

Empathic Instruction: Strengthening student-teacher relationships to increase attendance and reduce disciplinary action

TNTP, Inc. Submission

EIR Mid-Phase

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INTRODUCTION

TNTP, Inc. respectfully submits this proposal for consideration for the Education and Innovation Research (EIR) grant in response to **Absolute Priority 1** (*Moderate Evidence*), **Absolute Priority 4** (*Meeting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs*), and **Competitive Preference Priority 2** (*Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students, Educators, and Faculty*). TNTP proposes the use of EIR funds to implement, scale, and evaluate Empathic Instruction, an easy-to-implement and scale, research-based intervention for teachers that has been shown to lead to lower and more equitable suspension rates overall, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities (██████████ et al., 2016; ██████████ et al., 2022). Building upon prior research, this project proposes to examine the potential for the school wide implementation of Empathic Instruction in middle schools to improve outcomes on a broader scale. Specifically, the project proposes to examine if Empathic Instruction improves disciplinary equity, academic outcomes, attendance/chronic absenteeism rates, and social emotional well-being, especially for high-need students. For the purposes of this proposal, “high-need students” includes Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions; all of whom are either disproportionately suspended or have high rates of chronic absenteeism in Virginia, where the study will take place.

Biases are universal and must be acknowledged to avoid unfair treatment. In schools, teachers' behaviors and responses to students are influenced by their biases (██████████ et al., 2022). However, interventions aimed at reducing bias have shown little effectiveness, with weak and short-lived effects at best (Lai et al., 2014, Lai et al., 2016). Empathic Instruction is innovative because it diverges from anti-bias approaches by aiming to sideline biases in teachers' decision-making processes, rather than directly combating biases. This professional development involves

two 40-50 minute online exercises per year, focusing on fostering teacher empathy, perspective-getting, and growth mindsets. Supported by a randomized controlled trial (**Absolute Priority 1**), Empathic Instruction has demonstrated positive student outcomes, particularly in reducing racial disparities and overall discipline rates (██████████ et al., 2016; ██████████ & Ruiz, 2020; ██████████ et al., 2022).

To scale Empathic Instruction, this project will extend its implementation across a broader spectrum of teachers and students to evaluate its impacts. Previous studies have focused solely on grade 7 mathematics teachers, showing positive effects such as reduced suspension rates overall and in terms of racial disparities. This project aims to assess the potential for significant impacts by implementing Empathic Instruction across all content areas and grade levels in Virginia (VA) middle schools. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the mechanisms through which Empathic Instruction enhances students' social-emotional well-being, which is essential for its expansion (**Absolute Priority 4**).

This project proposes to partner with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to implement Empathic Instruction in up to 30 of their School Divisions (the name for school districts in Virginia) in up to 75 middle schools. Virginia's Superintendent of Public Instruction, ██████████, stated that, "Our students and our schools are facing different issues than they faced before the pandemic," (VDOE, 2024) and the rise of chronic absenteeism is an issue they are tackling (**Competitive Preference Priority 2**). This project will focus on three main goals: 1) Scale Empathic Instruction to more teachers, students, and outcomes, 2) Evaluate the implementation and impacts of Empathic Instruction, and 3) Disseminate the findings of Empathic Instruction and continue to track scaling efforts.

SIGNIFICANCE

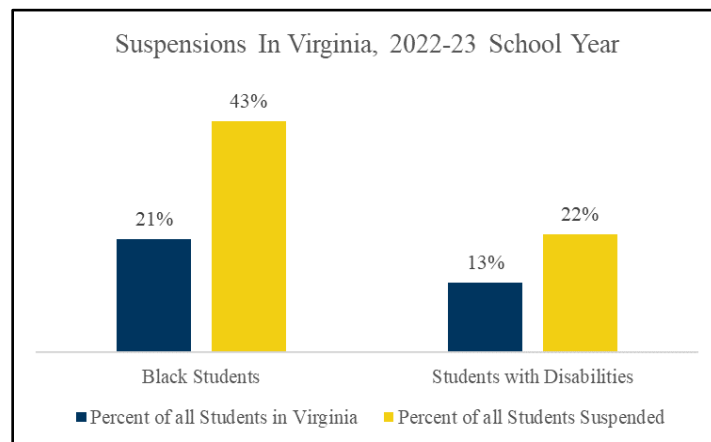
Suspension and chronic absenteeism are linked to negative outcomes in school and in later life. Student suspension leads to absenteeism, hindering class engagement and academic success. This cycle of disengagement correlates with increased absences, poorer academic outcomes, and higher dropout rates. Research shows higher absenteeism predicts lower academic achievement (Ehrlich et al., 2014) and increased high school dropout rates (Liu et al., 2021). Suspended or chronically absent students (missing 10% or more of school days) not only lose immediate learning time but also face future suspension risks (Fisher et al., 2021) and long-term consequences such as higher risks of underemployment and incarceration (Gubbels et al., 2019). Moreover, disparities in school absences due to suspension or chronic absenteeism can widen achievement gaps and perpetuate economic inequities (Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

Suspension and chronic absenteeism disproportionately impacts underserved students. Nationwide, approximately 5% of K-12 students are suspended from school each year (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022), with students from marginalized groups experiencing suspension much more frequently than their peers. For example, in 2017-18, 12% of Black students and 9% of students with disabilities were suspended at least once, and 19% of Black students with disabilities (almost one in five) were suspended (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Additionally, there is ample evidence of teachers using harsher treatment toward some students, particularly Black students, who demonstrate the same behaviors as their White counterparts (██████████ et al., 2022). Rates of chronic absenteeism are also higher for Black students (39%) and Hispanic students (36%) than for white students (24%) (Malkus, 2024).

Rates of chronic absenteeism and discipline issues increased following COVID-19 (Competitive Preference Priority 2). Nationwide, chronic absenteeism almost doubled in the wake of COVID-19, increasing from 15% in 2018 to 28% in 2022 (Malkus, 2024). These increases

were most pronounced in districts with low achievement and high poverty (Malkus, 2024). In a 2022 school leader survey, the National Center for Education Statistics found that 56% of respondents said that the pandemic led to increased classroom disruptions from student misbehavior and 48% said it led to more acts of disrespect toward teachers and staff (NCES, 2022).

Addressing disproportionate suspension rates and chronic absenteeism are priorities in Virginia schools. VA ranks among the top third of states for the number of students receiving suspensions, with Black students and students with disabilities receiving a disproportionate number of suspensions as compared to their white, nondisabled peers (see Exhibit 1) (Bostwick, 2024). Racial disparities are also apparent in rates of chronic absenteeism in VA. Black and Latinx students and students with disabilities have higher chronic absenteeism rates, at 23%, 25% and 25%, respectively, as compared to the state average (19%) and their white counterparts (17%) (VDOE, 2023).



Source: Bostwick (2024)

Exhibit 1. Suspensions in VA, 2022-23 school year for subgroups.

The VDOE is starkly aware of the challenges faced by students and teachers following the pandemic, so much so that they created the Office of Behavioral Health and Wellness to help focus

resources and attention to their students who are struggling the most. This involves integrating strategies aimed at enhancing student outcomes by expanding behavioral support across schools and communities (VDOE, 2023).

Empathic Instruction has been shown to reduce suspension rates, particularly for Black and Latinx students and students with disabilities. Empathic Instruction is a short, online professional learning and reflection experience that supports teachers to leverage the relationship-building skills they already have to respond empathically – rather than punitively - to student misbehavior. Empathic Instruction supports teachers’ growth, improves student behavior, and reduces disparities in discipline rates. In addition to lowering suspensions overall, research has shown significant decreases in suspensions for Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions who had at least one teacher participating in Empathic Instruction (██████████ et al., 2016; ██████████ et al., 2022).

We propose to build upon the current research to understand the impact of Empathic Instruction on student attendance and other key outcomes in addition to suspension rates. Given how Empathic Instruction strengthens student-teacher relationships, and considering research linking suspensions to attendance (Singer, 2023) and to students' social-emotional well-being (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009), there is potential for the intervention to enhance social-emotional well-being. This could include improving student perceptions of teachers and school, boosting attendance, and potentially enhancing academic outcomes through increased classroom time and stronger teacher-student bonds. This evaluation is crucial as prior studies have not explored these additional outcomes, providing insights into the comprehensive benefits of scaled Empathic Instruction.

STRATEGIES TO SCALE

B.1 Strategies that Address Barriers to Scale

Virginia and other states face challenges in mitigating chronic absenteeism, high suspension rates, and disparities in suspension rates. These challenges include issues such as finding an intervention that works and dealing with teacher burnout.

Barrier 1: Interventions that fail to diminish racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes. In the educational setting, strategies addressing racial disparities in disciplinary actions have centered on either specific policies or intensive educational programs, both yielding mixed outcomes. Some states have prohibited commonly cited interpersonal infractions, such as "willful defiance," which show significant racial disparities in suspension rates (Thurmond & Darling-Hammond, 2021). While these measures may decrease instances of student suspensions for minor infractions, they do not necessarily deter such behaviors or the resultant removal from classrooms through alternative methods like in-school suspensions. Furthermore, many interventions aimed at reducing bias have shown little effectiveness with weak and short-lived effects at best (Lai et al., 2014, Lai et al., 2016) and reductions in anti-Black bias have not resulted in nor predicted changes in behaviors or outcomes (Forscher, et al., 2019). Consequently, disparities in exclusionary disciplinary actions based on race may persist.

Many school districts have adopted Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), using multi-tiered models requiring significant resources, including specialized behavioral coaches and customized student training sessions to improve behavior (Reinke et al., 2013; Sailor et al., 2009). PBIS has effectively reduced suspension rates in elementary schools but has shown reduced effectiveness in higher grades, which is where suspension rates and racial disparities often increase (Vincent et al., 2015). Efforts to reduce suspensions have disproportionately benefited white

students, exacerbating racial inequalities over time (Porowski et al., 2014). The inconsistent success in addressing racial disparities may result from insufficient focus on the psychological factors influencing teacher-student interactions based on race and ethnicity.

Strategy to Scale and Address Barrier: Empathic Instruction is not an anti-bias intervention but rather it seeks to sideline bias in teachers, making bias less controlling of their behaviors. The goal of Empathic Instruction is to foster positive student-teacher relationships, encourage the belief in their potential for positive change, enhance teachers' empathy to facilitate this change through perspective-getting, and reduce the labeling of students as troublemakers (██████████ et al., 2020). Enhancing teacher-student interactions theoretically fosters greater respect during misbehavior incidents, potentially increasing students' respect for teachers and motivating positive classroom behavior (██████████ et al., 2016). Previous randomized trials with grade 7 teachers have demonstrated significant reductions in overall suspension rates, reduced racial disparities in suspension rates, and reduced suspension rates among students with disabilities (██████████ et al., 2016; ██████████ et al., 2022). Scaling Empathic Instruction across VA middle schools should reduce suspensions overall and racial disparities, potentially lowering chronic absenteeism and enhancing academic and social-emotional outcomes, especially for Black and Latinx students, those with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions.

Barrier 2: Teachers are grappling with burnout, including the pressures associated with implementing intensive, hands-on interventions. Teaching is widely recognized as one of the most stressful professions (Kyriacou, 2001), with teachers contending daily with numerous stressors that increase their risk of burnout. Burnout not only impacts teachers' well-being but also diminishes their effectiveness in the classroom, leading to negative student outcomes. According to the Prosocial Classroom Model, which posits that teacher well-being and socioemotional

functioning are critical to effective educational leadership and classroom management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), teachers experiencing burnout often develop strained relationships with students, frustration when students do not follow instructions, and negative perceptions of their students (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

Strategy to Scale and Address Barrier: Empathic Instruction is a minimally intrusive exercise conducted twice yearly online, each session lasting 40-50 minutes and available asynchronously with internet access. Participation rates are higher during scheduled professional development sessions, but teachers can also choose convenient times within a 2-month open session period. Empathic Instruction is most effective when conducted independently without additional activities or immediate discussion, allowing for independent personal reflection on values and experiences, while ensuring that it minimally disrupts teachers' schedules. This private approach fosters a deep, personal engagement that may be compromised by group discussions. In addition, Empathic Instruction endeavors to validate teachers by helping them to reconnect with the values and goals that motivated them to become teachers in the first place and helps to approach student-teacher relationships in more productive ways (██████████ et al. 2016; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

Barrier 3: Challenges identifying high-quality evidence-based interventions. On top of these issues, many schools don't have the capacity to identify high-quality, cost-effective interventions and implement them with fidelity. Although there are many evidence-based interventions available to schools, the "research to practice gap," which refers to the disparity between the findings in scientific research on effective educational practices and what actually occurs in schools and classrooms, is quite large (Porter & McMaken, 2009). Furthermore, there

are few if any other interventions with evidence from multiple randomized trials showing significant, substantial effects on racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes.

Strategy to Scale and Address Barrier: TNTP and Mindset Science Solutions (MSS), in partnership with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), will implement Empathic Instruction across multiple school divisions statewide. Empathic Instruction has shown promising outcomes aligned with VA's educational goals. TNTP and MSS offer expertise to support the state in assessing the potential benefits for teachers and students. TNTP will guide school leadership in implementing Empathic Instruction effectively and confidently with high levels of uptake and fidelity, initially assisting with management and providing comprehensive resources to support implementation. These resources include Empathic Instruction's research background, communication templates, checklists, FAQs, implementation timelines, and a data dashboard for real-time tracking of teacher participation and outcomes. This project aims to scale the intervention to a larger group, while remaining low-touch and cost effective and expanding the research base.

Participants. Middle school teachers in the state of VA will participate in this project, supported by the VDOE (Appendix C). TNTP will collaborate with the state to recruit up to 30 school divisions, offering Empathic Instruction in up to 75 middle schools. The project targets middle schools based on evidence showing positive impacts, particularly in grade 7 mathematics, and aims to expand these benefits across all middle school grades and subjects. Recruitment focuses on divisions with high-need students, high suspension rates, and high chronic absenteeism. The team will use generalizability software and NCES common core data to create a recruitment plan, and recruit a sample that is representative of VA by region, student demographics, and locale (i.e., urban, rural, etc.) (Tipton & Olsen, 2018). Implementation will be staggered across school years 2025-26 and 2026-27, with schools randomly assigned to receive Empathic Instruction

initially or as part of a comparison group. Empathic Instruction can help the VDOE reach their goals of reducing racial disparities in suspensions, chronic absenteeism and improving academic outcomes for students.

B.2 Adequacy of the Management Plan

TNTP will lead this project and will partner with Mindset Science Solutions (MSS), the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), and WestEd. Each partner brings a track record that demonstrates capacity to bring the project to scale, as well as experienced personnel (see Section B3 and Appendix B). TNTP will lead project management and regularly meet with each partner. Bi-weekly meetings with the external evaluators, WestEd, will occur throughout the life of the grant. These meetings will provide updates and interim findings from WestEd to be used for continuous improvement throughout the project period. During the first year of the project, TNTP will meet with VDOE monthly to coordinate and provide updates regarding recruitment strategy. TNTP will meet with MSS bi-weekly to ensure the Empathic Instruction modules are ready for implementation. After divisions are recruited, TNTP will meet with division staff to coordinate around outreach and recruitment of schools. As schools are recruited into the study, TNTP will meet with schools bi-weekly to help prepare for implementation. During the implementation window for Empathic Instruction in each school year, TNTP will communicate with individual participating schools and divisions weekly through facilitators identified by each participating school division. Facilitators help with communication to teachers, implementation, and data reporting. Facilitators will be provided with training and stipends for their time. Regular communication via the facilitator during the implementation window will help to monitor implementation and support continuous improvement activities. Communication types (i.e., virtual meetings, in-person meetings, emails, etc.) and frequency will be dependent on the implementation

phase and the need of each school. All meetings will ensure that project activities are on time and implemented with quality. This proposed Empathic Instruction program will occur over five calendar years (January 2025 to December 2029). Specific milestones, dates, and roles for grant activities are outlined in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Milestones, Timeline, and Responsible Party

Milestone	Dates	Responsible Party
Planning & Management		
Submit project for IRB review, update annually	1/25-3/25	TNTP/WestEd
Create sub-awards and scope of work agreement	1/25 – 3/25	TNTP
Kick-off meeting with partners	1/25	TNTP
Monthly management team meetings	ongoing	TNTP
Bi-weekly evaluation team meetings	ongoing	TNTP/WestEd
Recruit Virginia School Divisions - Cohort 1	1/25-4/25	TNTP/VDOE
Complete MOUs, data sharing agreements, etc. - Cohort 1	6/25	TNTP/VDOE/ WestEd
Identify School Division Facilitators and Train them on Empathic Instruction	4/25-7/25	VDOE/TNTP
Recruit Schools - Cohort 1	4/25-7/25	TNTP/VDOE
Conduct Teacher outreach - Cohort 1	7/25	TNTP/VDOE
Develop Facilitator Guidebooks - Cohort 1	7/25	TNTP/MSS
Develop individualized links for Empathic Instruction exercises - Cohort 1	7/25	MSS
Recruit Virginia School Divisions - Cohort 2	1/26-4/26	TNTP/VDOE
Complete MOUs, data sharing agreements, etc. - Cohort 2	6/26	TNTP/VDOE/ WestEd
Recruit Schools - Cohort 2	4/26-7/26	TNTP/VDOE
Conduct Teacher outreach - Cohort 2	7/26	TNTP/VDOE

Develop Facilitator Guidebooks - Cohort 2	7/26	TNTP/MSS
Develop individualized links for Empathic Instruction exercises - Cohort 2	7/26	MSS
Progress reports	Annually	TNTP/MSS/ WestEd
Empathic Instruction Implementation		
Communicate randomization to school leaders	8/25 & 8/26	TNTP
Fall Empathic Instruction window opens for treatment schools (cohort 1 & 2)	8/25-10/25 & 8/26-10/26	TNTP/VDOE
Winter Empathic Instruction window opens for treatment schools (cohort 1 & 2)	01/26-03/26 & 01/27-03/27	TNTP/VDOE
Fall Empathic Instruction window opens for comparison schools (cohort 1 & 2)	8/26-10/26 & 8/26-10/26	TNTP/VDOE
Winter Empathic Instruction window opens for comparison schools (cohort 1 & 2)	01/27-03/27 & 01/28-03/28	TNTP/VDOE
Post data collection	05/26-06/26 & 05/27-06/27	TNTP
Implementation & Impact Study		
Randomize participating schools	7/25 & 7/26	WestEd
Control teacher survey data collection (cohorts 1 & 2)	10/25, 3/26, 10/26, & 3/27	WestEd
Student survey data collection (cohorts 1 & 2)	10/25, 3/26, 10/26, 3/27	WestEd
Impact estimate on combined cohort data	07/27	WestEd
Dissemination		
Evaluation report	12/29	WestEd
Dissemination of products and publications	Ongoing between years 4+	TNTP/MSS/WestEd /VDOE

B.3 Capacity to Scale Empathic Instruction to a Larger Sample

Founded in 1997, TNTP is an educational nonprofit with over 650 full-time employees committed to transforming educational outcomes so that every student thrives. Today, we work side by side with educators, system leaders, and communities across 39 states and more than 6,000 districts nationwide to reach ambitious goals for student success. Additionally, TNTP has over two decades of experience managing complex, multi-year projects, including federal grants. TNTP will draw on the infrastructure and resources of a large, long-standing, national organization to implement this project and to scale, including working collaboratively across our research and data, finance, communications, information technology, and project teams.

The Project Team. The team brings years of experience working with teachers, leaders, and researchers nationally, in addition to previous partners and past, successful collaborations.

Exhibit 3. Personnel, Roles, and Responsibilities

Person, Role	Responsibilities & Qualifications
<p>██████████, TNTP Leadership</p>	<p>██████████ will provide leadership for the project, meeting regularly with VDOE leadership and WestEd evaluation teams. She will manage the collaboration with the state, VA divisions, and the evaluation team and oversee grant reporting. Currently, ██████████ is a TNTP Partner that helps identify and recommend appropriate research methods and evaluation plans for TNTP partnerships with districts and states. ██████████ holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Educational Leadership and Policy.</p>
<p>██████████, TNTP Project Director</p>	<p>██████████ will manage the project team that oversees the implementation, communications, and dissemination of project information, holding responsibility for team goals, objectives, measures and the management plan. Currently, ██████████ is responsible for various aspects of data work, including data collection, maintenance, analysis, and reporting on TNTP LEA and SEA partnerships. ██████████ holds a Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in School Psychology.</p>
<p>██████████, Intervention Design, Mindset</p>	<p>██████████ is a social psychologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Cognitive and Psychological Sciences at Brown University. His research on Empathic Instruction and aligned interventions has proven results to reduce discipline incidents and cut suspension rates. ██████████'s academic appointments include the Psychology Department of</p>

Science Solutions	the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University. [REDACTED] holds a Ph.D in Psychology from Stanford University.
[REDACTED], Evaluation Lead WestEd	[REDACTED] is the Principal Investigator and will lead the design and execution of the evaluation. [REDACTED] has over 26 years of experience designing and executing rigorous impact studies. He has published multiple peer-reviewed studies regarding psychosocial factors, and their relationship to student success for Black and Latinx students. He is currently leading two large scale RCTs focused on the effects of psychosocial interventions on disciplinary equity and student success, including one RCT examining the effects of Empathic Instruction in the elementary grades. [REDACTED] holds a PhD in Public Policy from Harvard University.
[REDACTED], Co-Principal Investigator WestEd	[REDACTED] is Co-Principal investigator and will provide input on the development and refinement of the evaluation design, instrument development and data collection, and quantitative and qualitative analysis strategies, particularly with respect to measuring and understanding the effects of the intervention on teacher perspectives. [REDACTED] will also supervise quantitative and qualitative research staff and support reporting and dissemination efforts. [REDACTED]'s career began as a K-12 teacher and data coordinator in Chicago Public Schools. [REDACTED] holds a PhD in Special Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago.
[REDACTED], Technical Advisor WestEd	[REDACTED] is technical advisor and will review and provide input on the development and refinement of the evaluation design, instrument development and data collection, and quantitative and qualitative analysis strategies. [REDACTED] is currently the Co-Principal investigator of a Regional Education Laboratory experimental study measuring the impact of the Empathic Discipline intervention on Black elementary students' disciplinary outcomes. [REDACTED] holds a PhD in Public Policy and Administration from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Virginia.
[REDACTED], Virginia Department of Education, State Superintendent of Public Instruction	[REDACTED] serves as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction for the VDOE and will serve as the executive sponsor of this project. Prior to Virginia, [REDACTED] served as the Chief Academic Officer for the Tennessee Department of Education, as well as an Executive Officer for Metro Nashville Public Schools. In TN [REDACTED] helped launch a reading initiative that secured Tennessee's place as a national leader in implementing high-quality instructional materials. Recently [REDACTED] completed a Broad Fellowship in Education Leadership from Yale University.
[REDACTED], VDOE,	[REDACTED] serves at the Virginia Department of Education's Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning. [REDACTED] serves as the Chief Academic Officer for the department of education and oversees the

Deputy Superintendent	academic strategy for 1.3 million students. As part of her role, she leads the behavioral health and wellness offices. [REDACTED] will serve as the project liaison with Virginia divisions.
[REDACTED], VDOE, Director of Strategic Analysis & Research	[REDACTED] serves as the Virginia Department of Education’s Director of Strategic Analysis and Research with a focus on improving academic outcomes for students by using high-quality research and data analytics to inform policy and service delivery. In the proposed project, [REDACTED] will serve as the VDOE point of contact for ensuring access to all data required for the project evaluation, measures, and reports. [REDACTED] holds a PhD. from William and Mary in Education Policy.

B.4 Dissemination for Further Development and Replication

TNTP is a well-respected thought leader in education with the capacity, systems, and relationships to produce high-quality reports and disseminate them broadly. TNTP will leverage its national reach, extensive partnerships, and established external communication platform to share project information. TNTP has experience working with evaluation partners to share final reports through blog posts, subscriber email lists, and social media accounts. TNTP’s website receives on average 85,000 views a month, with an email distribution list of 36,000. TNTP’s 2018 report *The Opportunity Myth* has been viewed over 275,000 times. In the past year, TNTP has been featured in such tier-one publications as *USA TODAY*, and *The Washington Post*, as well as in leading education trades, including *The 74*, *Education Week*, and *The Hechinger Report*.

TNTP is committed to sharing its work, research, and findings nationally. Our acclaimed national reports such as *Accelerate*, *Don’t Remediate: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classrooms* (2021), *The Opportunity Myth* (2018), *The Mirage* (2015), *The Irreplaceables* (2012), and *The Widget Effect* (2009), have inspired policy change across the country. *The Opportunity Myth* (2018) examined the quality of students’ academic experiences in school, their access to four key resources, and implications for students’ futures. More than 9,000 people—including 40

prominent education leaders, like former U.S. Education Secretaries Arne Duncan and John King—pledged to advance *The Opportunity Myth*'s recommendations upon its release.

In recent years, TNTP has presented at professional conferences including USED-sponsored grantee meetings and virtually, as panelists in i3 learning community webinars. Most recently TNTP has presented at the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), the Association of Latino Administrators & Superintendents (ALAS), the National Migrant Education Conference, the National Charter Schools Conference, SXSW EDU, The National Forum to Advance Rural Education, The Reading League Summit, The National Alliance of Black School Educators, and National ALICE Summit. Additionally, our CEO, Dr. Tequilla Brownie, has served as both a featured speaker and panelist at NewSchools Summit, Jobs for the Future Horizons Conference, and will present at the ASU+GSV Summit in 2025.

TNTP and external evaluation partner, WestEd, are committed to publishing findings and presenting at national research conferences for educational researchers and practitioners, such as the American Educational Research Association, the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Council for Exceptional Children, the American Evaluation Association, and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. In addition to conference presentations, project information and findings will be disseminated through several avenues to the state of VA, including participating school divisions as well as more broadly to relevant education communities nationally. These avenues will include materials intended to be more concise, as well as accessible summaries of findings that connect research and educational practice such as webinars hosted jointly by TNTP and WestEd, a research brief, and infographic. Peer-reviewed journal articles will also be produced from study findings.

TNTP, in partnership with WestEd, will disseminate project information and findings following the close of the impact study after Year 3.

TNTP has infrastructure and resources to support quality replication of this work. Following results from the impact study, TNTP will partner, separately from this project, with additional school districts to implement Empathic Instruction in different settings and with different populations.

B.5 Use in Other Settings

TNTP has a strong track record of bringing promising new practices to scale, and Empathic Instruction is an evidence-based practice that can benefit many schools, teachers, and students. This project will inform journal articles, conference presentations, policy briefs, and electronic media content, which will provide useful information to a wide range of audiences with varied levels of expertise. As described above in Section B1, schools face many barriers to identifying evidence-based strategies that effectively address racial disparities in schools. At the completion of this project, the proposed study design will identify the impact that Empathic Instruction has on important student outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging, trust, suspension rates, attendance, GPA) with a focus on Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions. These results will provide rigorous evidence to inform broader use of Empathic Instruction and help school leaders better understand the features and implementation of a low-touch, cost-effective intervention to help reduce disparities for their most underserved students. The emphasis on implementing and learning from this project in these diverse contexts will help school leaders see how Empathic Instruction can support the needs of local students.

Additionally, throughout this project, TNTP will work with VDOE leadership to continuously monitor outcomes from implementation of Empathic Instruction. These data and

findings will contribute to Virginia's Support Framework (VDOE, 2022) in alignment with incorporating school discipline supports. TNTP will provide resources outlining additional supports that can be used in the schools. TNTP and VDOE will discuss plans to expand Empathic Instruction in current participating school divisions and introduce it in new schools.

Furthermore, the dissemination plan as described in Section B4 is designed to share the information learned through the proposed study to relevant stakeholders, including researchers, teachers, districts, state education organizations, and policy makers. The variety of targeted audiences for the study's products will ensure that the study informs the conversation about racial disparities and methods to reduce these gaps in schools and provides a resource to effectively reduce racial disparities. These findings will help provide Empathic Instruction to additional school sites across the nation.

QUALITY OF THE PROJECT DESIGN

C.1 Theory of Change & Logic Model Summary

Growing evidence links high suspension rates, particularly among students of color, to racial bias (██████████ & Eberhardt, 2015). Many schools lack teaching staff that reflect their student demographics (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), contributing to persistent racial disparities in student achievement (Reardon et al., 2019) and disciplinary actions (Morris & Perry, 2016). These conditions can foster bias and negative stereotypes, especially towards Black students (Starck et al., 2020). Furthermore, some schools maintain policies and practices that perpetuate rather than address bias. For instance, they may lack mechanisms for teachers to understand students' perspectives or to build deeper relationships with them. This often results in labeling certain students, particularly Black students, as "troublemakers," leading teachers to resort to punitive disciplinary measures (see Exhibit 4).

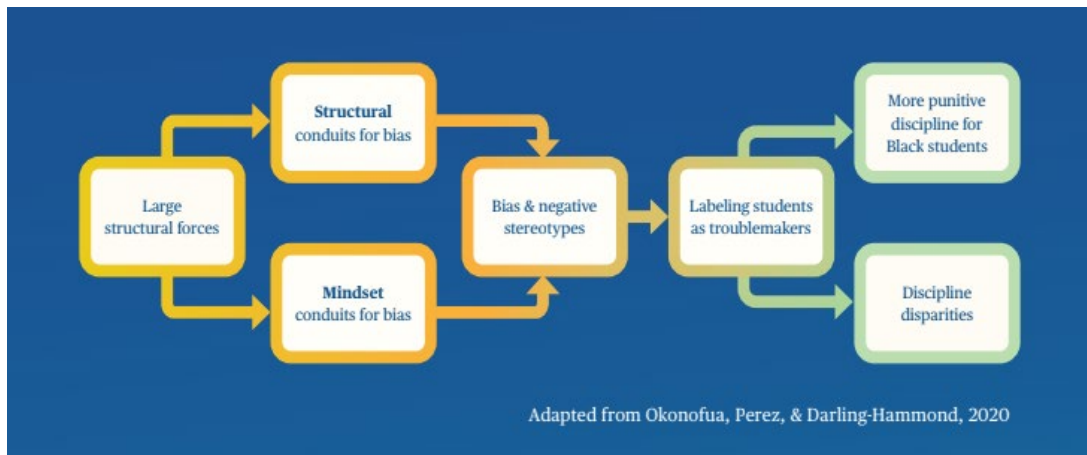


Exhibit 4. Typical recursive cycle of punitive responses

If punitive responses continue, student-teacher relationships may begin to deteriorate. Students don't feel respected by their teachers and teachers become frustrated, strengthening the punitive reaction. The cycle needs to be broken. However, many strategies aimed at reducing bias have shown mixed results, with few resulting in positive outcomes for students (Porowski et al., 2014). In fact, recent research indicates that professional learning emphasizing empathy, perspective-getting, and growth mindsets among teachers can reduce racial disparities in discipline more effectively than efforts solely focused on bias reduction.

Empathic Instruction, the current approach, aims not to eliminate bias but to "side-step" bias, i.e., minimize its influence on teacher behavior (██████████, Harris, & Walton, 2022). The theory posits that by enhancing their perspective-getting and growth mindset perspective, Empathic Instruction can disrupt the punitive cycle reducing the tendency to label students quickly as troublemakers (see Exhibit 5). It should be noted that Empathic Instruction does not encourage teachers to not discipline misbehaving students. Instead, the intervention encourages teachers to discipline students in a context of mutual understanding and trust.

Based on this theory of change implemented through Empathic Instruction, all students face less risk of suspension. This reduction is especially pronounced for Black and Latinx students,

students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions, and thus leads to fewer discipline disparities in a school. Additionally, students may see improved student-teacher relationships and a stronger sense of belonging, gain more trust in adults in the school, and experience higher attendance rates and improved academic outcomes.

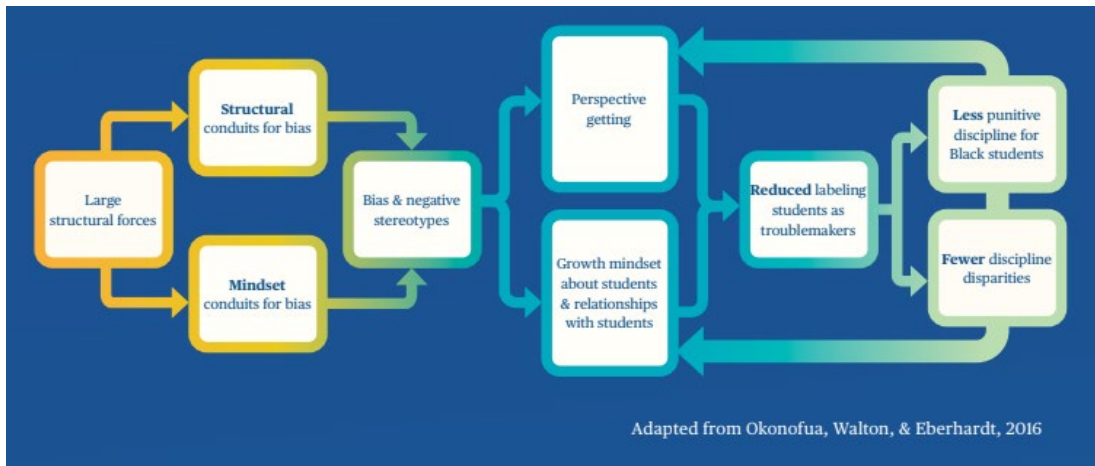


Exhibit 5. Theory of Change for Empathic Instruction

The logic model below outlines the inputs, outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes expected to be realized with the implementation of Empathic Instruction. The full, detailed version of the logic model can be found in Appendix G.

FY24 EIR Mid-Phase: Empathic Instruction Abbreviated Logic Model

Key Components		Outputs	Outcomes	
Resources	Activities		Short Term	Long Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports and Resources from TNTP, Mindset Science Solutions, SEA, LEAs (Divisions), & Schools Empathic Instruction modules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher participation in EI module 2 x per year Professional learning to emphasize empathy, growth mindset, and perspective-getting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased teacher growth mindset relative to student behavior and student-teacher relationships Teachers react to student misbehavior with more empathy rather than punitive responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved student-teacher relationships Reduction in chronic absenteeism and suspensions More equitable discipline outcomes (particularly Black and Latino students, students receiving special education supports, and students with previous suspensions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved student academic outcomes and SEL outcomes, such as students reflecting that they have at least one adult they can trust in the school and a stronger sense of belonging Students perceive schools/classrooms as being more equitable and safe environments

Exhibit 6. Logic model outline

Empathic Instruction is a series of online exercises for teachers, completed independently and at their convenience. It typically takes 40-50 minutes per session, with teachers engaging twice yearly, once per semester. Activities include reading articles, providing insights on interactions, responding to surveys, and participating in reflection exercises. To see sample content from the exercises please see Appendix K.

C.2 Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes

The goal of the project is to implement Empathic Instruction with a wider population of teachers and grades (i.e., middle school grades, core content subject area teachers). A summary of the project’s goals, objectives, outcomes, and measures is shown in Exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7. Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, and Measures

Goal 1: Scale Empathic Instruction to more teachers, students, and outcomes.		
Objective	Measure	Target/Timeline
1.1 Scale Empathic Instruction (EI) to middle school teachers and students in Virginia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X number of middle school teachers participate in the Empathic Instruction professional learning • X number of middle school students will have at least one teacher who has participated in EI (annual performance measure) • X number of high-need students will have at least one teacher who has participated in EI (annual performance measure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By the end of year 5, a total of 3,000 individual middle school teachers have participated in Empathic Instruction at least once. • By the end of year 5, 50,000 middle school students will have at least one teacher who has participated in EI. • By the end of year 5, 10,000 high-need students will have at least one teacher who has participated in EI.
1.2 Recruit School Divisions and Middle Schools to participate in the program study.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of School Divisions and Middle Schools recruited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By year 4, up to 30 School Divisions and up to 75 (60 required for impact study) Middle Schools have been recruited for the program study
1.3 Train School Division leaders to manage program implementation within their School Division.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training materials and # of School Division leaders who attend training sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By year 4, at least one leader for each participating School Division has participated in Empathic Instruction training

1.4 Identify barriers to implementing and scaling Empathic Instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative notes and feedback from School Division and State leaders in Virginia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual reports will identify, and address barriers as noted from meetings with School Division and State leaders
1.5 Work with leadership to determine next steps and additional strategies to sustain efforts to reduce suspensions and chronic absenteeism in Virginia alongside Empathic Instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss implementation and impact findings with state leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By year 4, at least 3 Virginia state leaders are briefed on the findings and resources outlining supports are provided

Outcome: More teachers will participate in Empathic Instruction to allow the scaling of evidence on teacher and student outcomes.

Goal 2: Evaluate the implementation and impact of Empathic Instruction.

Objective	Measure	Target/Timeline
2.1 Randomize Middle Schools for program impact evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruited School Divisions and Middle Schools agree to random assignment design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By year 4, no more than 30 School Divisions representing 75 participating schools have signed MOUs for the impact study.
2.2 Measure and assess the implementation fidelity and impact of Empathic Instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The # of reports from an independent study of the project that (a) codifies critical program components for successful replication, (b) measures its effects on students and teachers, (c) provides information replication, and (d) provides the cost-effectiveness of the key practices to identify obstacles and success factors to scaling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By the end of year 5, 1 report that meets WWC standards with reservations will be completed.
2.3 The cost per student for Empathic Instruction will remain affordable for schools to implement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost per student served by the grant (annual performance measure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost per student will be \$116.19 per student throughout the entirety of the grant.

Outcome: Empathic Instruction is found to be implemented with fidelity and found to have positive effects on middle school Black and Latinx students at an affordable cost for schools to sustain.

Goal 3: Disseminate findings on Empathic Instruction and continue to track progress on scaling.

Objective	Measure	Target/Timeline
3.1 Disseminate findings to research audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TNTP and partners submit research paper proposal summarizing study results to a national conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentation of research findings given at 2 national research conferences and submitted to at least 1 peer-reviewed journal

3.2 Disseminate findings to public, teacher, and policy audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports summarizing findings to the Virginia Department of Education and participating schools • Partner with one participating member from Virginia (either state, division, or school-level) to submit at least one proposal to a national practitioner or policy conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations with at least one participating member from Virginia (either state, division, or school-level) given at least one national practitioner or policy conference
3.3 Continue to support the implementing of Empathic Instruction and track scaling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer Empathic Instruction to schools and districts around the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yearly documentation of new, non-study schools & districts using Empathic Instruction in Y 4-5 of the project, with a total target of 40 schools and 3 districts by EOY 5
<p><u>Outcome:</u> Empathic Instruction results are shared with both the research and applied communities and are reaching more schools and districts.</p>		

C.3 Appropriateness to Needs of the Target Population

As mentioned in Section A, VA schools suspend Black students and those receiving special education services at disproportionately high rates. These students also, along with Latinx students, face significant chronic absenteeism, potentially indicating feelings of disconnection or safety concerns within their school environments. By engaging teachers throughout the state in Empathic Instruction, all students may develop stronger relationships with their teachers, trust more adults in school, and feel a greater sense of belonging. This could potentially reduce suspensions, racial disparities in suspensions and improve attendance rates, positively impacting students’ academic achievement and long-term prospects, particularly for high-need students.

QUALITY OF THE PROJECT EVALUATION

D.1. Producing Evidence that Meets WWC Standards Without Reservations

WestEd will conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation and impact of Empathic Instruction on student disciplinary outcomes among high-need grade 6-8 students in VA middle schools. The research questions (RQs) for the evaluation (see Exhibit 8), align with the key

components of the Empathic Instruction logic model and project objectives. RQs 1-2 will address the impacts of Empathic Instruction on suspensions and chronic absence separately for *each* of the four high-need groups identified for this project (Black students, Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions). RQs 3-5 will address implementation while RQs 6-8 will address the extent to which mediators and moderators, such as changes in teachers' perspectives towards students or students' sense of belonging and trust, appear to be important mechanisms through which Empathic Instruction had an impact on student outcomes. Exploratory impact RQs 9 -11 will address exploratory impacts on additional outcomes, including attendance, sense of belonging and school trust, and GPA. Finally, RQ12 explores the impacts of Empathic Instruction on suspension rates for all grade 6-8 students, irrespective of whether they are in the high-need groups. The focus of the evaluation will be high-need students in grade 6-8, in a sample of 60 middle schools.

The Empathic Instruction evaluation is a school level intent-to-treat cluster RCT structured to meet WWC evidence standards without reservations. We expect the RCT to have low attrition, due to the reliance on district administrative data for our primary impact questions. Schools and students will be kept in their original assigned groups, regardless of school mobility or actual implementation of the intervention. The study team will assess attrition at the cluster and individual levels, as indicated in the WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook, 5.0, applying the cautious boundary. If attrition exceeds the boundary, the evaluation team will assess baseline equivalence across the experimental groups and control for baseline characteristics to control for any group imbalance in the impact model. Since there is a low risk of bias due to joiners, student joiners will be included in the analytic sample. Additionally, the risk of confounds in the study is minimal with multiple sites and a large sample size.

Exhibit 8. Evaluation Research Questions

Research Question	Primary Data Source(s)
Confirmatory Impact Questions	
1. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on school wide suspension rates among high-need students in grades 6-8?	District administrative records data from participating school districts
2. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on chronic absence rates among high-need students in grades 6-8?	District administrative records data
Implementation analyses	
3. To what extent is Empathic Instruction implemented with fidelity throughout treatment schools?	District administrative data, Empathic Instruction module data,
4. To what extent does the implementation of Empathic Instruction adhere to the intervention design and intended supports throughout the treatment schools?	District administrative data, Empathic Instruction module data, teacher/school staff focus groups and interviews
5. What does “business as usual” with respect to supports for disciplinary equity look like in the control schools (i.e., treatment contrast)?	Teacher/school staff focus groups and interviews
Main mediating analyses and moderator analyses	
6. To what extent is the impact of Empathic Instruction on high need students mediated by changes in the teachers’ perspectives on student behavior, including the extent to which teachers tend to label students who experience behavior incidents as “troublemakers?”	Empathic Instruction module data, teacher survey data, district administrative records data
7. To what extent is the impact of Empathic Instruction mediated by changes in perceptions of school trust and belonging among high-need students?	Student survey, district administrative records data
8. To what extent do the effects of Empathic Instruction on suspension rates among high need students vary across grades?	District administrative records data
Exploratory Impact Questions	
9. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on attendance among high-need students in grades 6-8 and among all 6-8th grade students?	District administrative records data
10. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on school trust and belonging among high-need 6th - 8th grade students and among all 6-8th grade students?	Student survey, district administrative records data
11. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on grades (GPA) among high-need students in grades 6-8 and among all 6-8th grade students?	District administrative records data

12. What is the impact of Empathic Instruction on school wide suspension rates among all 6-8th grade students?	District administrative records data
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D.2. Evaluation Will Produce Guidance on Effective Strategies for Replication

In addition to producing impact estimates of the school wide implementation of Empathic Instruction on grade 6-8 students, the evaluation team will conduct a fidelity of implementation evaluation that is consistent with the EIR TA guidelines and conduct cost analyses to establish a model that is replicable and sustainable beyond the EIR grant, with sufficient information for stakeholders to make replication decisions regarding the intervention.

Fidelity of Implementation. To measure fidelity of implementation (Wilson et al, 2020), the WestEd team will collect data corresponding to three dimensions: 1) Fidelity of Implementation; 2) Implementation Adherence; and 3) Treatment/Control Contrast. **Fidelity Thresholds.** The evaluation team will work with TNTP to define thresholds for determining the level for each implementation measure. As the intervention is straightforward, fidelity (completing an online module) fidelity will simply be defined by the extent to which teachers in treatment schools completed the Empathic Instruction exercise. For example, we may define high fidelity schools as those in which 75% of teachers complete the Empathic Instruction exercise. In addition to uptake and completion rates as our primary measure of fidelity, we will also examine adherence to the timing and processes for implementation, as well as the treatment control contrast. Further details are in Appendix J.

Generalizability and Scalability. In collaboration with the VDOE and TNTP, WestEd will evaluate the schoolwide impact of Empathic Instruction in a representative sample of schools throughout the state. The evaluation will produce reliable evidence that will inform decision-making about scaling and replication of Empathic Instruction on a school-wide basis, and the

extent to which the intervention benefits the high-need student populations in VA. Examining the schoolwide effects of Empathic Instruction scaled across all middle school grades and teachers will shed light on the extent to which this approach is an effective and viable strategy for improving disciplinary, attendance, socioemotional and academic outcomes among high-need populations at scale.

Cost Study. WestEd will evaluate the resources used to implement the program and provide information about the associated cost of the program per participant. The cost analysis will rely on the ingredients method (Levin [RD8] et al., 2017). Ingredients are all the resources required for the successful implementation of a program or strategy. The evaluation team will also examine cost effectiveness. The evaluation team will collect program budgets, expenditure reports, and will subsequently follow up with the intervention providers to determine actual costs. The analysis will provide insight into the financial sustainability and scalability of the program, as well as provide important cost information to the current and prospective program providers.

D.3. Evaluation Plan Clearly Articulates the Key Project Components

Impact Design. WestEd will implement a school level cluster randomized controlled trial and create an intent-to-treat (ITT) impact estimate of Empathic Instruction on the (WWC acceptable) outcomes of yearlong suspension rates and chronic absenteeism (see Exhibit 8 for all research questions). It is a 3 level cluster RCT, with students nested within schools, nested within school divisions. Schools will be randomized within division level blocks and will be implemented across two cohorts. Both divisions and cohorts will be treated as fixed effects. The project team will recruit VA divisions and schools in the first year of the study, Prior to the fall of the first year, the evaluation team will randomly assign schools to a treatment group that has access to the intervention in the 2025-26 school year, or a control group that does not have access to it until the

2026-27 school year. If the sample goal of 60 schools is not met in the first year, recruitment will continue into year 2 of the project, and a 2nd cohort of schools will be randomly assigned to treatment and control status prior to the fall of 2026. The details of how the impact estimates will be modeled can be found in Appendix J.

Exhibit 9. School Level Random Assignment and Implementation Design

		Academic Year			
		2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Cohort 1	Treatment Schools	Receive Empathic Instruction			
	Control Schools		Receive Empathic Instruction		
Cohort 2	Treatment Schools		Receive Empathic Instruction		
	Control Schools			Receive Empathic Instruction	

Sample size and minimum detectable effects. The primary confirmatory impact questions focus on the impacts of Empathic Instruction among the *four* groups of high-need students identified for this project. High-need students (Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students with prior suspensions) represent approximately 21, 19, 15, and 5 percent, respectively, of students in VA in the 2022-23 school year (VDOE, 2024; Bostwick, 2024). The average enrollment in VA middle schools is 524 students (USDOE, 2022). With half of the schools assigned to treatment status and half assigned to control, the MDEs for each group are all below .20. The evaluation is therefore sufficiently powered to detect meaningful effects on high-need students should they exist. The Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995),

adopted in many studies, will be used to adjust statistical significance determinations for the false discovery rate in testing multiple hypotheses.

WWC Acceptable Outcome: Student Suspensions. The primary outcomes of interest for the impact study are suspensions and chronic absence, both of which are WWC acceptable outcomes based on district administrative disciplinary data. Exhibit 10 below provides the study measures, their data source, and their WWC outcome domain.

Exhibit 10. Key measures.

Measures	Data Source	WWC Outcome Domain
Student Suspensions. Number of yearlong suspensions, both in- and out-of-school.	District administrative records	Student Discipline
Attendance. Yearlong attendance rate.	District administrative records	Pre-K—12 Progress and Completion
Chronic Absence. The percentage of students absent for more than 10 percent of school days.	District administrative records	Pre-K—12 Progress and Completion
Grade Point Average. Grade point average in core courses based on a 0-4 scale, calculated using letter grades.	District administrative records	Course Performance
Student Belonging. Validated and reliable multi-item survey index of the extent to which students report feelings of belonging in school. (Pyne, et al., 2018, Borman et al., 2019)	Online Student Survey	Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Outcomes
School Trust. Validated and reliable multi-item survey measure of the extent to which students trust the school and the adults in it.	Online Student Survey (MSPAA)	Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Outcomes
Teacher Growth Mindset. Validated reliable survey index based on a series of questions regarding the extent to which teachers believe student behavior patterns can change [REDACTED] et al., 2016; 2022)	Online Teacher Survey	NA

Teacher Labeling. Validated reliable survey measure of the extent to which teachers label students who act out as “troublemakers” (██████████ et al., 2016; 2022).	Online Teacher Survey	NA
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Data will be transferred and stored securely. WestEd information security systems were developed in accordance with the ISO 27001 standards for information security management and the Federal NIST 800-53 standard for security and privacy controls.

D.4. Methods Will Provide Regular Performance Feedback

The evaluation will also generate evidence of effectiveness on academic, social emotional, and attendance outcomes, increasing the extent to which practitioners can make informed decisions about the problems to which this approach can be applied. This in turn will inform division and state choices regarding how and where to scale the intervention. The proposed evaluation will also examine the teacher and student mechanisms through which Empathic Instruction improves middle grade outcomes and reduces disciplinary disparities. As programs inevitably evolve with scale, understanding these mechanisms will help inform tradeoffs and design decisions that often accompany expansion. Results will be shared with key stakeholders quarterly throughout the life of the grant with formal annual reports provided after each year of implementation.

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