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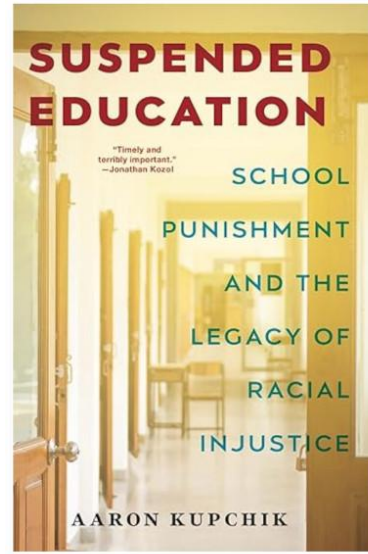
**Kupchik, A. (2025). *Suspended education: School punishment and the legacy of racial injustice*. New York University Press.**

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In *Suspended Education: School Punishment and the Legacy of Racial Injustice*, Aaron Kupchik, professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware, asks why Black students are disproportionately punished in school and are more likely to be suspended compared to white students. Specifically, Kupchik examines how and when suspensions became a normative response to real and perceived student misbehavior. Using a structural race perspective and historical data from two case studies (New Castle County, Delaware, and Boston, MA), Kupchik shows that suspensions were infrequently used before school desegregation but increased following the implementation of school desegregation policies in the 1970s as a legal way to exclude unwanted Black students from previously predominantly white schools. In the decades following desegregation, suspensions became institutionalized as a taken-for-granted response to student misbehavior.



**Aaron Kupchik**

Kupchik grounds his analysis in a structural race perspective, using historical case studies and empirical data analysis. He argues that a structural perspective is helpful because it can explain how schools today are shaped by the legacy of historical racial inequity in education and why inequities persist despite progress after schools desegregated. As Kupchik defines it, a structural race perspective focuses on how laws, policies, and institutions, such as schools, are structured in ways that maintain inequality, and how the current state of unequal education is informed by historical disparities. It predicts that policy change is enacted in ways that maintain racial inequality because a racial hierarchy is baked into institutions like schools.

A structural race perspective acknowledges the role of individual agency, such as how individual teachers might be biased in how they evaluate or

punish students. But it focuses primarily on the social systems in which these individuals work, and how widely experienced social norms and institutional processes teach and can encourage bias. (p. 16)

In the introductory chapter, Kupchik articulates a theoretical basis for his central claim that school punishment and racial segregation are closely related. Building on key frameworks from other scholars, he critiques other explanations, such as implicit bias and racial threat theory, as well as research that looks to broader criminal justice, economic, and historical trends. He argues that while useful, these approaches do not explain why schools punish students as they do or how or why punitive school punishment emerged when it did and became a common form of punishment for student misbehavior. Nor do they, Kupchik argues, sufficiently explain racial disproportionalities, that is, why the increase in school punishment has not affected all students equally. Drawing on other work on structural racism, Bonilla-Silva's theory of racialized social systems, and critical race theory, Kupchik focuses on how schools today are shaped by the legacy of historical racial inequity in education and, using neo-institutional theory, why suspensions persist decades after schools desegregated.

### **Nationwide Data: Historical Legacy of Suspension**

Kupchik begins by establishing an historical link between resistance to desegregation and the emergence of suspension as a contemporary school punishment. He employs a rich collection of national data, including data on public schools and school districts from the federal Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), U.S. Census data on racial/ethnic composition of communities and school districts, and the American Communities Project at Brown University for data on desegregation court cases and federal Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) actions related to school desegregation. Kupchik then shows that school suspensions as a response to student misbehavior were not widely used before school desegregation. Before the 1960s, schools relied on corporal punishment, shaming, or other in-school punishments. For a variety of reasons, these practices began to fall out of favor in the 1960s, but rather than adopting other options, schools turned to suspensions.

National data, as well as data from both historical case study sites, show that an infrequently used punishment—suspensions—rose immediately after desegregation, especially for black students. Specifically, the introduction of Black students to previously all-white schools resulted in more school punishment as well as larger racial gaps in more integrated schools. As Kupchik argues:

After schools across the US were forced to desegregate, they found new ways to exclude Black students with the “discovery” of exclusionary school punishment. The law required that schools must accept Black students, but it allowed schools to kick them out via suspension, which is exactly what started to occur. (pp. 21-22)

Kupchik dates this shift toward suspension as a common form of school punishment to the 1960s and 1970s. While the *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954, its vagueness on when to desegregate left it to the states and school districts

to determine how and when to desegregate. Most segregated schools did not begin to desegregate until the late 1960s or early to mid-1970s.

He links the contemporary use of suspensions to a legacy of resistance to desegregation in two ways. First, schools in districts that had more desegregation-related court cases or HEW actions in the past have significantly higher rates of suspensions today, especially for Black students. Second, the use of suspension was not just an immediate response to desegregation, but a practice that persisted. It became more common in the 1990s with the introduction of zero-tolerance policies, and its growth was particularly felt in schools serving Black students. Kupchik documents a trend showing that schools with larger concentrations of Black students maintain higher school suspension rates today. He also documents how policies originally used to exclude Black students during desegregation still disproportionately impact Black students and are not applied to all students equally.

### **Case Studies: The History of Segregation and Racial Oppression**

The two case studies are used to explain how the link between resistance to desegregation and contemporary school punishment came about. Case study data included archival reports, records, news articles, and personal records and papers of individuals involved at the time. In addition, when possible, Kupchik interviewed individuals who were active participants at the time.

The case studies illustrate how each state—Delaware and Massachusetts—navigated the changes and disruptions as schools were forced to integrate. Delaware was a border South State where slavery was legal, and Massachusetts was a northern, abolitionist, liberal state. Nonetheless, their histories with desegregation and punishment mirror each other. Prior to desegregation, there was a contentious history of segregation and racial oppression in both states, but little evidence that schools used suspensions as punishment. Exclusionary punishments, such as suspensions, were rarely used and even frowned upon. Suspensions in both states rose dramatically after schools were forced to integrate, despite significant differences between the two states. It was a typical response to desegregation. Kupchik argues that the rise in suspensions is what a structural race perspective would predict:

A structural race perspective reminds us that racial inequities are embedded within social institutions, including schools; that they are often unintended but follow a historical pattern of racial hierarchies, and that when institutions like schools change, they tend to do so in ways that benefit or maintain advantages for the white majority. (p. 128)

In other words, the case study data illustrate that suspensions were about race and resistance to desegregation rather than a fair or neutral response to the changes brought about by desegregating schools. To explain the continued use of suspensions over time and the application of a response, albeit unequally, to all students, Kupchik draws from neo-institutional theory. Suspensions became a normalized, taken-for-granted response—and sometimes the only response—to student misbehavior.

## Concluding Chapter & Recommendations

The final chapter recaps the central ideas: why we punish students the way we do and why efforts to reform failed. Since there is clear and consistent evidence that student behavior does not explain why Black students are more likely to be punished than white students, Kupchik argues that we have focused on the wrong problem. Kupchik defines the overuse of suspensions as an institutional problem; it is school policy, not the individual teacher's actions, that constrain teachers' options. Drawing on the work of Baggett and Andrzejewski (2021, p. 140), Kupchik argues that even when schools adopt strategies such as restorative justice, PBIS, or other methods, these evidence-based practices fall short because they either focus on the need for students to change or do not confront how institutionalized racism shapes school policy and practice. Rather than adopting new disciplinary practices or implementing the ones that work better, Kupchik argues for structural changes that address the racial inequities embedded in schools and other social institutions.

His recommendations fall into three broad categories. First, there are ideas for what schools can do to better support teachers, including working with teachers and administrators to understand the history of systematic racial inequality better, and providing incentives for teachers who adapt their teaching strategies to resist systemic inequality. Second, take a structural approach, such as making funding formulas more equitable, hiring more teachers, and increasing average salaries. The last is to adopt policies aimed at reducing racial inequity embedded in social institutions. This could include reparations to reduce systemic inequality or the adoption of statewide policies that reduce racial wealth and opportunity gaps. Kupchik defines reparations as targeted, community-based investments in schools designed to better support Black students, rather than as reparations paid to individuals. These recommendations are aimed at the broader system of racial inequality and boil down to better understanding contemporary racial oppression and inequity and redistributing resources in ways that improve opportunities, especially for Black students. These approaches also recognize that school systems have limits in their capacity to compensate for structural inequities; see Menendian (2025).

As someone who attended public schools before desegregation, I had one of those aha moments while contemplating the data linking suspension rates to desegregation. Then, the worst thing that could happen was to be sent to the principal's office. For shame! The book also forces one to look differently at the data on disproportionality. While highlighting disparities in suspensions is an important tool for policy advocates, so too is viewing suspensions as a way to avoid addressing the underlying issues. *Suspended Education* will be helpful for academics and students, as well as policy advocates and policymakers. However, the use of the term "reparations" in policy advocacy is likely to be a political non-starter.

## References

- Baggett, H. C. & Andrzejewski, C. E. (2021). *The grammar of school discipline: Removal, resistance, and reform in Alabama schools*. Lexington Books.
- Menendian, S. (2025). *Structural racism: The dynamics of opportunity and race in America*. Routledge.

### About the Book Author

**Aaron Kupchik** is a professor of sociology and criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. His research focuses on the policing and punishment of juveniles in schools, courts, and correctional facilities. Kupchik has published six books, including *The Real School Safety Problem: The Long-Term Consequences of Harsh School Punishment* and *Judging Juveniles: Prosecuting Adolescents in Adult and Juvenile Courts*. He is the recipient of the American Society of Criminology's Ruth Shonle Cavan Young Scholar Award, and its Michael Hindelang Book Award, in addition to the American Society of Criminology Division on Corrections and Sentencing New Scholar Award. Kupchik is the former president of the American Society of Criminology's Division on Corrections and Sentencing and is currently an executive counselor for the American Society of Criminology. He is regularly invited to present research on juvenile justice to different audiences, including multiple presentations for committees of the National Academies of Sciences.

### About the Reviewer

**Gail L. Sunderman** is a National Center on Education Policy (NEPC) fellow and research associate with the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. She is co-founder and former director of the Maryland Equity Project at the University of Maryland, a research and policy center focused on access to educational opportunities in Maryland. Prior to joining the University of Maryland, she directed the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center at The George Washington University, where she oversaw the development of the Equity Planning Tool, a research-based instrument designed to assist districts in assessing equity. At the Harvard Civil Rights Project (CRP), she was the lead researcher on a five-year study examining the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In addition to her scholarly work, Sunderman has served as an expert consultant on educational disparities for the U.S. Department of Justice and other organizations. She is a former Fulbright scholar to Afghanistan and received her PhD in political science from the University of Chicago.



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