Brokers and Boundary Managers: School Expulsions amid the Non-Punitive Turn

Rebecca D. Gleit

Skidmore College, USA

ABSTRACT

Like many American institutions, K–12 schools are increasingly embracing a rhetoric of non-punitiveness and seeking to supply resources instead of imposing harsh punishment. Using ethnographic data from a diverse, suburban, well-resourced public high school, I explore how institutional actors manage this central role in the provision of goods and services. I find that school staff lack the capacity to successfully serve as brokers for all their constituents, forcing decisions about how to allocate their limited resources. Staff navigate these constraints by strategically managing the boundaries of the institution, redefining who gets to remain a member and who they will continue brokering for. I describe how and when these exclusions occur and show that students from less advantaged backgrounds are at higher risk of expulsion because they depend more on the school for resources than their privileged peers. Further, informal methods of exclusion become favored in this non-punitive pivot, meaning that official data likely undercount the number of students forcibly removed from their schools. As institutions take on more resource brokering amid the turn towards non-punitiveness, the decisions of boundary managers – those actors with the power to enroll and expel members – become increasingly consequential for the allocation of public resources.

KEYWORDS: school; expulsion; discipline; resource brokering; punishment;

In a decisive move away from punitiveness, American institutions are increasingly aiming to supply resources rather than enact punishment. Drug courts provide medical, counseling, and job-related services instead of jail time, policing diversion programs connect arrestees with supports such as housing rather than incarcerating them, and non-police organizations offer emergency responses to mental health crises (Jensen, Parsons, and Mosher 2007; Stuart and Beckett 2021; White Bird Clinic n.d.). Yet, as more institutions transition from formal punishment to resource brokering, new challenges arise. Notably, this shift to new functions often occurs without sufficient input of additional funds or personnel, forcing staff to decide how and to whom they should allocate their limited supply of resources. I examine how actors within public institutions manage their increasingly central role in the provision of public goods and services in the context of finite resources. I find that institutional actors navigate these constraints by strategically managing the boundaries of the institution, redefining who gets to remain a member. Those actors with the power to regulate membership within the institution – whom I call boundary managers – are increasingly consequential as public institutions...
shift towards non-punitiveness, because they hold the power to separate people from the resources brokered by their institution.

I use the case of schools because educational institutions are experiencing the non-punitive turn particularly dramatically. Historically, educators responded to student misbehavior through punitive practices such as suspensions and expulsions. Now, non-punitive practices like restorative justice are encouraged in the schools of traditionally liberal and conservative states (González et al. 2020). As part of this turn towards non-punitiveness, school leaders often seek to address behavioral challenges not through exclusionary discipline, but with an infusion of additional supports for that student. Exemplifying this shift, the California Department of Education issued guidance that “our state’s focus on equity means addressing students’ holistic needs,” and thus called on schools to “replace punitive discipline practices with targeted student supports” (Thurmond and Darling-Hammond 2021). These supports might involve brokering connections to internal school resources, such as an appointment with a counselor, or external resources, such as mental health treatment, rent assistance, or food pantries. Ultimately, this shift towards non-punitiveness and resource brokering makes schools essential sites for the administration of the social safety net.

I rely on three years of ethnographic data from a diverse, suburban public school in California that I call Northwest High (NWHS). Despite the relative affluence of NWHS, staff lack sufficient resources to successfully serve as brokers for all students and their families. Given this constraint, how do school staff decide where to allocate their time, money, and energy? I find that school administrators address their limited brokering capacity by forcibly removing students they perceive as a burden. These expulsions reduce the burden because school actors are not responsible for brokering for a family when their child is no longer enrolled. Importantly, I find that students are forcibly removed from NWHS despite administrators’ desire to use less exclusionary discipline. Because leaders seek to minimize their number of formal expulsions, removals are often pursued through informal means and are, therefore, invisible in official administrative data.

THE TURN TO NON-PUNITIVENESS AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION OF RESOURCES

Shifting away from the “new punitiveness” of the 1970s (Pratt et al. 2005), institutions are turning their attention towards rehabilitation over formal punishment. Law enforcement agencies increasingly favor community policing, the criminal-legal system expanded the use of problem-solving and drug courts, and schools are turning away from strict zero-tolerance policies in favor of more restorative approaches. In this therapeutic turn, institutions have moved towards “disciplinary governance through empowerment,” in which compliance is encouraged through the provision of resources and opportunities (Parreñas 2021:1044). Senior police officers designated as “community liaisons” direct Skid Row residents towards social services like the nearby mega-shelters (Stuart 2016:85). Similarly, drug courts rely on community partnerships and collaborative interdisciplinary teams to intervene with clients’ employment, education, housing, physical health, mental health, and social relationships (Castellano 2011; Tiger 2011).

Providing these opportunities requires institutional actors to serve as resource brokers, connecting individuals to goods and services (Small 2006). Yet, the reliance on organizations to broker resources is not equal. For the privileged, much of this coordination is done by families, without the involvement of public institutions (Gong 2019). Affluent parents coordinate and nurture inter-institutional connections to positively facilitate their children’s upbringing (Jackson 2020). They might buy a house in a neighborhood with low rates of crime where they regularly prepare nutrient-dense food for their families according to recipes they access on high-speed internet. At the slightest concern for their child’s wellbeing, they may schedule a visit with healthcare providers and then advocate for related accommodations to promote their child’s success at their well-resourced school. These coherent webs of institutional collaboration form a cocoon around already-advantaged people to further promote their flourishing. Unlike their affluent peers, however, children from lower-income backgrounds may be embedded within isolated or actively damaging institutions (Jackson 2020).

Resource brokering can be understood as institutional actors’ attempts to spin coordinated webs akin to those the privileged spin for themselves. Because of school actors’ brokering efforts, a student might access healthcare through a mobile clinic that visits campus and bring home food for their
family from the school’s pantry. That student’s parent might receive advice from the school’s parent liaison about navigating legal aid as an undocumented immigrant. To successfully facilitate the creation of these multi-institutional networks, staff must be knowledgeable about and build connections across organizations to first become aware of available resources and then to connect constituents with them. While many actors within an institution might broker resources, brokering is most consequential when it is done by the subset of street-level bureaucrats I call boundary managers.

**Boundary Managers: Punishment through Exclusion**

The turn towards non-punitiveness has increased the significance of boundary managers because they are often responsible for much of the institutional resource brokering and, most importantly, because they uniquely hold the power to manage entry and exit from this brokering. As such, boundary managers can break the network of resources brokered for an individual by that institution. For example, judges are the boundary managers in problem-solving courts. They supervise collaborative teams that coordinate resources for constituents; they also can cut ties between the constituent and the resources brokered within the problem-solving court (Burns and Peyrot 2003; Castellano 2011). School and district administrators similarly oversee interdisciplinary teams of staff who connect students and families with resources. Schools typically have administrative teams tasked with identifying struggling students and designing relevant interventions. While teachers may also broker resources for their students, they are not boundary managers because they don’t hold administrators’ power to enroll new students or expel existing students from their educational institutions.

As street-level bureaucrats, boundary managers face time pressures, inadequate resources, and conflicting and ambiguous goals (Lipsky 1980). Brokering for students and families can tax boundary managers’ already-limited resources, since fostering productive, coherent, and supportive connections across institutions requires time, material resources, and energy. When these inter-institutional networks are managed within families, as they often are for the affluent, the person coordinating may be doing so for one, two, three, or even ten people. When these webs are coordinated by institutional actors, boundary managers are brokering connections for dozens, hundreds, or thousands of constituents with insufficient time, money, or manpower.

Staff in public-facing institutions respond to the challenge of limited resources by “redistributing,” “burden shuffling,” or “offloading” clients to other institutions (Lara-Millán 2021; Seim 2020; Sirois 2023). Which clients become seen as a burden to be shuffled? To inform their allocative decisions, boundary managers may rely on their perceptions of clients as differentially receptive. As Burns and Peyrot summarize, “treatment-oriented practitioners often seek to conserve scarce treatment resources by identifying certain persons as being unable to benefit from treatment and denying them access to treatment” (2003:423–24). For instance, the judge – as boundary manager – delineates between “unsuitable” and “suitable” participants. The former may never be admitted into or may be removed from a problem-solving court program (Burns and Peyrot 2003). The distinction between those deemed able and unable to benefit mirrors the “logic of appropriateness” embedded into many street-level bureaucrat decisions, in which resources are provided to those who are perceived to be “appropriately” responding to outreach efforts (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). In schools, boundary managers might perceive some students and families as responding “appropriately” to their resource brokering efforts, while they may perceive others as failing to respond properly. School boundary managers might continue brokering only for students perceived as responding properly.

A unidimensional scale of proper response, however, does not account for variation in the amount of brokering that a constituent requires. I argue that two dimensions of boundary managers’ perceptions are necessary to understand their decision making – and thus are necessary to understand which individuals become seen as burdens to be shuffled (Figure 1). The vertical axis is akin to the unidimensional scales discussed in previous literature and represents how boundary managers perceive the constituent’s response to their brokering efforts. The horizontal axis represents the degree of brokering required by a constituent. As institutions take on an increasingly large role in resource brokering, boundary managers implicitly categorize constituents into the resulting quadrants.

The most consequential quadrant is the fourth, in which boundary managers perceive that: (1) they are expending a vast amount of resources on a particular individual, and (2) the receiving individual is not responding properly to the brokering efforts. Boundary managers selectively remove
these constituents, who are perceived as a burden, which releases them from the responsibility of brokering for those individuals and thereby helps balance the demands of brokering with the limited supply of resources. Numerous infractions may be used to justify these removals, infractions that – if a constituent were perceived to be in a different quadrant – would not result in removal.

The horizontal dimension – how much brokering one requires – is crucial to understand how boundary managers’ frameworks map on to unequal outcomes. Adding a second dimension reveals that even if a constituent is perceived to be responding poorly, they may still be able to remain part of the institution so long as they don’t require many resources from it. Because their families typically facilitate the creation of complete multi-institutional networks, affluent constituents often require less brokering from public institutions and fall on the left-hand side of Figure 1. They are, therefore, granted the privilege to remain a member of the institution, regardless of how their response to any brokering effort is perceived. Moreover, I will show how maintaining the membership of the most socio-economically privileged constituents, even if they are not perceived positively, may improve the institution’s overall ability to serve as a resource broker. Further, because constituents who are perceived to become a burden – and thus at risk of removal – are those who receive a high degree of support from the institution, the impact of removal is more severe than it would be for their more affluent peers.

This framework offers an important link between the institutional turn towards non-punitiveness and patterns of social exclusion. Social scientists have long documented how methods of exclusion can occur both through formal (de jure) and informal (de facto) means. Families might be excluded

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**Figure 1.** Four-Quadrant Framework to Explain Who Becomes Perceived as a Burden by School Boundary Managers and is at Risk of Expulsion
from a neighborhood through *de jure* or *de facto* residential segregation, or evicted from their house through formal or informal means (Desmond 2012; Rothstein 2017). If the cultural movement towards non-punitiveness invokes reactivity (Espeland and Sauder 2007), then institutional actors may increasingly favor *de facto* means of exclusion over formal *de jure* means. Informal exclusion allows institutions to publicly demonstrate their non-punitiveness by having low counts of disciplinary outcomes in official metrics.

While informal exclusion may offer some benefits over formal exclusion (e.g., a lack of a documented negative sanction in the case of an eviction or a school expulsion), the material outcome is harmful no matter how (in)formally the exclusion occurred. If a student is expelled, they lose access to the education they would have received, as well as all non-educational resources brokered by the school. There is no guarantee their next educational establishment will offer these same supports. Even if it does, the student and their family may have to expend substantial effort to build the necessary connections to learn about these resources and gain access. Further, forced removal from school may harm students’ self-concept, sever ties with their school-based peer networks, disrupt parents’ schedules and transportation arrangements, and disrupt students’ curricular progress, since shifting educational providers often means a student will miss crucial lessons that could affect their larger academic trajectory.

### The Case of Schools

In response to the documented harms of suspensions and expulsions (Rumberger and Losen 2016), lawmakers and educational leaders are attempting to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline by replacing zero-tolerance policies, banning the use of suspensions and expulsions for some age groups and infractions, and implementing restorative justice programs (Folley 2019; Skiba et al. 2006; Washburn and Willis 2018). Rather than assign exclusionary discipline, staff are encouraged to embrace the role of resource broker. Widely implemented programs like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are designed to supplant harsh punishment with supports, solidifying the expectation that schools coordinate non-educational resources for students (Agostinelli 2022). Government policies also promote schools as resource brokers, providing funding to transform them into community hubs where a broad array of services for students and families are facilitated by the school (Horn, Freeland, and Butler 2015; Maier and Niebuhr 2021). Yet, brokering extra-educational resources for students and families places new demands on school staff, who rarely have sufficient training, personnel, or funding to successfully fulfill the needs of all students and their families (Horn et al. 2015:5).

I show that school expulsions often stem not from any given infraction of a student, but instead from the general state of the school’s ability to serve as resource broker for that student. If staffs’ perceived ability to serve as a broker is burdened by an outsized share of time, money, or energy and they don’t view the student and family as responding properly, then administrators selectively activate their boundary management capabilities to reduce this burden by excluding that student. This theory helps explain why, among students who commit similar infractions, some experience expulsion while others do not. Moreover, because expulsions often happen when the school-as-resource-broker becomes burdened, students who depend on the school for resources – often students who are low-income or from other marginalized groups – are at higher risk of exclusion from school. This may be one mechanism that sustains inequality in school discipline, despite efforts to reduce it.

### DATA AND METHODS

#### Setting

Northwest High (NWHS) is a large diverse public school in suburban California. Meticulously maintained historic brick buildings surround a central open quad where NWHS students gather during passing periods. Roughly half of these students reside in wealthy, mansion-studded neighborhoods, while others come from more modest contexts – ranch houses interspersed with apartment complexes. Approximately one-third of the students are classified as socio-economically disadvantaged. The plurality of students are Latinx (over 40 percent), followed by Asian (over 20 percent), white (just under 20 percent), and small percentages of Pacific Islander, Filipino, and Black students. The school also offers many English Language Development (ELD) courses. Roughly one in six students is classified...
as an English learner, many of whom are newly arrived immigrants from Central America. I gained access because of my and the administrators’ shared interest in the shift towards non-punitiveness. NWHS administrators had recently developed alternatives to traditional discipline like suspensions and expulsions and they sought to expand their use of restorative justice.

With its vast racial and economic diversity, Northwest High is not the modal American high school. Nonetheless, NWHS is a strategic case for understanding how institutional staff use their discretion to broker resources and assign consequences. Zussman argues, “Successful case studies look at extremes, unusual circumstances, and analytically clear examples, all of which are important not because they are representative but because they show a process or a problem in particularly clear relief” (2004:362). Northwest High’s diversity makes it an important analytic case, since more racially and economically homogeneous schools vary in ways that impact both their ability to broker resources and their punishment practices, such as financial resources and discipline codes (Sosina and Weathers 2019; Welch and Payne 2010). By studying a single school, I eliminate the possibility that differential student outcomes are due to institutional features. Northwest High also constitutes an extreme case, as they have a private foundation raising hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Thus, my work shows how even in the most well-resourced schools, administrators exercise discretion in the allocation of these resources that reproduces social inequality. While the specific methods of resource brokering and discipline may vary across contexts, my analytic and extreme case study illuminates generalizable social processes that help explain how and why within-institution disparities arise.

Data Collection and Analysis

Over three academic school years, I conducted more than 400 hours of participant observation and 76 formal in-depth interviews with students, staff, and parents at Northwest High. The data for this paper are drawn predominantly from my fieldwork (2019–2022). Table 1 summarizes my data collection. Prior to mid-March 2020, I conducted campus visits and interviews in person. Between mid-March 2020 and August 2021, most fieldwork and all interviews were conducted virtually. I occasionally visited campus during the 2020–21 academic year, when a few administrators were working in-person, to observe the day-to-day management of virtual school. For 2021–22, students returned in person but most administrative meetings remained on Zoom; I conducted fieldwork and interviews both on campus and virtually. Table 2 provides demographic information about individuals described in the results.

When I was physically on campus, I spent the most time in the lobby of the student services office, the home base for two assistant principals, the school therapists, campus security, and the school resource officers (when they are present). This is often the site where students were assigned a restorative or punitive consequence or no consequence. While I conducted observations at all times of day, I quickly realized the office is busier in the afternoon. I often timed my visits so that I arrived just before lunchtime and stayed through the last bell. Beyond student services, I observed classrooms (in-person and on Zoom), wandered the halls, joined administrators as they patrolled during lunch, and attended football games, dance recitals, graduations, teacher professional development, parent events, town halls, school board meetings, and support programs for students struggling with virtual learning. I took jottings in a notebook, my laptop, or my cell phone, whichever was least obtrusive in a given context. After leaving the field, I expanded my jottings into detailed field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Formal interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim.

I took a grounded theory approach to my analysis (Charmaz 2014). After identifying emergent themes in my data, I used a process of theoretical sampling in which I returned to my field site with

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1 Using the 2019–20 NCES Common Core of Data, I estimate that roughly 25 percent of large (enrollment ≥1,000) US public schools have no majority racial group (>50 percent), similar to NWHS. Also like NWHS, roughly 10 percent of large schools have sizeable shares of white, Asian, and Hispanic students (10–50 percent each). A non-trivial number of students attend schools demographically similar to NWHS.

2 NWHS administrative and support staff became accustomed to my presence. The dean often invited me to work in his office, tested me if KidTalk meetings were rescheduled, and proposed that I ask district administrators for a job. He was neither the first nor last person to suggest I join NWHS staff. While I never formally worked at NWHS, I often took on the role of support staff. I set up for standardized testing, sorted files, and chaperoned prom. When I arrived to help at the Class of 2021’s graduation, my pre-prepared nametag read “STAFF” in the bottom corner.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Format of Schooling</th>
<th>In-Person Fieldwork</th>
<th>Virtual Fieldwork</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Average Frequency</td>
<td>Average Frequency</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Modal Setting</td>
<td>Modal Setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>Before mid-March</td>
<td>~3-4x per week, 4</td>
<td>~5 times, 60 min.</td>
<td>16 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Person</td>
<td>hours each</td>
<td>each</td>
<td>8 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>School board</td>
<td>In-Person:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>office</td>
<td>meetings</td>
<td>semi-private location at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After mid-March</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NWHS (e.g., office, empty room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtual</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>virtual:</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>interviewee's preferred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>Virtual</td>
<td>~10 times, 3 hours</td>
<td>~3-4x per week,</td>
<td>21 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>each</td>
<td>90 min. each</td>
<td>2 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>KidTalk meetings</td>
<td>virtual:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>office &amp; Saturday</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td>interviewee's preferred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-22</td>
<td>In-Person</td>
<td>~1x per week, 4</td>
<td>~1-2x per week,</td>
<td>4 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hours each</td>
<td>90 min. each</td>
<td>3 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>KidTalk meetings</td>
<td>In-Person:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>office</td>
<td></td>
<td>semi-private location at</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Although school was virtual, Mr. Mendoza (the Dean) began running Saturday support sessions for students who were perceived as struggling with online learning. He solicited “referrals” for this program from teachers and counselors. I attended most of these sessions.*
Table 2. Demographics of Participants Described in Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Speaks Spanish fluently?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Roberts</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Ms. Zhao</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Mendoza</td>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Man</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Popov</td>
<td>Family Engagement Coordinator</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Ms. Sandoval</td>
<td>Academic Counselor</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Resnick</td>
<td>Academic Counselor</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<td>School Therapist</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Watson</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rossi</td>
<td>District Administrator</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>Ms. Osoguera</td>
<td>ELD Teacher</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Ronin</td>
<td>ELD Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Larkin</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year in School</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>Race/ Ethnicity</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Diego</td>
<td>ELD</td>
<td>Low/middle</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>ELD</td>
<td>Low/middle</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<td>Calvin</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>Low/middle</td>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giles</td>
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<td>ELD</td>
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<td>Kevin</td>
<td>12th</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Won Ton Squad</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In the case that I know how someone identifies themselves, I list that. In cases where I did not know a participant’s self-identification, I note a racial/ethnic classification based on a combination of how others describe that individual’s race or ethnic background, students’ racial/ethnic category as listed in the school information system, and my own perceptions.

** Year in school is taken at the time of the story being detailed. I use the five categories that school staff at NWHS use to sort and process students: 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, and ELD. Students in the ELD program are rarely referred to by their technical grade level, as the relationship between a student’s age, time in the US, English fluency, and credit accumulation is often complex. Moreover, both assistant principals and academic counselors at NWHS are assigned according to these five categories. Students in the ELD program are assigned to Ms. Roberts as their assistant principal and Ms. Sandoval as their academic counselor. All non-ELD students are divvied up – according to grade level – between the other assistant principals and academic counselors.

*** I categorize students’ socioeconomic status into two rough categories – high and low/middle – based on information including students’ housing contexts, neighborhoods of residence, caregivers’ jobs, and involvement with state institutions like the child welfare system.
these themes in mind. Seeking to refine my developing theories about forced removals, I began attending the twice-weekly administrative meetings that are a key source of data for this paper. At “KidTalks,” teams of administrators, counselors, and therapists discuss struggling students, debate how best to intervene, and delegate follow-up actions. I attended nearly every KidTalk meeting during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years. Meetings generally lasted 60–90 minutes and were on Zoom (even when school was in person), a circumstance that allowed me to document conversation among staff nearly verbatim. I developed the two-dimensional framework in this paper through iterative coding of each student case – both those discussed in KidTalk as well as those that I observed outside of KidTalk – and through analytic memo writing.

Ethnographic methods are particularly well suited to examine how staff navigate the institutional movement towards non-punitiveness. As a part of this shift, states have adopted accountability metrics to assess schools’ use of exclusionary discipline, with lower rates receiving more favorable scores (California Department of Education 2022). Social theories of reactivity would anticipate school actors altering their behavior to perform favorably on these public metrics (Espeland and Sauder 2007). This would limit the utility of administrative data to capturing only instances when an official consequence, such as a suspension or expulsion, was issued. Ethnographic data are able to capture rich observation about how a child behaves, how adults behave in response, how these behaviors are perceived, the context in which such actions take place, the personal and relational histories of the individuals involved, and debates or disagreements that precede the officially recorded outcome. In particular, my dual observations of the “frontstage” day-to-day school practice and “backstage” conversations among staff yielded fruitful insight into what happened and how school staff perceive, process, respond to, and categorize events.

FINDINGS

How Expulsions Happen

Boundary managers at Northwest High balance resource brokering with their finite time, money, and emotional reserves by selectively excluding students who are perceived as a burden. Yet only two formal expulsions appear in NWHS’s official data for the years prior to and during my fieldwork. I asked Assistant Principal Ms. Roberts – an energetic, tenderhearted middle-aged Latina woman – about expulsions while we chatted in the hallway. She acknowledged the rarity of *de jure* expulsions at NWHS. “Usually,” she explained, “we don’t do formal expulsions.” A more typical response, she told me, is “when they can’t keep coming to our school, but we send them somewhere else in the district.” As Ms. Roberts described, a formal expulsion is not the only way for administrators to negotiate the boundaries of their institution and force students out. I observed boundary managers at NWHS rely on four primary strategies of informal removal.

Two of the strategies for accomplishing these *de facto* expulsions – coerced transfer and independent studies – were applied to a variety of infractions. Coerced transfers occurred when a student was forced to change schools. Youth who were coercively transferred were relocated to another physical school campus; in contrast, students assigned to independent studies were obligated to complete their schooling online, without face-to-face interaction with educators or other students. During our interview, the long-tenured, unflappable principal of NWHS, Ms. Zhao, recited her typical script to families in these instances: “If you don’t take this... transfer, we’re going to move for expulsion if you have one more thing. So, you can either move schools now... or can you keep it together and not do anything because we’ll just hold a meeting and you will be expelled. There won’t be any pleading or saying like one more chance.” Although framed as a choice, the two options – change schools or be expelled – offer families limited control over their child’s educational trajectory. The transfer is, in essence, a coerced choice that results in a student being forcibly removed from their school.

The other two strategies of accomplishing *de facto* expulsions are more specific, resting on a set of conditions that could lead to a forcible removal due to technical rule violation. In the third method, staff selectively weaponize geographic boundaries to remove burdensome students. When a family relocates outside of the area zoned for NWHS – often somewhere with a lower cost of living – their student should transfer to the new school. However, many continue attending NWHS and do not report their move. Individual school actors are frequently aware of students who no longer reside within the
boundaries and can, at their discretion, activate this knowledge to force the student out. The fourth method – withdrawal – can occur if a student is absent for ten consecutive school days. After repeatedly hearing about withdrawals in administrative meetings, I asked Ms. Roberts about them. “You can take them off the lists,” she shared, explaining that these students are removed from course rosters and unenrolled. “What happens to them?” I asked. She shrugged, “They’re just not in school anymore.” While withdrawn students can re-enroll, they and their families must re-register at the district office to get back into classes.3

Importantly, not all potential expulsions resulted in removal. Many times, school actors turned a blind eye to administrative rule violations. Staff did not notify officials each time they knew a student lived outside official school boundaries. Nor were all students with ten consecutive absences withdrawn. Moreover, while some students were pushed out for behavioral violations (such as fighting or drug use), others committing similar infractions remained at NWHS.

When Expulsions Happen

School as resource broker.

The role of the school in connecting students and families to resources is crucial to understanding when administrators pursue expulsion. Staff at NWHS devote substantial energy to serving as resource brokers for their students. This brokering is most apparent at KidTALK meetings. Staff discuss a sweeping array of community resources as they debate how to intervene with struggling students – food pantries, legal aid, rent assistance, therapy services, programs to ease internet access, a mobile health clinic, LGBTQ+ support organizations, parent support groups – and refer to each with off-the-cuff familiarity.

This brokering requires extensive input of school resources, particularly by placing demands on staff time and energy. Counselors, therapists, and administrators cultivate relationships with local nonprofits to remain informed of their programs so they can facilitate connections between students, families, and relevant organizations. School staff also nurture organizational ties to for-profit companies to broker resources. In early 2021, Ms. Roberts attended weekly meetings with Comcast representatives about a reduced-price internet program, where she had to actively negotiate logistical details to ensure the program could work for their families. Brokering thus extends beyond the confines of school. Staff not only connect students to resources while they are on campus, but channel resources directly into families’ homes. In the fall of 2020, Ms. Roberts and Mr. Mendoza – the gentle, reflective dean with a surprising penchant for heavy metal – spent at least one afternoon each week visiting students at home to conduct this brokering, including helping students with their internet hotspots and delivering paperwork necessary for students to become eligible for state aid. Visits from school staff also extend beyond education-related matters, including welfare checks or Principal Zhao’s Costco grocery deliveries.

Importantly, school actors’ ability to serve as a resource broker is not unlimited. As the family engagement coordinator at NWHS, Ms. Popov’s primary role is to serve as a conduit between students, families, and the school. In one administrative meeting, Ms. Popov could hardly contain her frustration as she described her brokering-related burnout:

Parents call me, “I need to pay my rent, I need money.” I say, “I sent you the list, the resources”... I believe also, I’m becoming a social worker without the title. And it’s so much responsibility. I’m listening to these family dramas for hours... I’m worn out.

While Ms. Roberts validated Ms. Popov’s frustration, she emphasized that resource brokering is an explicit part of their role as school staff: “It’s our job to guide [families] to the resources.” Nevertheless, brokering can become exhausting enough that staff – even Ms. Roberts – seek to mitigate the burden. Just two weeks later, Ms. Roberts described this scenario at the start of another administrative meeting: “We have our resources and at some point we have spent them and the student is still not

3 A period of absence resulting in a withdrawal isn’t the same as dropping out. Counselor Ms. Sandoval shared during one KidTALK meeting that a student who was withdrawn had reached out to her via her student-facing Instagram account. “Where is my schedule?” she recalled him asking, seemingly confused why he didn’t receive a second semester schedule of courses. Although he had been withdrawn, this student was both confused about his status and sought affiliation with the school.
doing what we want them to be doing." A student’s membership is at risk when boundary managers perceive brokering for them as unduly burdensome. Pursuing expulsion can relieve this burden.

**Becoming a burden (or not).**

Boundary managers perceive a student as a burden when two criteria are met: (1) school actors expend a large amount of resources on that student; and (2) staff perceive the student (or their family) to be “improperly” responding to these brokering efforts (**Figure 1, Quadrant 4**). I often observed NWHS staff debate these conditions during KidTalk. One day, the team brainstormed potential responses to Diego’s recent absences. Ms. Roberts recalled that Diego’s name was on the list of students with over ten consecutive days of absences who were eligible for withdrawal. As the team attempted to settle on an intervention, one of the school therapists expressed hesitation about conducting a home visit. Ms. Roberts responded, “I’m going to have to do something,” His counselor, Ms. Sandoval, replied:

> I think we’re going to have to [discuss] if he’s something we’re going to exhaust our resources and efforts on. Or if – honestly, I’m kind of at the end with Diego. I don’t really have any more energy to give him, which sounds terrible, but he hasn’t been present. We’ve tried to reach out. So at this point, if we commence this whole reaching out again and giving him services, we just need to be ready to start this whole [withdrawal] process over again from step 1.

To Ms. Sandoval, Diego had become a burden. She was ready to initiate the *de facto* expulsion and thus expressed hesitancy about outreach efforts, since one day of attendance would reset Diego’s record and leave the school no mechanism for removal. Ms. Roberts, not quite at this breaking point herself, suggested they give Diego one final opportunity: “I think once we do the home visit, after like a week of [non-]attendance, I’m going to email the district that this is a no show, these are all the things we’ve done.”

Since he remained enrolled for one last effort, the team planned their next steps. During this discussion, the extensive, unrequited resource brokering that predated Ms. Sandoval’s frustration became evident. When Ms. Roberts described the lack of food at Diego’s home, the team frustratedly recalled their previous failed efforts to convince Diego’s mother to participate in the school’s food pantry. Ms. Roberts then brought up their efforts to get Diego into therapy: “After all the attempts at trying to get them with an outside resource for therapy, she [Diego’s mom] would never take him.” School actors attempted to broker services for Diego’s material and emotional needs. They felt frustrated with Diego’s and his mother’s perceived lack of response to their efforts, leading them to seek withdrawal. Ultimately, school staff marked Diego as a “no show” and he did not graduate from any district school.

Many cases of extended absences do not end in withdrawal, however. Students with frequent absences were protected from this means of *de facto* expulsion so long as they were not perceived to fall in Quadrant 4. For example, Javier had accumulated absences. Additionally, no one from his family had come to school to pick up a Chromebook aimed at alleviating his difficulties connecting to virtual learning. During KidTalk, Ms. Popov described Javier’s family as “a kid who doesn’t want to go to school and a father who knows.” But a school therapist responded that the therapist team has met with Javier only twice, and they don’t max out until after having 12 sessions per student. Thus, even though Javier and his father were not perceived as responding appropriately to the school’s brokering efforts, there were still untapped resources available to extend to him (Quadrant 3). The possibility of withdrawal was not discussed. Instead, the team decided that Ms. Roberts would reach out to Javier’s father again about the Chromebook. If he still did not pick it up, she would bring it to their house.

Like Javier’s, Calvin’s technical rule violation did not translate into a forced removal. Calvin’s mother had recently regained custody of him before she suddenly passed away. Calvin’s counselor, Ms. Resnick, told the KidTalk team that she suspected Calvin now resided outside the district boundaries: “If he’s living with dad, he’s now out of district or he’d have to apply for an inter-district transfer [to keep attending NWHS].” Nonetheless, she thought they should offer Calvin school-based therapy. “His family – they’re all really responsive,” she assured the team. As administrators scrolled through Calvin’s long list of contacts, I noticed that Calvin’s foster mom was still listed as his education rights
holder and resided within the geographic boundaries of NWHS. The team discussed potential responses to Ms. Resnick's suspicions:

Ms. Ocampo: I don't know if they're just using her [foster mom's] address just so he can remain in the district?
Ms. Resnick: I think so. Dad used to live in [city of NWHS] but he lost his housing last year. I don't know if it's best to just leave what's in [the student information system] for now, and just "don't ask, don't tell" for now?
Mr. Watson: That sounds good for now. And if it's changing down the road. I think it's ok to leave it for now.

Mr. Watson's reaction to the suggestion of “don’t ask don’t tell” illustrates the potential for fluidity between quadrants. Mr. Watson approved of Ms. Resnick’s idea “for now.” In response, Ms. Resnick doubled down on her assertion that Calvin’s family would respond positively to their brokering efforts: “The extended family is very supportive and will probably take any resources we offer.” Calvin was perceived in Quadrant 1. Although they presumed that Calvin now lived out of the district, staff at NWHS did not intend to activate boundaries to push Calvin out because they anticipated that his family would properly uptake resources.

Diego, Javier, and Calvin were all technically eligible for removal from NWHS, but NWHS staff pushed only Diego out because only he was perceived to be a burden. The reverse can also happen; a student may be perceived to be a burden but with no administrative violation that could be activated to force them out. In these cases, administrators may take advantage of any behavioral violations to push for an expulsion. Differences in perceived quadrant explains why some students face exclusion for relatively common infractions like fighting or having drugs on campus while others do not.

Julio’s fight initiated his forcible removal. Julio had arrived in the United States as an unaccompanied minor and began attending NWHS. Mid-year, he was placed in a foster home 30 miles away. Although typically this move would require transferring schools, Julio – as a foster youth – was legally entitled to continue at NWHS. Julio’s choice to stay required additional resource brokering, since the district was then obligated to provide individualized transportation for the lengthy commute. The expense of his transportation reliably came up each time boundary managers discussed Julio. For instance, I saw him in the office and asked Mr. Mendoza why Julio was there. Although Mr. Mendoza later revealed that Julio had been in a fight, he first told me that Julio was in foster care in [Far Away City] and they must arrange special transportation for him. The resources expended on Julio were more salient than the specific behavior landing him in the office. Further, Julio had stopped reliably showing up for his rides. Later on the day of Julio’s fight, while waiting for that evening’s school board meeting to start, I observed Principal Zhao talking with district administrator Mr. Rossi. She frustratedly informed Mr. Rossi that Julio was skipping his rides. Mr. Rossi responded, “This cannot continue. He needs to go to [Far Away City] schools. It’s expensive, and it’s 2.5 hours roundtrip.” Principal Zhao and Mr. Rossi thought Julio was not taking proper advantage of the expensive services they provided and were frustrated at his unreliable uptake. Their solution was for Julio to leave NWHS.

Although Julio had official permission to transcend district borders, school staff were nonetheless able to force him out. Despite legal protections, foster youths’ right to attend their original school can be waived upon agreement from affected parties (California Education Code 48853.5). In practice, Mr. Rossi’s decision that Julio “needs to go” appeared relatively unilateral. Months later, I asked Ms. Roberts whether Julio was expelled. Like other administrators, she quickly reminded me of the cost of Julio’s transportation: “The district was paying to take him back and forth, but he didn’t show up, and he was getting in lots of trouble.” She then described the meeting with “all of Julio’s advocates,” where it was decided that he would no longer attend NWHS: “We did make a pro/con list and the cons definitely outweighed the pros.” I asked whether the list was for Julio or for the school. She replied, as if it was obvious, “For everybody! We all decided it was best for him to go to [Far Away City].” While Ms. Roberts framed this decision as a consensus, it is unclear whether Julio had any tangible say, especially because he had previously chosen to stay at NWHS. By waiving Julio’s right to remain at NWHS and forcibly removing him, the burden of brokering transportation for Julio was alleviated.
In contrast, students in Quadrants 1, 2, and 3 who got into fights remained at NWHS. Staff perceived Giles to be in Quadrant 1, and he remained an NWHS student despite multiple fights and frequent absences. Giles’ family received substantial resource brokering from the school. Their living arrangements rendered his family ineligible for the Comcast program, so Ms. Roberts devised other methods to help Giles connect to online schooling. Yet school actors perceived that Giles responded appropriately to their brokering efforts, so they did not seek removal for his infractions. Ms. Roberts described Giles during KidTalk as “a student who has been putting in effort,” sharing gleefully that this year “He’s not getting in fights anymore! It’s huge!” Ms. Roberts viewed their frequent meetings as sufficient to get Giles back on track: “I think he needs a restart every so often... sometimes we all need a restart or a reminder.” Despite needing frequent intervention, accumulating absences, and getting in fights, Ms. Roberts perceived Giles as responsive to her efforts and was willing to continue dispensing reminders and brokering resources to keep Giles at NWHS.

Variation in perceived burden.

Based on the two-dimensional framework, boundary managers are likely to disagree about exclusion when they hold different perceptions about whether a student is a burden. I observed as administrators arrived at diverging opinions about how to respond when they found an uncharged Taser and doodles they read as gang-related in Danny’s backpack. Principal Zhao and Dean Mendoza originally assigned Danny a three-day suspension. Then Ms. Roberts arrived in the office. Seeing the Taser, she quickly escalated the situation to district administrators and three police officers arrived, followed shortly by Danny’s sobbing mother. Danny knelt in front of his mother, hands cuffed behind his back, as they exchanged tearful words before he was arrested. After his release from juvenile hall, he and his mother were called to a meeting at the district office where Danny was told that he could not return to NWHS and would attend a different high school in the district. When I interviewed Mr. Mendoza a few months later, he told me it had not occurred to him to call the police: “I actually didn’t think of calling the authorities... That had never even crossed my mind.” Had Ms. Roberts not arrived, the incident would likely have been resolved after Danny’s three-day suspension and he would have remained at NWHS.

The differences in Mr. Mendoza’s and Ms. Roberts’ disciplinary responses can be explained by their differing perceptions about whether brokering for Danny was a burden. Both administrators had invested substantial time and energy into working with Danny and connecting him to resources. Yet, they held different perceptions of Danny’s response. Ms. Roberts had worked with Danny and his family for multiple years. As she and I walked across campus immediately following Danny’s arrest, she shared: “I feel betrayed. I’ve put so much blood, sweat, and tears into this kid since his freshman year.” She continued, describing that what she perceived as immigration-related trauma was beyond her bandwidth: “It’s more than we can deal with.” Ms. Roberts felt as if her personal resources and the resources of the school had been depleted, and yet she still perceived Danny to be making poor decisions. In contrast, Mr. Mendoza – a newer staff member who had recently begun working with Danny – did not feel similarly betrayed. Instead, he felt that his efforts were relatively well received by Danny and his mother. Even months later, he maintained that he could have helped Danny. He recalled during our interview, “I was really working with him trying to help him and he was making some progress.” Mr. Mendoza placed Danny in Quadrant 1: he extended many resources, but perceived Danny to be responding (albeit slowly) in positive directions. For Ms. Roberts, Danny fell into Quadrant 4 and she initiated the disciplinary actions that led to his removal from NWHS. I later asked Mr. Mendoza what he would have done if he were in charge: “I wouldn’t have transferred him. I would have given him a chance to stay.”

Xiomara’s story is another example of variation in perceived burden. In this case, though, the variation was not among boundary managers but between boundary managers and non-boundary managers. Although teachers do not have ultimate power over institutional boundaries as administrators do, their perspectives can influence students’ outcomes. Teachers exercise discretion when deciding which classroom matters to elevate and bring to boundary managers’ attention. Teachers refer students to KidTalk, where boundary managers coordinate resource brokering. In Xiomara’s unusual case, teachers’ advocacy countered boundary managers’ forced removal. Administrators had used their boundary management capabilities to remove Xiomara through withdrawal. After noticing she
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was no longer on their rosters, teachers actively worked to get her re-enrolled. Teachers’ and administrators’ varying perceptions of Xiomara’s response to their brokering efforts led them to different ideas about whether Xiomara should remain at NWHS.

Once Xiomara was re-enrolled, she was again referred to KidTalk. By this time, English Language Development teachers were invited to join select KidTalk meetings. ELD teacher Ms. Osoguera provided context about Xiomara’s referral: “She was kicked off enrollment for absences. And luckily [another ELD teacher] was like ‘Where’s Xiomara? Did she move?’ And we got her back on, I don’t know, week 2, week 3? So we got her. But she missed a week or two of school.” Ms. Osoguera’s initial description of Xiomara getting “kicked off enrollment” used passive voice, avoiding framing the removal as intentional. As revealed earlier, however, students who accumulated absences were not automatically removed. School boundary managers submitted the necessary documentation to initiate withdrawal only for students with accumulated absences whom they perceived in Quadrant 4. While I did not observe the specific decisions that led to Xiomara’s withdrawal, it is unlikely her withdrawal was accidental.

A stark discrepancy between how teachers and administrators perceived Xiomara soon emerged. Revealing administrators’ poor perceptions of Xiomara and her mother’s responses to their efforts, Ms. Sandoval reminded Ms. Roberts, “Xiomara is the one who has a bad attitude, talks back to you. She was bullying last year. We asked mom for recommendations [about working with Xiomara] and mom told us that’s not her responsibility.” Teacher Ms. Ronin interjected, offering an alternative, more positive, perspective on Xiomara: “When she comes, she does ask questions. She tries harder than most kids when she comes, but it’s so infrequent.” Ms. Ronin notes that Xiomara is perhaps even more responsive than many of her peers when she is present, contesting boundary managers’ perceptions that Xiomara does not respond properly to staff efforts. Another teacher echoed Ms. Ronin’s sentiment, noting that Xiomara had actively sought out his office hours. A third teacher sang Xiomara’s praises in the Zoom chat box. Ms. Sandoval reminded the team that Xiomara had been resistant to engaging with the school’s therapy services. As the highest-ranking member in this meeting, Ms. Roberts suggested she complete a home visit and have Xiomara’s mom sign an attendance contract, stipulating that continued non-attendance would result in a formal meeting at the district office. Such a contract signals only a limited willingness on the part of administrators to continue brokering resources for Xiomara; if she and her family are not viewed as responding properly, they have cause — as spelled out in the contract — to initiate a meeting that might end in removal (again).

Ms. Roberts closed by directly addressing the discrepancy between teachers’ and the original KidTalk teams’ perspectives on Xiomara: “It sounds like it isn’t attitude in your classes – sounds like she’s very sweet with you all, except maybe not us.” Ms. Roberts asked the group what they thought of the next steps: “What does the team feel? It sounds like you want to have her in your classes?” Ms. Osoguera affirmed. Xiomara’s teachers, who perceived her responses positively, used narratives of Xiomara’s effort to convince boundary managers to continue brokering for her. Xiomara was able to return to NWHS because of the specific way she had been forced out. Students who were withdrawn were technically eligible to re-enroll so long as they went to the district office and began the enrollment process from scratch. Teachers could not re-enroll students directly, but they could reach out to withdrawn students and guide them through the enrollment process. Most students who were forced out of NWHS never returned. In the rare cases when they did, such as in Xiomara’s, it was the result of staff advocating for that specific child.

The opportunity costs of discipline.

For students who require many resources from the school (Quadrants 1 and 4), boundary managers’ perceptions of their response to brokering efforts distinguishes students who are at risk of exclusion from those who are not. In contrast, staff perceptions have little influence on disciplinary outcomes for students in Quadrants 2 and 3. Students who require few resources from the school are not perceived as burdens and thus not at risk of exclusion, regardless of their response to brokering efforts. Kevin, a senior who frequently attended school intoxicated, was perceived to fall in Quadrant 4 and was forced out through independent studies. Like Kevin, a group of students who nicknamed themselves the “Won Ton Squad” were involved with substances at school. Administrators found drugs in the Won Ton Squad’s belongings, and the students participated in a physical fight and a “cheating
scandal." Nevertheless, the Won Ton Squad largely escaped exclusionary consequences because they were not perceived as a burden. Academically high-performing students from financially secure families, they required little brokering from the school. Thus, despite their substance use (and other concerns), the students of the Won Ton Squad remained at NWHS. Students from affluent families rarely require extensive resource brokering from the school and thus fall into Quadrants 2 or 3, protected from forced removal because they are unlikely to be perceived as a burden.

In addition to the protection that requiring few resources from the school provides, the opportunity cost of pursuing discipline for affluent students can be high. Just like resource brokering, pursuing punishment may require substantial time and emotional labor. School administrators’ early attempts to enact punishment for the Won Ton Squad indicated that disciplining might exhaust more resources than letting the incidents go without consequence. For instance, the students had originally been prohibited from participating in senior celebratory activities. When I interviewed Ms. Larkin, a straight-talking science teacher, she frustratedly explained that the school’s consequence for the Won Ton Squad had been overturned when their parents appealed to the school board. Ms. Larkin suspected that the outcome would have been different for less privileged students: “You’re basically saying if you have parents who can go to the school board, you can get whatever you want.”

When affluent students’ parents push back on disciplinary consequences, administrators prepare themselves for a potential lawsuit. During our interview, Assistant Principal Mr. Watson shared, “It [the threat of litigation] might come from a place of privilege, like if the family has a lawyer that they don’t have to pay for and it’s just their next-door neighbor or their uncle.” Even a potential threat of litigation taxes school staff’s resources. Mr. Watson described carefully documenting cases and alerting his supervisors when he perceived that parents might litigate, because, in his last job, parents would “have a lawyer down in the office by noon” in response to consequences he assigned. “One percent of the kids were taking up 99 percent of my time, dealing with parents and lawyers,” he lamented. Importantly, the opportunity cost of this labor is high, because the more time and energy administrators devote to meeting with one another, parents, and sometimes lawyers about disciplinary matters, the less is available to broker resources for students with greater material needs. When boundary managers anticipate litigation, they may see disciplining as a greater burden than letting an incident go with few consequences. Since school staff anticipate litigation from affluent parents, materially advantaged students are thus further protected from forced removal.

Angering affluent parents can also negatively affect boundary managers’ ability to serve as resource brokers for the school’s less advantaged students. Ms. Larkin revealed the role of finances when I asked her what parents who push back against school consequences typically do. “You know, sometimes they’re big donors in the foundation.” NWHS’s non-profit foundation raises hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, from which it pays the salaries of support staff, purchases supplies, and helps fund the school’s food bank. Keeping affluent parents happy – and thus donating – increases the school’s supply of financial and material resources. Just as fear of litigation means the path of least resistance is sometimes to let a disciplinary infraction go, a fear of withdrawn funds also means that the most burden-alleviating action may be to keep students of affluent families at NWHS. Not only do these students often require low resources themselves, but their parents’ financial contributions ease boundary managers’ ability to resource broker for others.

**DISCUSSION**

I show that school actors navigate the burdens of resource brokering by selectively activating their ability to redraw the boundaries of the institution. My findings constitute an empirical example of how state institutions “redistribute the poor” to resolve the challenges of limited budgets and progressive legal demands (Lara-Millán 2021). Seim describes the similar practice of “burden shuffling,” when constrained workers redistribute responsibility for undesirable clients to other institutions (2020). School expulsions allow staff to shuffle the burden of brokering for a given student elsewhere. Importantly, because the increased demands on institutions to broker resources are expressly tied to a desire to reduce punitive outcomes, these forced removals are more likely to occur via informal rather than formal methods, resulting in “the administrative disappearing of social suffering” (Lara-Millán 2021). During the hallway conversation described above, I asked Ms. Roberts why they avoided
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formal expulsions. She explained: “because of the numbers. The board doesn’t want the numbers. If it’s [informal], it doesn’t count on the district’s numbers.”

This preference for informal expulsions likely extends beyond NWHS: in 2018–19, the vast majority of schools in California (85%) did not report a single expulsion (California Department of Education 2021). Yet, a rhetorical commitment to non-punitiveness – and low counts of expulsions in formal data – does not mean that students are not involuntarily pushed out of their schools. Instead, the existence of de facto expulsions means our data undercount the true extent to which students are excluded from public education. This exclusion – informal or formal – can inflict lasting harm. For instance, I interviewed Danny eight months after his coerced transfer. When I asked how his new school was going, he replied, “It’s been really hard for me.” He reminded me of his long-term goals – to graduate high school, attend college, and become an ethnic studies teacher – but didn’t mince words as he shared how his expulsion harmed the way others view him and his self-image: “They ruined my whole—well, not my whole life, but they ruined, like, part of my life... cause everyone looks at me like... he’s a bad guy, you know. He’s got no future. Even my family, they think the same.... So that just makes me think that... I’m not gonna do anything good in my life.”

My findings also suggest that a burden on the role of school-as-resource-broker is one mechanism that sustains discipline inequality in settings motivated to reduce their use of exclusionary punishment. Since expulsions are more likely to happen when resource brokering becomes burdensome, students who depend on the school for resources – often students from lower-income backgrounds – are at higher risk of exclusion. Most students pushed out of NWHS held multiple socially marginalized identities, as low-income, children of color, recent immigrants, Spanish-speakers, and/or students with disabilities. Despite NWHS administrators’ vocal concern about disparities in and harms of exclusionary discipline, awareness did not alter the daily constraints of finite money, time, and emotional bandwidth. During our conversation just after Danny was arrested, Ms. Roberts’ internal strife about her decision to escalate matters was apparent. “This perpetuates stuff,” she told me remorsefully, referring to the proverbial school-to-prison pipeline. Yet, her awareness and concern alone were not enough for Danny to avoid expulsion. The power to reveal this disconnect between what people say and what they do is a unique strength of ethnographic methods (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). In this case, that gap (educators’ continued use of exclusionary discipline despite commitments to move away from harsh punishment) is largely attributable to the structural condition of finite resources.

If the ability of the school to act as resource broker is one mechanism maintaining inequalities in school discipline, then equity-promoting solutions would either (1) reduce the number of students who are perceived to fall in Quadrant 4 and are thus at risk of removal; or (2) sever the link between this 2x2 framework and punishment altogether, so that the quadrant in which a student is perceived has no relationship to their ability to remain at their school. Reducing the number of students who are perceived to fall in Quadrant 4 could happen by shifting students vertically or horizontally. A shift vertically would require fewer school adults to perceive students as responding improperly to their brokering efforts. At NWHS, adults largely decided which resources might benefit students, leaving youth little say over what programs or services they were expected to participate in. Bolstering student and family agency in the resource brokering process might increase the number of students whom adults perceive to be responding “properly,” thus reducing the number of students in the lower two quadrants. A shift horizontally would mean that fewer students depend on the school for access to basic goods and services. This would require a more robust social infrastructure where families can fulfill basic needs outside of educational institutions. Policy changes might ease families’ access to food through sources other than school (e.g., expanding SNAP benefits), improve health insurance coverage for undocumented children and teenagers, or create more opportunities for young people to pursue mental health care in their communities. If supports were readily and easily available outside of schools, then fewer students would fall in the right-hand quadrants.

We might also re-allocate the task of resource brokering to school-based adults who are not boundary managers. This would weaken the relationship between resource brokering and punishment because fewer staff with the power to expel would perceive youth (and families) as falling into Quadrant 4. Northwest High, while highly resourced among American public schools, did not have a social worker on staff throughout my fieldwork. Most of the resource brokering was conducted by staff with other primary duties: assistant principals, academic counselors, and therapists. The
family engagement coordinator, Ms. Popov, was the only staff member whose primary role was resource brokering. This task was overwhelming for a single person in a school of 2,000 students, especially as COVID-19 illuminated long-standing social inequities. Ms. Popov transitioned out of her role as family engagement coordinator after the 2020–2021 year, leaving NWHS with neither a dedicated social worker nor a single staff member primarily tasked with resource brokering. Institutions where street-level bureaucrats serve as resource brokers should formally recognize and support this role by compensating full-time positions dedicated to resource brokering. Removing this duty from those who also control institutional boundaries, such as assistant principals, will allow boundary managers to focus on their other tasks and rely less on exclusion to alleviate their role as resource broker.

By observing boundary managers debate, discuss, and resolve incidents, my work responds to calls for studies of the “backstage” decision-making processes of interdisciplinary institutional teams (Castellano 2011:964). However, the analytic focus on adults’ sense-making processes provides limited space for those most affected by staff decisions – the young people at the heart of my data – to make sense of their own experiences. Nonetheless, I decided not to systematically seek participation from students I heard discussed during KidTalk. The harm I might cause by reaching out to these students – many of whom were concurrently undergoing acutely stressful life events and were likely unaware of being discussed during private meetings – outweighed the benefits their first-hand experiences would bring. Danny is the only student in this paper that I interviewed, as he was enthusiastic to participate prior to his arrest and expulsion. When I reached out a few months later, he was eager for his story to be shared. Future work should center the lived experiences of young people who have experienced school expulsion.

Furthermore, I do not know whether students who avoided punishment at school (e.g., the Won Ton Squad) received consequences outside of school. Affluent families may enact greater social control for their children within the private sphere of their home while the public school governs more leniently. Indeed, NWHS staff default to the looser governance strategy of “tolerant containment” (Gong 2019), allowing students leeway as they balance the desire to mitigate disturbance with their limited resources. This is evident in the lack of exclusion for students perceived in Quadrants 1, 2, and 3. Future work should explore the interplay between school and family disciplinary responses to children’s infractions at school.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers key insights for scholars of education, punishment, and public governance. Despite being the most severe of all school-based consequences, surprisingly little work has examined expulsions. I explain how and why schools expel students, suggesting that many disciplinary proceedings are not based on single, isolated incidents, but handled according to a broader context and history of the relationships between student, family, and staff. Furthermore, my findings highlight the importance of analyzing informal methods of discipline and exclusion alongside formal methods, especially in institutions embracing the rhetoric of non-punitiveness. I contribute to academic and policy discussions about the community schools model, in which educational institutions become community hubs with a wide array of resources. Similar discussions exist in healthcare, as medical institutions seek to integrate services within their institutions (e.g., NYC Health+Hospitals Press Office 2018). While there are benefits to centrally locating resources within a single institution, this also raises the stakes of membership in that institution. Analyses of community hub models for schooling, healthcare, or other social services must consider access to these hubs: the more brokering occurs within a single institution, the more power that institution’s boundary managers hold to bar constituents from a wide array of resources. Finally, I advance the literatures on governance and non-punitive social control by detailing a framework for who becomes seen as a burden to be shuffled. Future research should examine how boundary managers across a variety of public institutions selectively activate their ability to enroll or remove constituents and whether, as in schools, this boundary work is centrally tied to the dynamic and interactional nature of resource brokering.


