate who attended a no-excuses charter school in a suburb of Chicago, IL for high school, between 9th and 12th grade. Third is the profile of Jayme, a current college student who attended a no-excuses charter school in Newark, NJ from kindergarten to 9th grade, with a total of ten years spent at the school. The last profile is Indigo, a current college student who also attended a no-excuses charter school in Newark, NJ for eight years from 5th to 12th grade. All these profiles represent students of marginalized racial backgrounds. Though these profiles represent different experiences, comparing them will allow any potential trends, commonalities, and differences to be revealed so that their potential significance can be discussed.

In congruence with parent motives for sending their children to no-excuses charter schools that were discussed in the Literature Review section, the students interviewed generally reported that their parents chose their respective schools in hopes that these schools would offer their children academic opportunities and an environment that would contribute to their child’s success. More specifically, Shaye believed that their underperformance and lack of motivation to learn at their public school prompted their parents to send them to the no-excuses charter school that they ended up attending. For Azure, the charter school they attended seemed like the family’s only option when compared to underperforming and underfunded local schools or expensive private schools that the family could not afford. While Jayme did not perceive any thought or consideration in school choice on part of their parents, after going through the initial lottery process to get into the school when they started in kindergarten, it seemed most simple to have Jayme just continue at the charter school. Indigo was attending a different charter school prior to the no-excuses charter school they enrolled in at 5th grade, and their parents were ultimately drawn to the no-excuses charter school that they ended up attending because Indigo’s school at the time did not offer enrollment beyond 4th grade. The no-excuses charter school
seemed to have a rigorous curriculum that would match Indigo’s needs based on them scoring above grade level on almost all of the assessments taken until that point. All of the no-excuses charter schools attended by the interviewees advertise high academic achievement, and several of them promise to provide college preparation for their students.

Despite the best intentions of these students’ parents, all of them report looking back on their experiences at their no-excuses charter schools as an overall negative experience. Common among these student narratives was the students perceiving the discipline and academic systems at their no-excuses charter schools as having a negative impact on their mental health. All four students shared that they felt immense pressure from their school to prioritize their performance above everything else, often at the expense of rest, non-school related activities, or opportunities for social interaction. The constant comparison of students to each other, with these schools going to the extent of ranking and categorizing students based on their performance, compounded the pressures that students experienced from school.

**Discipline and Punishment**

At the school Shaye attended, there were very specific rules around student behavior, such as how students passed in papers, entered classrooms, and used their lockers. One of these rules was that students were not allowed to doodle during class, and Shaye said one of the moments they were “most scared ever” was when their history teacher caught them doodling in class, and as a result, the teacher made Shaye stay after class and wrote a note to send home to get signed by their parents, reporting this misbehavior. This was common at the school, and every test or quiz had to be signed by students’ parents. According to Shaye, “you couldn’t keep anything private,” and this constant threat of your parents finding out something you did
incorrectly at school was “the main form of control” employed by the school. Shaye explains that a large population of the school was made up of children of immigrants, and because of this background, there was a higher expectation of students from their parents. Knowing this, Shaye expressed that the school “kind of weaponized that” and used it as a “tool for fear” to get students to conform to the school’s expectations. Additionally, Shaye explained that during their time at their charter school, the constant comparison of students fostered “peer to peer pressures” and students “measuring and competing against each other,” which created a dynamic through which students upheld the expectations of the school among themselves. These comparisons and competition were more than implied—students were explicitly categorized, ranked, and were given displays of that rank for other students to identify them with. After every trimester of the school year, since fifth grade, students would be given a “dog tag” that delineated who was in “the top ten percent” of the class, who got a 3.5 GPA or higher, among other markers. Shaye describes this as a “weird social caste system” that operated in the school, because it was obvious what your rank was since everyone wore these tags, and students who didn’t get a tag at all stood out.

At the school Azure attended, there were similar high expectations for students, and failure to meet these expectations for academics and behavior would result in students being pushed out. Azure said, “a lot of our discipline stems from academic performance,” meaning that high academic achievement would be rewarded, and failure to meet these academic standards would result in being excluded from experiences other students had. Students who racked up too many disciplinary infractions were “expelled really easily” and a lot of the students who started high school with Azure “ended up not being there by [their] sophomore and junior year” due to being forced out. The students who remained in the school until graduation were only the ones
that were able to conform to the expectations and rules the school set for them—rather than adjusting to serve the needs of students, the school only catered to those that it knew would be successful by the school’s definition, leaving everyone else out of luck.

Indigo and Jayme attended the same charter school, though they were in different grades and started at different times. Jayme described a much more formal and detailed discipline system at their school than that mentioned in other interviews. At Jayme’s school, there were very precise protocols for pretty much every aspect of existing in the school—what you could wear, how many buttons of your uniform shirt you had to have buttoned, the size of your earrings, how you were supposed to sit in class, and even more regulations beyond this that students were expected to memorize and adhere to. Failure to meet these expectations resulted in disciplinary action. Every student at the school, starting in middle school (5th grade), had an individual record of behavior known as a “Paycheck,” which was a record of (fake) money that was determined by the student’s behavior that week. Students began each week with a 50 on their Paycheck and could earn “dollars” for “good things” and lose “dollars” for “bad things”. Teachers would call out a student’s name, how many dollars they’d earned or lost, and why, publicly—during class, and sometimes in the hallways or cafeteria—to announce to the Paycheck Monitors what to update in that student’s Paycheck record. While there were a couple of ways to “earn” dollars from teachers, there were far more and easier ways to “lose” dollars. Based on Jayme and Indigo’s testimonies, an incomplete list of reasons a student could get dollars taken from their Paycheck includes:

- Incomplete homework assignments—which could be marked incomplete at the discretion of the teacher for anything from only doing part of the assignment and not the rest to something as small as a student forgetting to box/highlight their answers if that was in the instructions.
- Anything deemed disrespectful—again, determined by the discretion and perspective of the teacher, with few, if any, opportunities for student input or explanation.
Having your uniform messed up—anything outside of the uniform policy listed in the student handbook, such as having your shirt untucked, not having the correct number of shirt buttons done, not wearing a belt with your pants, or wearing socks that were the wrong shade of blue, would be seen as an infraction. Jayme says that anything outside of “the specific set of expectations you were given,” was responded to with punishment with these dollar deductions.

Jayme and Indigo both continue to share the intricate procedures and aspects of the Paycheck system that was used as a metric of student behavior. Any students who earned below a specific threshold of $35 on their Paycheck for the week were automatically assigned detention at lunch and after school every day of the following week, in addition to also having to get the Paycheck signed by their parents, which every student regardless of final Paycheck value was expected to do. Failure to return a signed Paycheck the day after they were distributed to take home would result in a massive deduction off the next week’s Paycheck of $5 if it was late or $10 if it was never turned in, starting that student off at a lower point for that week before it had really started. Additionally, though teachers and administrators were the only ones with the authority to give or take dollars, the “Paycheck Monitor” who recorded all these changes for each student’s record was one student selected from each class to be responsible for everyone else in the class’s Paycheck record. This created a hierarchy and tension within the students since Paycheck Monitors were also contributing indirectly to the rewards and punishments other students received. The nature of this system resulted in students having extreme difficulty changing their position or status because “bad” behavior had multiple compounding effects and students who were seen as “bad” were not often given the benefit of the doubt or opportunity to regain dollars they may have lost. Privileges—such as homework passes or priority access when selecting electives and other things—were awarded to students based on their average Paycheck
score at different points in the year, so there was pressure to not only keep your score for the week high, but your overall average score high as well.

Looking at all four of these experiences, all of these no-excuses charter schools created disciplinary systems that assigned an identity to students based on the metrics the schools set for academic and behavior. That identity was then used to create a hierarchy of “good” students who got rewarded and “bad” students who were punished, shamed, or forced out of school altogether. Because the identity you had as a student determined your ability to participate in things and what you could do at school, there was an immense amount of pressure on “good” students to maintain their standing by continuing to meet expectations perfectly to avoid losing their benefits and on “bad” students to constantly play catch up to avoid punishments piling up. The public nature of each student’s identity also adds pressure from always being in comparison to their peers. From these student perspectives, it appears that these schools employ measures that result in “student shame, alienation, rejection, and breaking of [healthy bonds],” which the APA task force mentioned in the Literature Review says would be reasons to be concerned that the policies “may create, enhance, or accelerate negative mental health outcomes” for students experiencing them.69

Student Reflections on Mental Health: At No-Excuses Charter School

Each interviewee shared their thoughts on what their experience with mental health was like at the school they attended. Common among all the students’ schools, regardless of the students’ personal mental health situation, was that there were insufficient designated resources to assist students with mental health struggles. Either the schools did not provide a social worker

69 Reynolds et al.
or guidance counselor at all, or the one adult responsible for the mental health of students was not enough to provide care to everyone who needed it.

When asked what factors of the no-excuses charter school environment most contributed toward their experience of mental health, Shaye reported that “having to perform” and the “culture of comparing yourself to your peers” were the most significant aspects that worsened their mental health during their time attending the school. Shaye shares an anecdote from fifth grade that at the end of a grading period, they received a marker of their performance of earning an average of 90% or higher during the grading period. Instead of feeling accomplished, Shaye shared that they “felt very ashamed” because they did not make it to the top 15% of students category. Additionally, Shaye reported that they felt pressured to take more advanced classes than they had the capacity for, “forcing” themself to enroll in six Advanced Placement (AP) classes during ninth grade due to “pressure from [their] peers and my parents,” despite thinking that six AP courses in a year was not reasonable. Beyond the peer comparison and constant pressure to perform, Shaye also shared that the “culture of surveillance” at the school that manifested itself in sending behavior and grade reports home for parents to sign “tarnished” their relationship with their mother, and the surveillance was a source of constant stress at the school.

Azure similarly said that they felt there were few, if any, factors contributing to their poor state of mental health that came from outside the school environment. The primary pressures came from school and “feeling like you have to be productive or have great outcomes in order to have a place there or to matter.” Though Azure did not face many direct repercussions from the disciplinary system at their school, it was clear that students were only seen to have value if they were able to excel academically and prove their worth.
Jayme felt that the nature of the no-excuses charter school they attended definitely impacted their mental health while attending that school. Jayme says that if the “disciplinary system had not been as strict as it was,” then they might not have developed anxiety to the extent that they experienced it or struggled with what they described as “crippling depression,” which ruled their life for a long time. While Jayme acknowledged that there were some personal and national factors that could have contributed to their mental health struggles, they believe that the world is always going to have some “confounding variable,” and claim that even if what they were experiencing outside of school may have been difficult, attending this school made everything much worse.

The aspects of the school Jayme felt most contributed to their mental health were the very public way that discipline and punishment was enforced and the intense rigidity of policies and practices at the school. According to Jayme, “public shaming was, like, the name of the game,” regardless of how small the infraction was. They describe an incident during class in which they dropped a pencil and turned and bent down to pick it up. A teacher passing by the classroom perceived Jayme to be talking, entered the classroom and interrupted the lesson to announce a $5 deduction from Jayme’s paycheck for talking. Jayme’s attempt to explain and clarify that they had simply been retrieving their pencil was viewed as “disrespectful” and resulted in Jayme being pulled from class and sent to the Dean for a misdemeanor they did not actually commit. In the dean’s office, Jayme was required to write an apology to this teacher, explaining what they did wrong and how it hurt the community, and Jayme was expected to then read that apology out loud in front of the school at morning meeting the following day. This is one example of what Jayme describes as the “hierarchy” that existed as absolute fact at the school, which students “have no power to fight back against.” In fact, Jayme goes as far as to say they often felt that
their “teacher sort of like saw [Jayme] in a uniform and sort of stopped there,” indicating that Jayme felt more viewed as an interchangeable puppet that could be controlled by the teachers than as an individual human person with complex thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Jayme really emphasized their frustration with how immovable the disciplinary system was based on how students were labeled and the treatment they received based on that label. While “good” students were more often given the benefit of the doubt, dissent from these students was more forcefully and publicly shut down “to make an example of you” so that students lower in the hierarchy would not think that they could test or bend the rules even a little bit.

Indigo faced similar mental health struggles at the school that they and Jayme attended. Indigo remembered noticing symptoms of depression around sixth grade, one year after starting at the no-excuses charter school. Despite trying to communicate to people that they were struggling, Indigo’s pleas for help were dismissed as “growing pains” or “teenage angst.” Without any support from the school, Indigo briefly turned to self-harm to cope with the pressure they were under. Indigo felt that they had so little control over their life because of the school that they started hyper controlling other areas of their life, such as restrictive eating and self-harm, to feel as though they had some agency and power in their life, even if it was hurting them.

In an incident during high school, Indigo was rushing to make it to school on time before the very strict 7:40 late mark. Failure to arrive on time would not only result in a tardy mark, but a deduction of 2 points from their disciplinary record, after school detention, and Indigo would be prevented from turning in their homework, which was due every morning before school officially started. In their sprint to the school building, Indigo fell, ripping open a gash in their jeans and their leg. Fortunately, Indigo was able to make it to school on time, but they were injured and frustrated. While the principal was discussing timeliness during morning
announcements, Indigo shook their head from the bleachers of the gym, reflecting on just how hard it was for them to get to school on time every day, especially given that morning’s experience. The principal noticed Indigo’s slight dissent, and in front of the whole school, called Indigo out and sent them out of the room to await punishment. Afterwards, once Indigo explained their situation, the principal expressed some sympathy for their injury, but Indigo walked away with the clear understanding that it was more important that they “publicly undermined the principal’s authority,” than the fact that they were injured.

Another time in high school, following the principal’s morning announcement of disappointment that “fourteen students were in the dean’s office” the day before, Indigo was walking to class with a friend and remarked “students do dumb stuff all the time and sometimes deserve to be sent out of class, but sometimes, teachers send students out of class just to show they have power over them.” The dean apparently heard the last part of Indigo’s comment and called them to the office. After being sent to wait in an isolation cubicle in a room next to the dean’s office for what would have been two hours of instruction time, the dean called Indigo into the office and said that because students looked up to Indigo as a “good” student, “words like that are dangerous. That’s how you start a rebellion.” Indigo was floored that their simple comment was worth losing class time over and that the dean viewed that comment as “dangerous” to the scale of potential “rebellion.” One of the core values of the school was “integrity,” which students were told meant “doing the right thing even if nobody is watching.” Even though integrity may have been an important value for students to learn, in practice, there were never any opportunities for students to practice integrity because someone was always watching and would always find out, so students existed in fear of punishment, even when they did not understand what they might be doing wrong. Indigo supplements Jayme’s claims that the
high pressure to not only perform on command without error, but the need to appear pleasant and submissive while doing so, caused a tremendous blow on Indigo’s mental health while attending the school. They describe feeling “powerless,” being “constantly on alert,” and “numb” because of the robotic and unfeeling way they were expected to achieve and follow rules silently and without complaint.

Based on all four narratives shared surrounding mental health at no-excuses charter schools, a common trend seemed to be that the school held almost complete power to determine a student’s worth. Through practices of constant surveillance and evaluation, the students interviewed experienced what seemed like a constant threat, even if they were not being punished as frequently as some of the other students. Benign and innocent acts, such as doodling or retrieving a pencil, would be misconstrued as massive transgressions, and there was no real opportunity for students to advocate for themselves. Attempts to explain were seen as talking back, and students learned that the most effective way to get through the no-excuses charter school environment was to maintain high academic standards and avoid rocking the boat.

**Student Reflections on Mental Health: After No-Excuses Charter School**

All the interviewees reported they felt ill-equipped to handle life at college, especially in the area of forming meaningful friendships and developing a sense of self. The no-excuses charter schools that these students went to trained them to perform in a very specific way under very specific circumstances. Since college life has a lot more freedom and choices than the rigidity of the respective charter schools attended, those interviewed felt thrown off balance after leaving the no-excuses charter school environment.
Shaye attended a school that was STEM\textsuperscript{70} oriented but decided in senior year of high school that they wanted to pursue policy and law instead of something science focused. However, once Shaye arrived at college, they were incredibly challenged with courses in their first year because they had received no preparation at the no-excuses charter school they attended on how to succeed in humanities courses. Outside of the challenges with academics, Shaye said that they struggled with forming new relationships in college, particularly because they were still in “that mentality of comparing yourself to others” that they had at the no-excuses charter school they attended. Shaye said they didn’t feel prepared to form “genuine, human relationships that were not academically focused,” and admitted they never felt they had the opportunity to consider what their actual values were outside of the school or practice introspection to learn about themselves outside of how they performed on tests. While struggling to make new friends in college, Shaye found that their bonds with friends from high school were not as strong as they’d thought, and old friendships faded off without the pressure of the environment and academics to connect them.

Azure also struggled during the transition from their no-excuses charter school into the expectations of university life. Though many no-excuses charter schools are known for their high scores on academic assessments, Azure said that the work itself at the no-excuses charter school was not particularly rigorous academically, so when they arrived at college, they were not prepared to keep up with the classes. Azure shared that having to get “up to speed with everyone else” really impacted their mental health, especially since they struggled to maintain the same level of performance that they had in high school, which seemed less attainable in college. One of the few things Azure said their school prepared them for was “to talk well to adults and know

\textsuperscript{70} Subjects in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math
what they wanted to hear.” Similar to Shaye, Azure struggled to find an identity for themselves after exiting the no-excuses charter school space. In Azure’s words:

I had no idea what I liked. I had no personality. I have forgotten a lot of the things that made me so creative or made me want to be alive because during that time of high school, it was so important, just like focusing on my academics and going to school that I didn't have anything outside of that. Without having a clear sense of self, Azure had difficulty connecting with people and forming friendships. Even outside of social relationships, it was hard for Azure to find extracurricular and community spaces on campus because their only high school experience was student leadership, making it challenging to try new things with people who had lots of prior experience in those areas.

In reflecting on their time at the no-excuses charter school they attended, Jayme remarked that the clear structure of the school helped them “realize the importance of routine and consistency and in some ways,” and now they seek to provide that structure for themself. They also admit to gaining strong public speaking and reading comprehension skills at the charter school. Jayme felt prepared going into classes after this no-excuses charter school experience, but mainly because the pressure they faced at the boarding school they transferred to after leaving their charter school and the challenges they faced at college “did not touch, like, the level of academic stress that [Jayme] was feeling” while at the no-excuses charter school. Despite these positives, Jayme shared that after their time at their charter school, they felt “completely sort of out of touch with [their] own internal sense of peace,” and their relationship with school was not very healthy, even after leaving the charter school. In Jayme’s own words:

…at times, like how happy I was in a class did not matter to me. And like, how able I was to complete a task, and at what cost didn't matter to me. And so, in weird ways, I think it perpetuated a lot of the unhealthy behaviors that are glamorized in college life, staying up all night to finish stuff. Like, kind of getting things done by any means necessary. And I think, because I'd spent so long just kind of like pushing through like my own upset and
distaste with the environment that I was learning in, I don't necessarily think I've always chosen environments that have been good for me to learn in. And in fact, things being difficult is at times what I prefer because I do not know how to just, like, do something that is nice and easy for me. And also, to that end, there is no amount of success that is really enough for my brain, even if I can stop in the moment and be like, ‘Oh, that’s a really cool thing that I did’. Like, the charter school being the foundation of my educational understanding and experience, and 10 years’ worth of that foundation, is something that, like, I don't think I'll honestly ever really shake. Beyond this, Jayme really struggled to gauge how they were doing in educational settings after the no-excuses charter school because they no longer had constant access to their live grades and rank compared to the other students. Even after leaving the charter school, Jayme described feeling like they were “constantly waiting for the shoe to drop,” and believed “there's some punishment coming from somewhere,” even if it hadn’t made itself known yet.

Like the other two students, Jayme had difficulty connecting with peers outside of the no-excuses charter school environment because they lacked what they described as “fundamental” shared experiences, meaning they were “not at all [able] to relate to [their] peers” from other schools. Jayme described an instance of talking to new friends, and when the topic shifted to recess, Jayme “did not know recess was standard” at other schools and was left out of this shared experience that everyone else seemed to have. In response to this gap in Jayme’s knowledge and experience, the other students responded, “you went to prison school,” referencing the no-excuses charter school Jayme formerly attended.

Indigo shared a similar experience of not realizing how significantly different their experiences in school were prior to college compared to that of their college peers. Indigo came into college thinking that “everything had to get done, and everything had to get done perfectly” to succeed. Everyone Indigo encountered seemed so talented at one thing or another, and Indigo envied the passion that other students had but was missing in their own life. In a desperate effort to make friends and find community, Indigo found themself overcommitting to clubs, classes,
and other extracurricular activities because that was all they knew how to do. With a color coordinated Google Calendar, filled from 9:25am to, at times, midnight, Indigo struggled to hold everything together in this new environment that was completely foreign. Without any core activity or interest to ground them, Indigo suffered greatly with their mental health when all the various balls they were juggling started to fall. At first, Indigo thought everyone struggled this much when coming to college, and that Indigo’s failure to keep up with everyone was a result of some intrinsic failure on their part. Eventually they realized that the no-excuses charter school they attended did not really prepare them for anything outside of that limited environment.

A common sentiment shared was that although the mental health struggles faced in college were “different” than those at their former charter schools, these students would not necessarily describe their mental health as “better” after leaving. The students interviewed shared that being outside of the no-excuses charter school environment changed the immediate stressors in their lives, but these stressors were complicated by their experiences at the charter schools. Jayme described their time at the no-excuses charter school as “just trying to keep [their] head above water until [they] got to a place where [they] could help [themself],” and after leaving the school, their mental health did not necessarily improve, but Jayme felt they had more agency to do something about their suffering and seek help and support. Azure said that everything at their no-excuses charter school felt like “life or death,” but after leaving that environment, they describe feeling constantly “exhausted” by the large volume of work they were expected to complete. Shaye felt that the challenges of high school and college “piled on top of each other,” and compounded the struggles they experienced. Indigo started seeing a therapist in college, but still struggled for most of the subsequent years to stop attaching their self-worth and identity to the work they produce and constantly fearing punishment.
While things may have marginally improved for these students after leaving the no-excuses charter schools they attended, they still experienced lingering effects of the no-excuses environment. Both Shaye and Azure specifically use the word “brainwashing” in reference to the way that the charter schools they attended conditioned them, and after leaving, both students had to go through the work of unprogramming all the beliefs that their charter schools taught them. Having to unlearn such deeply ingrained habits while also learning the rules of an entirely new setting was an obstacle that it did not seem like other college peers were facing.

**Additional Findings**

One additional, unanticipated theme stood out after reviewing the interviews. Most of the students (Azure, Jayme, and Indigo) expressed the strong sense of justice that developed while at the no-excuses charter schools they attended. Whether in response to the rigidity of the environments or despite it, these three students had a very clear sense that the system they were being subjected to was unfair and worked to subvert it in various ways. Though Azure reported not getting into much trouble at school, they were “always going into fights with teachers,” in disagreement with the ways in which the teachers chose to enforce their authority. Knowing that their mother would be supportive of them, Azure was able to challenge teachers without fear of additional repercussions at home. Because of their experience at their no-excuses charter school, Azure stated that they have “no respect for authority” because teachers and administrators would set expectations and rules for students that they did not follow themselves. In Azure’s mind, they felt like “I shouldn't have to listen to you guys if you weren't going to actually abide by your rules as well,” and frequently called out incidents with teachers that demonstrated their hypocrisy. Jayme shared several occasions of undermining the harsh system they experienced by
using their limited power and influence as a high achieving and well-behaved student to advocate for and lift up other peers. In one story, Jayme described a gym teacher picking on another student who was wearing a back brace at the time, and Jayme confronted the teacher asking “did you become a fitness coach so you could pick on kids like this? Are you happy with your life knowing that you're going to work and do this every single day?” Though Jayme admitted that their response should have been considered disrespectful, looking back, Jayme is proud that they called out the teacher, because it was one way they could point out the unreasonable expectations and power dynamics of the school while also taking back some agency and power. Indigo and Jayme both held the position of Paycheck Monitor during their time in middle school and they report being selective with the dollar deductions that they chose to record. If a student was near the threshold of receiving Paycheck Detention (during lunch and after school) for the following week, Indigo and Jayme would overlook deductions or grant additional dollars to that student’s Paycheck to save them from the extreme consequences they would have otherwise faced. Jayme notes that the frustrations with the school and the systems imposed by it were frustrations that all students shared, but Jayme was more willing to push back against them. Indigo also remembers frequently questioning teachers about the logic behind their actions and would use a form of weaponized incompetence to undermine teachers. Indigo would only follow instructions exactly as they were given by teachers, ignoring any implied subtext of the instructions, and when teachers were upset at the failure to meet their expectations, Indigo would remind them that they followed the teacher’s instructions to the letter, so any oversight was the teacher’s fault.

The sense of justice these students developed and honed at these no-excuses charter schools is fascinating, and worth exploring further. These students used what limited agency they had to poke at the foundations of the school’s hierarchy—even if their actions did not radically
transform the systems in that moment, these students at least felt that some part of them was fighting back against something they seemed to intrinsically sense was unfair.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the goal of this capstone paper is to construct a narrative understanding of how former high achieving students of no-excuses charter schools perceive the relationship between punitive discipline used at those schools and the students’ mental health. Though this project is not generalizable, it has very important potential implications about punitive discipline and mental health, and therefore should serve as an initial study for further research to be done.

This project was limited in several ways. First, focusing on high achieving students definitely limits the range of experiences that likely existed within these no-excuses charter schools. Students who were high achieving at their no-excuses charter school were probably more likely to be concerned about conforming to the school’s metrics of success, and were able to navigate the landscape successfully enough to earn merits and praise. This experience may not be shared among students who had frequent direct encounters with the disciplinary system, especially those who also struggled to excel academically. Further, there was likely some self-selection in the population of students who were interviewed for this project, given that students who had experiences with poor mental health may have been more interested in the topic of this study. Despite these limitations, the work of this capstone project still holds significance, and will hopefully encourage more robust research in the future to address these gaps and limitations.

Based on the experiences shared in the interviews and the information researched in the literature review, there are aspects of the no-excuses charter schools that the interviewees attended which they believe worked to the detriment of their mental health. While at the schools,
students reported feeling immense pressure to meet very high expectations of academic performance and fear of punishment for failing to adhere to the very precise demands of the behavioral expectations. These environments put students in constant comparison to their peers and enforced power hierarchies between students and teachers, and among the students themselves. Interviewees reported feeling that they did not have a sense of identity outside of their demonstrable merits being exemplary, especially compared to those of their peers. Even after leaving the no-excuses charter schools, the students interviewed shared that their experiences at the school continued to influence their lives during the transition into college.

While the no-excuses charter schools may not have been the sole factor in these students’ struggles with mental health, the students agree that their schools exacerbated and compounded other stressors they were experiencing.

There is so much more to be said about these students’ experiences, and so many more student narratives that deserve to be heard. In the mission to improve schooling and education, it is vital to ensure that students’ needs are being met by listening to students describe what they need and where schools fall short. Though all the students interviewed could be described as “highly successful” based on their academics and college admissions, none of these students look back fondly on their time at no-excuses charter schools and felt that their success may have come at a cost.

There are several policy changes I would suggest to address some of the findings of this capstone and improve schools for students. One change would be to include evaluations of student mental health in the overall evaluation of a school. Rather than relying solely on test scores and college admissions to determine whether a school is effective, including measures of student mental health would be crucial information to contextualize their overall performance.
These mental health evaluations could be conducted in the form of quarterly or end of year anonymous surveys that students are asked to complete. An additional change would be to turn away from punitive measures as a method of ensuring safe and respectful student behavior. As discussed earlier, observations of a Montessori classroom demonstrated similar academic outcomes for Black students without reliance on extreme or punitive forms of discipline. Schools could also consider implementing a restorative justice approach to discipline to give students more voice and agency as well as more opportunities to genuinely work through conflict rather than only being able to do what they are told. The experiences shared in the interviews highlight some of the negative impacts of punitive discipline that students remember, and it is worth investigating what practices are available that could produce similar academic success and gains without potentially exacerbating the obstacles students may face.

Embarking on this research has been incredibly eye-opening for me and has helped me understand my experience as a former attendee of a no-excuses charter school and consider potential improvements to the existing school model. Though I cannot generalize my experience to anyone else, it has driven me to better understand what makes a healthy environment for students to learn in and how to best create that for people. Students are experiencing so many things during their formative years, so it is vital that we create environments for them that are safe and allow them to learn, fail, and grow healthily to promote the most positive long-term outcomes.

The high focus on student scores and academic achievement overlooks a lot of the socioemotional learning that students undergo in schools as well as their development of a basic understanding of how to exist in and interact with the world and their peers. Social and emotional development are just as important as academic success because they have lasting
effects on students later in life. To bring this to a close, although my experience with punitive discipline was particularly challenging and harmful, it has also inspired me to envision a world where students do not share my experiences and are able to go into the world not only with their own merits and scholarly achievements but with the backing of a supportive community that sought and seeks to enrich them as they continue to grow.
Appendix

Section A (Interview Questions):

Interview Script

This interview is being conducted by Rahshemah Stevenson Wise, and I am the primary investigator for this study. Before we begin, let’s review the consent form and eligibility criteria together to make sure we’re both on the same page. Participants in this study must be 18 years of age or older, have graduated from a no-excuses charter school, and must currently attend a highly selective college or university [Confirm participant is eligible].

[Screen share consent form and walk through each point, checking for questions and confirming understanding after each statement. Participant will sign consent form and return it before the interview questions begin]

Introductions:

● What are your name and pronouns?

● What is the name of the high school that you attended?

1. Tell me a little bit about your experience in K-12 - what was it like?

   a. When did you start attending charter schools?

   b. Why that school? How many years at no excuses? What was the transition like from your previous school? (uniform, rules, attending school in August, compact, etc)

   c. What were your and your family’s thoughts as you were starting the school? What did you expect/want out of it?

   d. Describe yourself as a kid -- what were you like in school & out?
2. Once you started at the school, how did your experience compare to what you wanted or expected when you first started?
   a. Favorite part? Challenges/where did you struggle?

3. Mental Health in charter school
   a. How did you feel going to this school at the time?
   b. How would you describe your mental health at this time? How do you think this is compared to your peers?
   c. How would you describe your relationship to your teachers?
   d. Were there any support services (counselor/social worker) that you sought out?
   e. What factors do you think have contributed the most to challenges at your charter school? What about factors contributing to your state of mental health while there?

4. Discipline at Charter School
   a. What were the rules like at your school? Did you find yourself breaking rules/getting punished?
   b. How did that compare with the experiences of other students at the school?
   c. As you think back to that experience, do you see any connections between how you experienced school discipline and how you felt or your mental health at school? (Were there other school/family/peer factors that were contributing to your mental health?)

5. Tell me about the transition to college
   a. How did your high school prepare you and not prepare you for college?
   b. What challenges did you face in the transition from high school to college?
c. How was the environment of college different from that of your high school?

d. How would you describe your mental health in college? Is this different from how you felt in high school?

e. What factors do you think have contributed the most to challenges in college?

What about mental health in college?

6. Reflecting back on your experience at that charter school now, do you feel it has influenced/shaped who you are today?

a. Relationship to learning / work?

b. Relationship to authority?

c. Understanding of self / self image?

d. Mental health?

e. How do you describe that school and your schooling experience to people today?

7. Reflections on mental health / well being

a. In general, sharing as much as you like, what’s your mental health like today?

b. How has it changed over time?

c. Describe your ideal learning environment for a child

d. If you could go back in time, what would you tell your child/teenager self?

8. Next I will be asking some questions about demographics so I can be more specific about the group of people I am talking to

a. How would you describe your Race/Ethnicity on a census form?

b. How would you describe your gender identity?

c. Age

d. What charter school did you attend (high school and middle school if applicable)
e. What college did/do you attend?

f. (The next question is to get a sense of your family’s economic status growing up)

    If you’re comfortable sharing it, how would you describe your family’s economic situation while you were in high school?

g. Were you free/reduced lunch eligible?

h. Are you Pell grant eligible?

i. Are you on financial aid?

j. Did you experience any of the following: eviction, utilities shut off, family job loss

9. Is there anything I didn’t ask you that you think is important to talk about? (Long pause)

10. Do you have anyone to recommend that I speak with?
Works Cited


