

Discipline Disparities:

A Research-to-Practice Collaborative

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You Can't Fix What You Don't Look At: Acknowledging Race in Addressing Racial Discipline Disparities

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Discipline Disparities Series: Interventions

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The Discipline Disparities Research to Practice Collaborative

Disparities in the use of school discipline by race, gender, and sexual orientation have been well-documented and continue to place large numbers of students at risk for short- and long-term negative outcomes. In order to improve the state of our knowledge and encourage effective interventions, the Discipline Disparities Research to Practice Collaborative, a group of 26 nationally known researchers, educators, advocates, and policy analysts, came together to address the problem of disciplinary disparities. Funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and Open Society Foundations, the Collaborative has spent nearly three years conducting a series of meetings with groups of stakeholders—advocates, educators, juvenile justice representatives, intervention agents, researchers, and policymakers—in order to increase the availability of interventions that are both practical and evidence-based, and to develop and support a policy agenda for reform to improve equity in school discipline. The project has funded 11 new research projects to expand the knowledge base, particularly in the area of intervention, and commissioned papers from noted researchers presented at the Closing the School Discipline Gap Conference. A culminating report of the Collaborative's work is the formal release of the Discipline Disparities Briefing Paper Series, three papers on policy, practice, and new research summarizing the state of our knowledge and offering practical, evidence-based recommendations for reducing disparities in discipline in our nation's schools.

"There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often."

- President Barack Obama, July 19, 2013

Recent national tragedies—Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown—have once again brought issues of race to the forefront of our national consciousness. As much as we try to look away from the issues created by the idea and social realities of race in America, events remind us time and time again that our society's racial dividing lines, especially those involving Black males, can have serious, even deadly consequences. Those divisions and their consequences

extend beyond the streets into most of our institutions, including schools.

Racial and ethnic differences in everyday experience in schools remain ubiquitous in American education. Students of different races in American schools experience fundamentally different school compositions;¹ different educational opportunities and resources;² different rates of referral to both special education³ and gifted education;⁴ and different dropout and graduation rates.⁵ As the research cited in the Discipline Disparities Series indicates,⁶ ongoing severe and consistent racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsion lead to a variety of other negative outcomes: The more students are removed from school through suspension and expulsion, the more they vanish from graduation stages and fill the pipeline to prison.

Like other indicators of inequality in education, racial disproportionality in discipline, suspensions, and expulsions did not simply emerge full blown in recent years. Racial discipline disparities are a consequence of American history, of the biases and stereotypes created by that history, and of the still-strong divisions in lived experience between groups that we call "races."

It is impossible to tell the full story of racial discipline disparities without considering the full range of racialized historical and current factors that shape school life in the United States. The ravages of slavery and Jim Crow, forced migration, and policies that enforced unequal treatment placed most people of color at an economic and social disadvantage that persists to this day. Some of our most disadvantaged schools, more often than not populated by black- and brown-skinned youth, keenly show the effects of poverty within their walls, exacerbating potential conflicts. Yet, our history also left us with pervasive and false ideas about “races” that have shaped our perceptions of who is valued and who is not, who is capable and who is not, and who is “safe” and who is “dangerous.”

Racial disparities are not easy for Americans to confront, in large part because of a long-standing reluctance to talk about issues of race and ethnicity frankly and openly. Thus, this final paper in the Discipline Disparities series directly addresses our difficulties in addressing *race* when we confront racial disparities. This brief focuses on how our nation’s history has left us with ideas about race that still prompt exclusionary and disparate discipline, and a segregated, bounded experience that makes it difficult to confront racial issues, even as those issues continue to play out in our everyday interactions. The paper concludes with recommendations for a *race-conscious* approach to intervention, as a way of beginning to frankly discuss and directly address racial disparities, including discipline. If we are to undo the racial inequities that continue to plague us, we must find constructive ways to talk about them and intervene constructively and consciously to end them.

Part I: Why is It So Difficult to Face Issues of Race?

An Old Issue: What History Left Us With⁷

“Race” is a consequence of slavery and conquest. The racial groups we currently recognize are not based on substantive biological or genetic differences⁸ but rather are social constructs that were created and reinforced across hundreds of years.⁹ In the United States, the origins of inequality began with slavery and gave us many of the racial stereotypes that retain much of their power today in schools and society.¹⁰ Over the course of subsequent centuries, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, were all judged by European settlers and their descendants as inferior to Whites.

Popular authors and scientists produced and circulated data purporting to demonstrate the inferiority of non-Europeans to reinforce those stereotypes.¹¹ These corrosive stereotypes fueled unequal treatment, and continue to do so even today. Perhaps the most deeply entrenched—and the most pertinent to today’s discipline disparities—is the corrosive stereotype of the dangerous Black male.

Slavery and the notion of the dangerous Black male. Like many of the racial stereotypes that remain embedded in our consciousness, the notion of the dangerous Black male grew directly out of slavery and its aftermath. Key to the institution of slavery was the need to “discipline” and control those enslaved. Slave codes enacted beginning in the 17th Century made it illegal for slaves to congregate, marry, travel without their masters’ permission, or even learn to read.¹² For Black slaves then, any attempt to engage in normal human activity made one a criminal.

The “dangerous Black man” stereotype, which framed Black men as aggressors and “sexual predators,” was seeded and spread as slaveholders reserved the most horrific punishments for Black men. For instance, out of fear of the slave revolts of the early 19th Century, slaveholders spread the notion that runaway slaves were not escaping victims, but dangerous criminals who would rape White women if they had the chance.¹³ Although such incidents were rare or unheard of at that time, a law introduced in 1700 in Pennsylvania by William Penn mandated death or castration should a Black man attempt to rape a White woman; the mere fact of the legislation helped plant perceptions of the African American man as a potential danger. By the early 20th Century, the stereotype of the dangerous Black predator had become deeply entrenched in the American psyche, endorsed by popular culture, politicians, and academics.¹⁴ That fear in turn led to a cruel epidemic perpetrated on Black men: Between 1889 and 1918, more than 2,500 Blacks were lynched in the United States, primarily for minor grievances like disputing with a White man, attempting to register to vote, asking a White woman’s hand in marriage, or peeping in a window.¹⁵

Continuing inequality fueled by stereotypes. Long after slavery’s end, a racial worldview¹⁶ stressing the inferiority of Blacks and other people of color supported continuing segregation, unequal opportunity, and the race-based hierarchy of Jim Crow, enforced by law, custom, and the terror of bombings and lynchings. To escape outright oppression, Southern Blacks moved north in search of increased social and economic opportunity, yet still encountered attitudes and policies that

reinforced segregation and stereotypes, and limited economic opportunity.¹⁷ For nearly a century after the Civil War, laws and practices enforcing inferior schools, education access, housing, and jobs for non-Whites led to economic and social cumulative advantage for Whites and cumulative disadvantage for people of color.¹⁸ Today our nation’s academic and discipline gaps can be seen as our nation’s “educational debt”¹⁹—the direct results of cumulative, compounded economic, social, and political inequalities that have plagued the United States for centuries.

The effects of stereotypes today. Stereotypes rooted in our national consciousness for centuries—including the “dangerous Black male” stereotype—continue to play themselves out today. TV and other media play a role in reinforcing such biases in our brains: the social action group Color of Change only recently succeeded in getting Fox to cancel primetime “Cops,” a program filling generations of minds with images of Black people spread-eagled or running from police. Stereotypes developed through these centuries of oppression and discrimination contribute to lowered expectations for many children of color’s academic abilities and potential.²⁰ Study findings have revealed that 58.9 percent of Black and White subjects endorsed at least one stereotypical view of difference in inborn ability.²¹ As recent research on implicit bias shows, those stereotypes are still widespread, perhaps the norm, in American culture.²²

Deeply entrenched stereotypic views can have deadly consequences. As Pollock²³ wrote of the Trayvon Martin case:

We can debate [George] Zimmerman’s conscious “intentions” forever, but Zimmerman wouldn’t have killed Trayvon if Zimmerman hadn’t actively followed him, assuming his criminality on sight. Mental associations framing Black people as threats are many centuries old. Research shows that even unconsciously, most American brains (across race lines) associate Black men with danger and criminality and even gorillas.²⁴ It’s ugly. It’s old. It makes people cross the street to get away from Black people. Research by Phillip Atiba Goff at UCLA suggests it makes police officers use force against Black youth at alarming rates.

How we think about youth and crime affects how we think about youth in our schools and neighborhoods. As Elspeth Reeve²⁵ wrote July 16, “research published in the American Journal of Sociology in 2001 found that people are more likely to think their neighborhood

has a higher crime rate if more young Black men live there.”

In sum, negative, controlling images of the deviant Black person, developed over hundreds of years of discrimination and oppression, remain pervasive in America today. These stereotypes and beliefs have severe, sometimes deadly, consequences, and even more frequently, create disruptions in the life chances of many Black and Brown youth.

Failure to Communicate: How Segregation and Social Boundaries Perpetuate Stereotypes

In the aftermath of World War II, when the landmark decision *Brown vs. Board of Education*²⁶ rejected the doctrine of separate but equal and demanded affirmative steps to overcome the handicaps created by legalized segregation,²⁷ social scientists theorized that increased contact among those of differing racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds would make it increasingly difficult to hold on to stereotypes, bias, and discrimination.²⁸

By the early 1970’s, however, the courts began to limit or roll back many of the principles that had guided post-Brown civil rights reform, refusing to act on anything but explicitly “de jure”²⁹ segregation, releasing many districts from any desegregation efforts, and eventually, outlawing much race-conscious desegregation effort.³⁰ Patterns in housing choice exacerbate and reinforce the segregation of schools.³¹

As a result, despite the end of legal sanctions upholding strict segregation, there has not yet been a real and functional integration in schools and society.³² Physical separation across schools and districts by race and class remains the norm, and the structure of relationships between groups in our society remains largely segregated, lessening any opportunity for groups to interact and have their stereotypes challenged.³³ Both African American and Latino students attend schools that are on average composed of over 60% students of color, while White students are the most segregated of all groups, attending on average schools that are 77% White.³⁴ Our segregated schools continue to reproduce the class patterns associated with race throughout our history: African American and Hispanic students are three times (35% & 34.5 % respectively) as likely as White students (12.5%) to be born into poverty, have less adequate access to health care, and tend to attend schools with inadequate physical facilities, and less highly qualified and trained teachers.³⁵

Racial segregation also persists within schools in the form of tracking, in which old stereotypes about “smartness” intersect with inequalities in opportunities to learn.³⁶ Finally, even in the face of rapidly increasing diversity in our nation’s student population, the majority of U.S teachers remain female, White, and middle class,³⁷ creating a within-school boundary in itself. Many students in pre-service teacher education programs enter with little previous contact with racial groups other than their own;³⁸ unless pervasive negative stereotypes are explicitly engaged and challenged, teachers can carry these stereotypes with them into the classroom.³⁹

Thus, despite the end of legal enforcement of segregation, our experiences in schools are not just segregated physically, but socially boundaried.⁴⁰ Physical and psychological separation by race creates very real boundaries in lived experience that make us unable to learn from and understand each other. That is, segregation doesn’t just compound economic inequality, with more-wealthy and more-White students in schools or classes with more opportunity and less-wealthy students of color in underresourced, understaffed schools. The absence of truly integrated society⁴¹—a society in which we live together and as equals—also has left us unable to learn from one another, to surmount old stereotypes, and to communicate effectively as a nation about the inequalities that remain throughout schools and society.

In sum, 60 years after *Brown* we remain surprisingly segregated as a society, and the boundaries between the experiences of those of different heritages remain. The benefits foreseen by integration—that increased contact would lead to the gradual fading of bias and stereotypes—have occurred far less than expected. Combine still-pervasive stereotypes with vastly separate experiences for students and teachers of different races, and we can see why it is extremely difficult to come together and honestly talk about the racial and ethnic stereotypes and inequalities that still afflict our schools and society—and that shape our school discipline patterns.

Race Still Matters: How Old Patterns Continue Today

As a result of our boundaried experiences and the widespread tendency to avoid the charged topic of race whenever possible, there is insufficient opportunity to reach out across those lines of social division and examine the causes of deep-seated inequalities in education in America, including disparities in suspension, expulsion, and school arrest. Our continued separation influences the way

in which we interact around race, including the ways in which teachers and administrators interact with students. In this section, we turn to a rapidly growing body of evidence finding that, however much we would rather not talk about it, issues of race and difference continue to be embedded in our schools and society, continuing to reinforce and replicate inequality in society, in education, and in school discipline.

Implicit bias.

Implicit biases are deep-seated attitudes that operate outside conscious awareness—that may even be in direct conflict with a person’s stated beliefs and values.⁴² Brains hold old biases and preferences for various groups (positive or negative); such associations are mostly involuntary.⁴³

Implicit biases do not necessarily lead to explicitly biased decisions or behaviors, but they can undergird discriminatory behaviors—especially when such biases remain unstated and unexamined. In the school discipline realm, some research suggests that White and Black students may receive differential treatment in terms of opportunities to participate in learning settings, or different teacher reactions to misbehavior.⁴⁴ At the office level, harsher punishment of students of color for the same or similar behavior has been documented in a number of studies.⁴⁵ Finally, recent research has shown that schools with a higher proportion of Black students are more likely to use a range of more punitive consequences, including suspension, expulsion, arrests and zero tolerance.⁴⁶ Since these patterns have been found to occur regardless of school demographics or the severity of student behavior, it becomes increasingly difficult to rule out the possibility of some form of bias as a contributing factor.

Fortunately, emerging research suggests that it is possible to recognize implicit bias in oneself and learn techniques to overcome such perceptions and increase positive social interactions. Professor Patricia Devine, for example, developed a “multi-faceted prejudice habit-breaking” intervention that taught participants five different de-biasing strategies. Significant reductions in implicit bias among those trained provide tangible evidence that a controlled intervention can produce persistent reductions in implicit bias.⁴⁷

Microaggressions.

Microaggressions—everyday exchanges, usually brief, that deliver demeaning messages or subtle reminders about racial stereotypes⁴⁸—remain one key way that unconscious stereotypes or implicit biases are enacted in daily interactions. Microaggress-

sions are often enacted automatically and unconsciously—delivered in the form of subtle insults, indifferent looks, gestures, and tones. Such actions are often difficult to identify, whether they are verbal, nonverbal, visual, or behavioral.⁴⁹ Outside of schools, “microaggressions” can look like a waiter serving a White patron before someone of color; in schools, microaggressions can be acts that convey underlying (even if unconscious) messages that people of color are less intelligent, more dangerous, or otherwise inferior. Sometimes, everyday “microaggressions” are moments when we ignore, negate, or dismiss others’ experiences of harm.⁵⁰ In the disciplinary realm, “microaggressions” can take shape in sudden overreactions to young people of color as threatening.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about it.”

It is no surprise then that pre-service and in-service teachers resist discussing most racial topics related to education and to discipline specifically. The difficulty that educators, especially White educators, have in openly talking about race and racism has been well documented.⁵¹ Further, many scripts shape our talk when we do talk about race—we explain race issues in many predictable, often reductive ways.⁵² Thus, discussing our race talk habits head on is a crucial part of discussing race disparities in education.

A colorblind perspective suggests that maybe we shouldn’t talk about it—that discussions about race are extraneous, or that those seeking to discuss race are “playing the race card.”⁵³ A commitment to a colorblind philosophy may also be associated with the belief that U.S. society is in a “post-racial” era where any racial disparities are due simply to characteristics or behaviors of the affected groups themselves.⁵⁴ Yet Gotanda⁵⁵ has suggested that a color-blind stance is self-contradictory: Asserting that one does not “see color” actually requires considering race in society before rejecting its relevance.

Can We Address Racial Disparities without Addressing Race? The Failure of Race Neutrality

In recent years, national policy on education issues has replaced active, affirmative, race-conscious remedies with race-neutral ones. In case after case, the Supreme Court has rolled back efforts to consider race in school assignment.⁵⁶ The evidence, suggests, however, that race-neutral approaches to diversifying schools, such as income-based school assignment, are not effective in reducing segregation: in fact, such “race neutral” solutions can

lead to increased school segregation.⁵⁷

Nor is there evidence that race-neutral approaches have been effective in reducing racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline. For example, the technology of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has been found to be successful in general in reducing office disciplinary referrals,⁵⁸ decreasing rates of school suspension,⁵⁹ improving school climate,⁶⁰ and to a certain extent even contributing to improved academic outcomes.⁶¹ Yet Vincent and her colleagues have demonstrated that, without specific attention to issues of race and culture, even the most successful implementations of PBIS can fail to reduce racial/ethnic disparities in office referrals and suspension.⁶² Together, these data suggest that to successfully address racial disparities in discipline, we must acknowledge and work through issues of race.

Part II: What Should We Do? Bringing Race into Conversations about Disparities

Talking about racial discipline patterns in schools isn’t easy, because it involves talking about the full range of race, racism, and racial inequality issues in American life.⁶³ In schools, such conversations are especially challenging, as they force educators to reflect on their own views of and interactions with students. Beverly Tatum⁶⁴ argues that many Whites are reluctant to talk openly about race for fear that their comments will be “misinterpreted,” generating anger and rejection from people of color. Even considering the possibility of racial dynamics in our disciplinary interactions can be highly threatening: Do data showing racial disparities expose me or my school as “racist”?⁶⁵ While school staff members may resist public decisions about race, they may continue to struggle in private with a variety of race-based questions, tensions, and dilemmas in the wake of racialized interactions with students and colleagues.⁶⁶

Yet addressing racial disparities requires addressing race. Imagine a school district with consistently low reading achievement scores; yet within that district, an unwritten code prevented staff from explicitly discussing the topic of reading. Obviously, the failure to address the central problem would guarantee that reading deficits would persist over time. In the same way, when we don’t discuss and then address the racial dynamics of our racially disproportionate discipline, racial disparities in discipline continue to worsen over time.⁶⁷ Pollock⁶⁸ has referred to race talk

resistance as a complicated “colormuteness.” While some clumsy or incomplete race talk can in fact create harm (see below), our reticence to talk frankly about issues of race prevents us from even considering the steps we need to take to fix racial discipline disparities.

The goal is not just to talk more about racial patterns in discipline; rather, the goal is to discuss those patterns more thoroughly and then to ultimately eradicate them.⁶⁹ A conversation about race and discipline means talking about what we think automatically about “types of children,” even if those thoughts are undesired; who we react to with fear or harshness; and who needs more care inside our school buildings.⁷⁰ It also means asking hard questions about whether opportunities to learn and to be included in learning opportunities are equally or sufficiently distributed in schools. Particularly important to an “anti-racist” approach to discipline is to talk more thoroughly about any given incident of discipline⁷¹ and to ask reflectively, does this act of discipline provide access to opportunity, or shut off such access?⁷² Another key approach is to react compassionately, calmly, and without escalation to every young person’s interaction with a peer or teacher.

What follows are practical descriptions of approaches and strategies that can be used in schools and classrooms to acknowledge and address issues of racial inequality. The goal is not simply to talk about race, but rather to a) identify the extent of racial/ethnic disparities through examination of the data, b) be willing to discuss those disparities and their causes thoroughly, c) develop interventions that include a race-conscious analysis of the causes of those disparities, and d) monitor the effectiveness of our interventions through continued examination of disaggregated data.

Identify and Acknowledge the Extent of Disciplinary Disparities through Examination of the Data

Administrators and educators can open conversations on racial inequality by examining actual data patterns at the district, state, federal levels. Relying on school data to examine disparities based on race/ethnicity, as well as sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability status, provides teachers and administrators the opportunity to engage in honest discussions about why some groups of students are faring worse in discipline outcomes. In some cases, analyzing achievement outcomes simultaneously with disciplinary outcomes might be essential, as disciplinary incidents can arise in classrooms

where students and teachers are having frustrated interactions over academics. Educators and their supporters can:

- Examine out-of-school suspension, expulsion and school arrest data, as well as classroom disciplinary referral data, to ask what student groups seem to be disciplined disproportionately and to what extent decisions by school personnel play a role.⁷³
- Monitor and hold schools and districts accountable for racial/ethnic disparities in opportunities and resources for students, in order to remedy any unequal patterns in academic preparation and achievement that can exacerbate negative student-teacher interactions.⁷⁴
- Increase understanding and provide ongoing professional development for teachers and principals around issues of racial disparities, exclusions, and differences.

Engage in Conversations about Race

Once disaggregated data are available, they must be interpreted. Schools will make the most progress if data open a door to reflective and critical conversations about the ways in which school processes, adult actions, and adult interactions with students may contribute to disciplinary outcomes. Sustaining a critical conversation about race patterns means asking questions about the full set of interactions that produce discipline patterns; about how race factors in to how adults react to students and, how students then react to adults; about which false or harmful notions about “races” we carry around with us as we interact; and even when and how thinking of other human beings in terms of race is helpful.

To set the context for thorough analysis before dialoguing about specific disciplinary incidents, school leaders can encourage reading and dialogue about the issues raised in the first half of this brief, including:

- The history of false notions about “groups,” including the contemporary forms of old ideas and stereotypes;
- The national history of racial disparities in education opportunity, and the variety of factors that contribute to any contemporary lack of opportunities in the school’s local setting; and
- The distribution of resources in the school’s academic and/or social environment.

Then, leaders can support a thorough conversation about specific disciplinary incidents and habits of discipline at the school, including discussions of:

- How interests are served/not served, and whose needs are met/not met, by different disciplinary practices at the school (e.g., an out of school suspension; a “time out”).⁷⁵
- Students’ and teachers actual experiences with specific incidents of school discipline.
 - o Leaders can support teachers in considering the pros and cons of specific disciplinary interactions, for students as well as for teachers;
 - o Leaders also can support teachers to reflect on the experiences and pervasive ideas that have shaped their “gut perceptions” of students.
- Finally, leaders can support teachers to reflect on ways to create a culturally flexible school, where both teachers and students can interact “across numerous social and cultural boundaries.”⁷⁶

Facilitating Discussions about Race and Discipline with both Colleagues and Students

Educators preparing to create a dialogue with colleagues about issues of race and discipline can find many tips for dialogue in the work of researchers,⁷⁷ with the goal of supporting colleagues to hear information, analyze causes, and design solutions. Without proper preparation, facilitators may themselves minimize individual experiences, reinforce stereotypes, or find themselves unable to handle the range of conflicting and sometimes strong opinions and emotions that may arise.

“Clumsy race talk”⁷⁸ can also risk repeated stereotyping of students from particular groups, if speakers a) simply repeat stereotypes about students rather than challenge them, or, b) repeat scripted analyses that students alone are responsible for disciplinary problems, even when every discipline interaction involves an interaction between adults and students. To avoid repeating such “scripts” in talk about discipline, teachers can talk through actual interactions with students that seemed to “snowball”⁷⁹ into a discipline problem. Howard⁸⁰ has shown that having teachers watch videos of their interactions with youth can help them unpack disciplin-

ary incidents more thoroughly: educators can unpack how small interactions grow into dire disciplinary consequences.

To talk openly about race and why racial disparities occur, we must create safe spaces for school personnel. School principals and administrators can support teachers to openly discuss the full range of dynamics under specific discipline incidents, opportunity provision in the school, and, student-teacher relationships generally⁸¹. Educators need space to think through and dialogue about their own reactions to students; in addition, research shows that restorative justice approaches can support students to think through their own interactions to teachers.⁸² In engaging colleagues and even youth in dialogue, school leaders can:

- Model a willingness to ask questions.
- Acknowledge that mistakes will be made when speaking about race.⁸³
- Acknowledge that participants will experience discomfort while considering and discussing experiences/perspectives different from one’s own.⁸⁴
- Model commitment on the part of all participants to being part of the analyses of problems and solutions, given that any discipline issue involves an interaction between students and adults.⁸⁵
- Do not miss “race teachable moments.”⁸⁶ Take the opportunity when students’ comments, questions, and classroom incidents or students’ pre-occupations about race and/or racism to sustain critical conversations about inequities. These spontaneous conversations can complemented by formal activities that allow students to share about their families and identities.

Crafting Race-Conscious Intervention and Evaluation

Addressing the race aspect of racial discipline disparities requires more than thorough dialogue about why disparities occur. In order to remedy disparities, educators must design specific strategies for improving student-teacher relationships and, preventing and handling conflict. To support such work, leaders in the field have recommended a host of overall strategies, including efforts to improve the cultural responsiveness of instruction⁸⁷ and classroom management.⁸⁸ Efforts to increase academic rigor and to increase safe, predictable environments for young people have also been shown overall to re-

duce the conflicts that balloon into discipline cases.⁸⁹ Case studies have shown that specific attention to cultural responsiveness—that is, connecting respectfully to students’ lives—is beneficial for classroom process and student outcome.⁹⁰

Educators also can seek more specific strategies and interventions to reduce racial discipline disparities. A previous brief in this series, specifically addressing intervention,⁹¹ acknowledged that while we need to know a great deal more about how to intervene specifically to close the discipline gap, promising interventions are emerging. That brief identified a number of interventions and principles for reducing disparities in discipline:

- **Supportive Relationships**

Programs that improve interactions between teachers and students, such as My Teaching Partner⁹² have been shown to both reduce the incidence of disciplinary removal and close the racial/ethnic discipline gap.

- **Academic Rigor**

High-level and engaging instruction, combined with support for meeting high expectations, has been shown to turn around achievement even in highly disrupted school settings.⁹³

- **Culturally Relevant and Responsive Instruction**

Teachers can create safe and respectful classroom environments through materials, events, and teaching that reflect the diversity of their classrooms and community.⁹⁴

- **Bias-free classrooms and respectful school environments**

Analyzing disaggregated data can allow school teams to determine if different groups of students receive different penalties for the same infraction.

Teachers can avoid the trap of differential treatments by replacing snap judgments about discipline with time to reflect on the nature of the interaction.

- **Use Problem-Solving Approaches to Discipline**

Restorative practices train staff in structured problem solving to identify contributors to conflict, offering a promising approach for reducing the discipline gap.⁹⁵

- **Recognizing Student and Family Voice**

The experience of community organizations such as Denver’s Padres y Jovenes Unidos⁹⁶ have shown that schools with issues of disproportionate discipline benefit greatly from reaching out to parents and students to understand their concerns.

- **Reintegrating students after conflict**

After long-term absences due to suspension, expulsion, or detention, “transition centers,” involving collaboration between probation, mental health, child welfare, and school districts, can assist in the successful transition of excluded youth back into school.

It is unclear whether interventions must be tailored to specific racial/ethnic or cultural populations in order to have an impact on student outcomes.⁹² However, closing racial discipline gaps will almost certainly require interventions and programs that are in some way *race-conscious*—that is, conscious of overall race dynamics in student-teacher relationship and interaction.

At the same time, we cannot assume that any specific intervention or program, however effective it may appear to be in general, will reduce racial and ethnic disparities until we specifically test and measure the effect of that program on such disparities. In order to know whether any intervention or strategy is effective *in closing racial gaps*, evaluating its effects specifically *on racial/ethnic disparities* is key. As part of any new program, educators, policymakers and researchers seeking to reduce racial inequity will need to answer the question: *What is the evidence that our efforts have specifically reduced race and ethnic disparities in discipline?*

Does a Race-Conscious Approach Make A Difference?

Talking about race is linked to improved outcomes when it is tied to actual school reforms and practices focused on achieving equity in schools. Talking about race and culture, for example, has been found to improve student achievement. Survey data from teachers, students, and parents at 62 participating schools in Hawaii found that the use of culture-based educational strategies by teachers and by schools was linked to improvements in math and reading scores for all students.⁹⁸ In Howard’s⁹⁹ qualitative study of four schools successful in closing racial achievement gaps, he identifies five attributes commonly found across the schools that were fundamental in each of the school’s ability to produce high achievers in challenging circumstances. One of these attributes was explicitly ac-

knowledging race, racism, and its perceived influence in learning. The other attributes included a visionary leadership, effective instructional practice, intensive academic intervention, and parental and community engagement. While we cannot state equivocally that talking about race will actually reduce disparities and disproportionality in discipline, suspensions, and expulsions, we can infer from prior studies that a strong potential holds for its positive influence on the reduction of such patterns. More research and interventions utilizing race- and culture-conscious approaches are needed to support fully explore the potential of such interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of our attempts to avoid the topic, the issue of race emerges over and over again, permeating our society and conditioning our lives. For Travon Martin and Michael Brown, the translation of racialized thinking into action yielded deadly consequences. For many other youth in our nation, the consequences of our heritage of presumed racial difference and longstanding segregation play themselves out on a daily basis, through lowered expectations, decreased educational opportunity, and disciplinary overreaction. This is an old problem. Corrosive stereotypes—like the dangerous Black male—rooted themselves deep in our nation’s psyche and, whether or not they reach our consciousness, remain entwined in our thinking and our practices today. Throughout much of our history, the structures of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of racial exclusion were purposely intended to maintain deep divisions between us, to the advantage of some groups and the detriment of others. Even as we celebrate anniversaries of Brown v. Board of Education and the civil rights movement challenging the legal framework of segregation and division, judicial rulings and federal policy have reversed that early momentum, maintaining and reinforcing structural inequality and boundaries of race and class. Although based on social understandings rather than biological realities, perceptions of racial difference continue to determine who has opportunity and privilege, and who does not. At the same time, the benefits of integration foreseen by its advocates—that increased contact would lead to increased understanding, empathy, and ultimately equality—have not occurred, simply because there has not yet been real integration in American society. Today in schools, our interactions across racial lines yield differential outcomes in school discipline, with devastating consequences for the young people served.

The topic of racial disparities understandably remains emotionally charged. As in a family that can never discuss its fundamental secrets, our deeply held and often unconscious beliefs, stereotypes, and biases are too rarely brought to the surface, examined, and finally expunged. Yet as much as we seek to lock them from view, race and racism continue to color our interactions, including our disciplinary actions, on a daily, even moment-by-moment basis.

The goal, however, is not simply to talk more about race, or racial disparities in school discipline. Conducted clumsily, conversations about race can increase resistance to facing and addressing the problems that plague us. Even when courageous dialogues create insights, there is no guarantee that those insights will be brought back into schools and classrooms to create practical differences in treatment. To be effective in truly addressing racial disparities, our conversations about race must be a part of a process in which we a) examine disaggregated data to determine where racial/ethnic differences occur, b) thoroughly discuss the contexts and interactions creating those data, c) craft interventions to erase those disparities, and d) follow through to ensure that we have truly made a difference, by monitoring the disaggregated data to evaluate the impact of our actions. Ultimately, as has been noted in other papers in this series, achieving racial equity in school discipline requires action, leadership and a commitment to counteract old habits and stereotypes. The roots of racial inequality in our schools and our society are many centuries deep. Eliminating disciplinary disparities, or for that matter any inequity in our educational system, will require an ongoing awareness of how those disparities are produced, and a steadfast commitment to finally bringing them to an end.

Endnotes

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