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# Research Brief

## Disproportional High School Suspension Rates By Race and Ethnicity

**Questions: "What is the pattern of student suspensions when considering race? What about disproportionality between white students and students of color? How might high schools respond?"**

**Findings:**

One of the most consistent—and disturbing—findings in educational research for more than 30 years is that students of color at all grade levels and across the country are suspended at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Dunbar, C. & Villarruel, F. A., 2002; Gordon, R., Piana, L. D., & Keleher, T., 2000; Krezemien, M. P., Leone, P. E., & Achilles, G. M., 2006; Nieto, S., 2004; Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L., 2002). In fact, African American, Latino, and Native American students "are suspended or expelled in numbers vastly disproportionate to those of their white peers" (Gordon, et al., p. 2). An investigation of suspension practices in Seattle, for example, revealed that African American students were more than twice as likely to be suspended than other students (Nieto, 2004). The table below (from Gordon, et al.) provides suspension and expulsion rates by race from several major cities around the country which reveal a similar pattern:

| | African American | White | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Austin, TX** | 18% | 37% | Students Enrolled |
| | 36% | 18% | Suspend/Expulsions |
| **Denver, CO** | 21% | 24% | Students Enrolled |
| | 36% | 16% | Suspend/Expulsions |
| **Durham, NC** | 58% | 36% | Students Enrolled |
| | 79% | 18% | Suspend/Expulsions |
| **Los Angeles, CA** | 14% | 11% | Students Enrolled |
| | 30% | 8% | Suspend/Expulsions |

Studies of the disparity in the treatment of students based on their race or ethnicity have revealed several disturbing trends:

- Although male students of all races have been shown to have higher rates of discipline referrals and suspensions than female students, studies do not provide evidence that African Americans "misbehave at significantly higher rates" than white students or that "racial disparities in school punishment could be explained by higher rates of African American misbehavior" (Skiba, 2002, p. 322, 224);

- Although poor students are also suspended at higher rates than their more affluent peers, "significant racial disparities in school discipline remain even after controlling for socioeconomic status" (Skiba, 2002);

- Disciplinary referral rates by both race and gender are so consistent that they can be rank ordered for likelihood: African American male, white male, African American female, white female (Skiba, 2002);

- Students of color are often punished more severely for the same offense as their white counterparts (Johnson et al., 2001), are more likely to receive corporal punishment (Nieto, 2004), and are less likely to be offered "mild disciplinary alternatives" by school administrators (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 319);

- Students of color are subject to exclusionary practices (sent to the office, suspended, expelled) more often than their white peers, are more likely as a result to fall behind academically, and ultimately more likely to drop out (Gordon, 2000);

- Local and state "zero tolerance" policies established since the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA, 1994) have "deepened the inequity in disciplinary treatment across racial groups" (Krezmien, 2006, p. 223; Skiba, 2002);

- Students of all races interviewed about disparities in disciplinary treatment of their peers based on racial differences report consistently their perceptions that poor and minority students receive differing and inequitable punishments (Skiba, et al, 2002)

- Students of color, especially African American students, recognize these documented disparities in disciplinary treatment, view them as discriminatory and unjust, and often perceive school negatively as a result (Ruck & Wortley, 2002).

**What the research suggests about root causes:**

Disproportionate treatment of students based on race (or class) can certainly be traced to entrenched values and beliefs that have shaped American social systems and institutions. As difficult as it may be for educators to accept, "public education is hardwired—consciously or not—to perpetuate the inequities that children are born into" (Thompson, S., 2007, p. 1). Evidence suggests "a deep pattern of institutional racism" and, more recently because of Zero Tolerance policies, a "special kind of 'racial profiling'" that appears to be occurring consistently across the country (Gordon, et al., p. 1 – 2).

Even when educators recognize the role of institutional racism or personal bias, several other factors should be acknowledged in an attempt to understand the complex and disturbing problem of disproportionality in discipline:

1) The more teachers do not look like the students they teach in terms of race and/or ethnicity, the greater the chance for "faulty conclusions" and misinterpretations in interactions and responses to perceived misbehavior, as teachers' "interpretations may be culturally or class biased (Nieto, 2004, pp. 111 – 112; Gordon et al., 2000);
2) Traditional disciplinary policies, especially at middle and high school, are often developmentally inappropriate, assuming students of this age should "know better," and actually serve to "aggravate the sense of alienation felt by some students" (Nieto, p. 111);
3) In addition to differences in disciplinary treatment, minority students' access to the most engaging and relevant high school curricula and to the best teachers is too often limited through tracking practices that can begin as early as kindergarten.

**What principals can do to address the problem:**

It is important recognize the link between academic and disciplinary equity. Breaking the pattern of both in America's schools is "a matter of will, moral courage, strategic acumen, applied knowledge, and persistent work at every level of the system" (Thompson, 2007, p. 1). Because the problem is systemic, the solution

should be comprehensive, multi-faceted, and strategic. Although some aspects of the problem, for example, the recruitment of greater numbers of minorities into the teaching ranks, will require partnerships with teacher training institutions, principals and teachers can do much to break these patterns. The current emphasis on insuring access for all students to a challenging and relevant curriculum, and the reorganization of high schools into smaller and potentially more personalized learning communities holds promise for reducing disproportionality in discipline based on racial differences in students (Johnson et al., 2001). Below are other strategies and suggestions that may be helpful in constructing a comprehensive plan for equitable disciplinary practices:

- As a faculty, gather, make public, and "wrestle with" student discipline data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (Gordon et al., 2000);
- As a principal, work to insure a school culture that is "challenging, respectful, and a culturally appropriate learning environment" for the diversity of students served (Gordon et al., 2000);
- Become familiar with the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and lobby for the repeal of state or district policies that go far beyond the intentions of this federal policy (Gordon et al., 2000);
- Abolish local zero tolerance and mandatory minimum policies that exacerbate inequitable treatment of students of color, and strip administrators of their authority to work with individual students and families in dealing with discipline cases (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Gordon et al., 2000).
- Replace "punitive and exclusionary [discipline] procedures" that may target certain groups of students with "comprehensive and preventive approaches for maintaining school safety and discipline" (Krezemien, 2006, p. 224) such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support;
- Through the use of data and feedback from students and families, recognize when discipline policies or practices "target" certain groups of students, and the unintended consequences of such policies or practices (Gordon et al., 2000);
- Provide professional development to faculty that helps them understand cultural differences between themselves and their students, and helps them defuse potentially volatile (and sometimes justified) challenges to their authority by students of color (Nieto, 2004; Ruck & Wortley, 2002);
- Democratize the process of developing discipline policies by involving high school students and families that represent the student population in the development of those policies (Nieto, 2004);
- Make positive behaviors expected of all students clear and explicit, do not assume students arrive at high school with the behavioral skills they will need (Nieto, 2004), and make teaching and modeling those behaviors an expectation and norm for all faculty members;
- Eliminate academic tracking to insure that all students have access to a relevant, engaging curriculum which suggests to students that adults envision a positive and successful future for them (Bleyaert, 2007; Gordon et al., 2000);
- To the greatest extent possible, make it a priority to recruit and retain a diverse faculty (Gordon et al., 2000);
- Reach white faculty members who may be reluctant to discuss this difficult issue through book study groups, using such texts as *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom* by Lisa Delpit, or "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* by Beverly Daniel Tatum.

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Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support: http://www.pbis.org/school/default.aspx

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