DIVISION 15 OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION PRESENTS

RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

A RESEARCH BRIEF FOR POLICYMAKERS
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Racial disproportionality in school discipline or the discipline gap refers to the over-selection and over-sanctioning of students of color compared to other racial groups.

- According to the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), although Black students make up only 16% of U.S. public school enrollment, they account for 40% of the suspensions.[1]
- Nearly 1 in 5 Black students have been suspended, compared with 1 in 10 White students.[2]
- In Pre-K, Black preschoolers are expelled at three times the rate of their White peers, leading to disproportionate numbers of suspensions and expulsions as they progress through school.[3]
- Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are two to five times as likely as White and Asian students to be suspended or expelled.[4]

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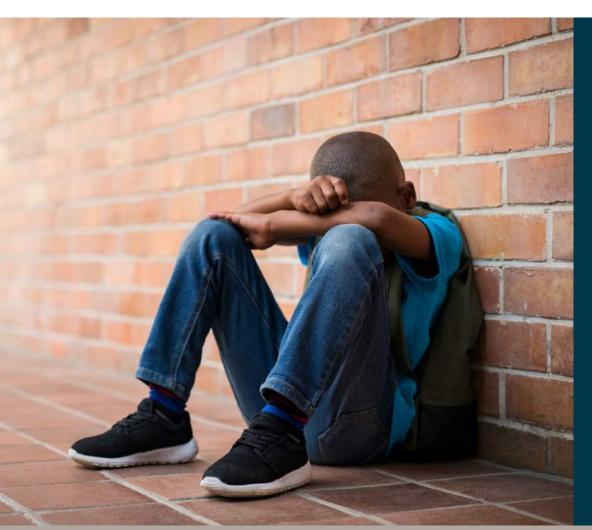
Exclusionary discipline practices (practices that take students out of the classroom and away from learning, including office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions):

• reduce students' institutional trust and academic achievement;[5]
• increase students' academic disengagement and rule-breaking;[6]
• increase students' risk of dropping out;[6] and
• predominantly push students of color into the school-to-prison pipeline.[7]

One study of over 1 million students found that a single suspension or expulsion nearly tripled a student's likelihood of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system the following year.[8]

What is to blame for the disproportionate rates of students of color being disciplined?

• <u>Differential Selection and Processing:</u> There is evidence that students of color are more likely to be "selected" for discipline, despite similar behaviors exhibited by classmates.[9] They are also more likely to receive harsher punishments for the same infraction.[10]
• <u>Implicit Bias:</u> Infractions that require subjective instead of objective interpretation (e.g., disrespect versus drug possession) account for a great deal of the discipline gap.[11] Researchers argue that it is through subjective disciplinary decisions that implicit bias plays an important role in the disproportionate selection and processing of our students of color in school settings.[12] We see this in the disproportionate referral of Black students for minor infractions and misconduct that are highly subjective in nature, such as perception of threat, non-compliance, or harm.[13]
• <u>Negative Racial Stereotypes:</u> Researchers found that behaviors cited most commonly for Black girls' discipline referrals aligned with racial stereotypes of behavior, such as being too loud or having a bad attitude.[14] Similarly, another study found Black boys are perceived as older and less innocent.[15] The persistence of these and other stereotypes contribute to implicit, racially biased interpretation of behavior of students of color, leading to their over-selection and harsh, exclusionary sanctions.

VICTIMS OF THE DISCIPLINE GAP face even greater risks and challenges, including lowered academic achievement and increased likelihood of drop-out and involvement in the juvenile justice system.[16] Scholars argue that the goal of equitable education for all students cannot be realized while racial disparities in school discipline persist, including not only who gets chosen for discipline, but also the harshness of that discipline.[17] The prevention and intervention policy recommendations in this brief include reforms based in positive behavior supports, empathy, and an equity lens.

EVIDENCE OF SOLUTIONS

There are at least four areas of opportunity for eliminating the discipline gap. First, focus on relationships. We know that positive teacher-student relationships—those comprising respect, support, and care—contribute to positive short- and long-term outcomes for students. One study found that at-risk students who had more positive relationships with teachers also had better outcomes in social, behavioral, engagement, and academic realms.[18] We also know that positive relationships in kindergarten support behavioral and academic performance up to eight years later.[19]

Second, provide all students with equal access to high-quality instruction. Studies have shown consistently that when students are academically engaged and excited about learning, the use of discipline is rare.[20] Unfortunately, access to academically rigorous and motivational classrooms is not evenly distributed, with students of color finding themselves more often in lower-tracked classrooms.[21] Therefore, schools must actively work to provide equal access to all students.

Third, embrace evidence-based approaches that are known to reduce both the discipline gap and overall discipline referrals. Restorative justice or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are designed to address the behavioral, social-emotional, academic, and other individual and community needs.[22] Extensive studies have found one of the most common models, Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS), to reduce overall racial disproportionality in discipline.[23]

Fourth, ensure all teachers and school staff are supported in developing critical consciousness around issues of race and equity. Educators are called to "explicitly consider issues of culture, race, gender, power, and privilege in addressing inequality in schooling."[24] Without it, there is risk of continuing to perpetuate the inequities the reform is aiming to address.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is tempting to choose one single intervention, discipline gaps are complex, and not easily erased. A combination of evidence-based programs and policies may help to eliminate racial disproportionality. Alignment, from the one classroom in a single school district to state and federal policy makers, is crucial.

Federal & State Policymakers: Rather than focusing solely on standardized test scores to assess the success of a school, begin to measure efforts towards equity, including collecting data on racial disproportionality in discipline and academic tracking. Increase funding and support to schools that need it most rather than incentivizing a small number of families to move their students to higher performing public or private schools through voucher systems. This form of school choice increases opportunity inequity.

School Board Members: Allocate funding to build culturally- and critically-conscious curriculum and professional development that helps educators engage in conversations about race and equity. Utilize data and reform discipline policies and practices with equity in mind, including restorative justice and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

Principals & Superintendents: Provide race, bias, and equity programming for all staff members. Support growth and accountability over the long term. Find and adapt systems that allow staff to constantly reflect and improve, including affinity groups and mentoring. Recruit educators from the communities the school serves. Encourage practices of enfolding families and community into the school, including invitations to meetings and home visits.

Educators: Educators should see students as more than just test takers or learners. Students are social beings and also thrive when they feel they belong and are connected to others. Advocate for aid needed to provide students physical, social, emotional, and academic supports. Hold your school and government officials accountable to supporting you in your work to erase the discipline gap through funding, programming, and other means.

This reform will not be quick or easy, but it is necessary and long overdue. With the increased attention on White Supremacy and structural racism nationally, now is the time to make these crucial, long-needed changes and finally fulfill our promise to make schools safe places to learn for all children.

IN-TEXT CITATIONS

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[20] Emmer & Sabornie, 2014

[21] Kena et al., 2015; Wing, 2006

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