Denver Public Schools accountability report: 
Update on racial disparities in school discipline

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DPS-DU Partnership Overview

The overall goal of the partnership is to reduce racial disparities in discipline practices through collaborative research, knowledge dissemination, and intervention testing and development. Specific phases of the project include:

1. Conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices.
2. Sustain and strengthen efforts to use research to inform local policy, programs, and practices.
3. Work with policy makers and practitioners to identify preventive interventions to disseminate broadly.
Executive Summary

- While DPS student enrollment has increased over the past five years, the use of out of school suspensions and expulsions has decreased. This trend has benefited students of all backgrounds.
- Disparities for African-American students, as compared to all other student ethnicities, remain the district’s most significant challenge. However, we saw meaningful improvements in 2012-2013 school year, relative to White students. In contrast, disparities for low-income students worsened.
- Despite these reductions, district-wide racial disparities in rates of office disciplinary referrals, suspension and referral to law enforcement persist. After accounting for student characteristics like gender, disability and family income, DPS data show that race still impacts school discipline practices. Black and Latino students in particular are more likely than White or Asian students to be suspended from school and referred to law enforcement for the same behavior.
- The effect of race decreases throughout the discipline process: race has the strongest effect on office disciplinary referrals and has no independent influence on expulsion decisions.
- Over the last four years, high school administrators at the aggregate level have eliminated the influence of race on their decisions to suspend a student once they are referred to the office. This is a remarkable achievement; however, disproportionalities in suspension will persist until race no longer predicts who is sent to the office.
- In contrast, middle schools have seen a decline in the influence of gender and socioeconomic status on administrators’ decisions about discipline resolutions, but racial disparities have worsened over time. At the elementary level, no clear trends are evident.
- The restorative approaches outlined by JK-R are promising strategies to address student behavior and keep students in school. In DPS, students with behavior problems are significantly less likely to experience a subsequent office referral or out of school suspension if they receive restorative interventions after their initial referral to the office.

Implications & Recommendations

1. Prevention efforts in the classroom, not only at the administrative level, will be necessary to eliminate disparities and reduce suspensions. Teachers would benefit from training in culturally responsive, classroom-based behavioral interventions that prevent office referrals for Black, Latino, and low-income students in particular.
2. Our analyses provide robust evidence that restorative approaches (RA) are effective alternatives to out of school suspension in addressing student behavior. Additional fiscal resources are needed to implement these interventions widely.
Across Denver Public Schools the use of out of school suspensions and expulsions in response to behavior problems is decreasing at a time when the overall district population is increasing.

Similar trends in expulsion speak to the adherence to board policy JK-R, and to continued improvement in the practice of managing expulsion requests, and the independence of the expulsion officer.
Denver Public Schools & University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work Partnership
School Discipline Disparities Research Report: Updated for the 2012-2013 School Year

% of Students Suspended by Grade Level: 2008-2013

- Overall, the number of suspensions is decreasing at all grade levels.
- Suspension rates are highest in traditional middle schools, followed by high schools.
Since 2008, all students of color have seen a decline in suspensions.

However, Black and Native students are still suspended at higher rates than their White or Asian counterparts.

The gaps between Black, Native, and White student suspensions decreased in the 2012-2013 year primarily because of an increased rate of suspension among White students (largely due to drug-related offenses).
Since 2008, students of all genders and socioeconomic backgrounds have seen a decline in suspension rates.

However, Male and low-income students are still suspended at higher rates than their counterparts.

The gaps between male and female students have decreased over time, whereas the class gap has remained unchanged.
Rates of law enforcement referrals are still lower than they were at the passage of JK-R, but they increased for all groups in the 2012-2013 school year. This is surprising given the passage of the IGA in 2012, but this trend may reflect increased fear on the part of school staff in the wake of the Sandy Hook school shooting on December, 14, 2012.
What is a disparity? How is it different than disproportionality?

- This report largely focuses on disparities. A disparity is a comparison of information about two different populations (e.g. Black students who were expelled compared to White students who were expelled). In this report, a disparity refers to the risk of a student from one racial, class or gender subgroup being referred to the offices, suspended, or expelled compared to a young person of another background.
- Disproportionality represents a comparison of information about one population (e.g. all Black students) to a subgroup of that same population (e.g. Black students who were suspended). In particular, disproportionality is an issue of the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a subgroup of youth, relative to their proportion of the general population.
- The concepts are related; for example, disproportionalities in suspension occur whenever a subgroup of students experiences disparities in office referrals or discipline consequences. In other words, disparities lead to disproportionalities.

What does “more likely” mean?

- Risk is the chance that something will occur. If you are flipping a coin, your “risk” for landing on tails is 50%, or 50 out of 100 times. If you are drawing a card from a deck, your “risk” of getting a spade is 25% or 25 out of 100 times.
- The term “more likely” is a comparison of risks. If you are playing a game where you can win by landing on tails in a coin flip, or pulling a spade from deck of cards, you are 100% (2 times) “more likely” to win if you flip a coin rather than pull a card.
- In the context of this report, “more likely” means the risk of referral, suspension, or expulsion in one group (e.g. Black students) is higher than the risk for another group. For example, in 2011-2012, Black students in DPS were 31% (0.3 times) more likely than White students to be suspended for the same behavior, after taking into account their socioeconomic status, special education eligibility, and gender. All racial groups should be equally likely to be suspended after you take into account these other risk factors.
The effect of race, class, disability and gender through the discipline process in DPS schools

After conducting statistical tests which rule out the influence of factors that could influence suspension rates, like students’ special education status, their reasons for office referral over the course of the school year, as well as the demographics of the school, we were able to see what factors uniquely contributed to the chance that a student would be referred to the office, suspended, or expelled.

- **Referral**
  - Black, Latino, Multiracial and Native youth are significantly more likely than other students to be referred to the office for behavior problems.
  - The same is true for students who are low income, male, or have disabilities.

- **Suspension**
  - Black, Latino, Multiracial, Native, and Asian students, youth are significantly more likely than other students to receive a suspension for the same office referral reasons.
  - The same is true for students who are low-income, and have disabilities.

- **Expulsion**
  - Boys are significantly more likely to be expelled for the same referral reasons than girls.
  - Youth with emotional disabilities are less likely to be expelled for the same referral reasons.

- Disproportionality in suspensions and expulsion are driven by disparities in office referrals, as students of color, male students, and students with disabilities are more likely to be sent to the office for the same behavior as white students, female students, and non-disabled students.
Black and Latino students were significantly more likely (meaning actual risk, not the risk due to chance) to receive a suspension than White students for the same behavior.

Low-income students are more likely than higher income students to receive a suspension for the same behavior. Note, this trend increased in the past school year.

During the 2012-2013 some disparities in the rates of suspension decreased. Specifically, the likelihood of a Black student being suspended compared to a white student decreased, as well as the risk of a male being suspended compared to a female for engaging in the same behavior.

These findings indicate that higher rates of suspension among Black, Latino, and low-income students are not solely the result of higher rates of misbehavior, special education participation, or enrollment in segregated schools.

*These analyses ruled out other factors that contribute to suspensions, like students’ office referral reasons over the course of a year, special education status, and the demographics of their school.
• Over the past four years, reduction in racial disparities was greatest in high schools. Our statistical tests indicate that there is no significant difference in rates of suspension between racial groups at traditional high schools once other factors are accounted for, such as office referral reasons.
  o This finding should not be interpreted to mean that race doesn’t influence suspension patterns in high schools. As long as student of color are more likely to be sent to the office, they will still be overrepresented in suspensions.

• However low-income students are still more likely (14%) than higher income students to be suspended for the same behavior.

• In 2012-2013, boys were significantly less likely than girls to be suspended for the same referral reasons in high school. This may be a proactive administrative response to the disproportionately large number of boys sent to the office for discipline concerns.

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Disparities in Suspension Decisions by Grade Level: Middle and Elementary Schools

- The largest racial disparities in suspension decisions continue to be seen at the middle school level, however, both elementary and middle schools have seen a reduction in racial disparities during the 2012-2013 school year.

- Middle schools have substantially reduced the effect of gender and poverty on suspension decisions.

- In elementary schools, gender and poverty continue to be significant predictors of harsher punishment for the same referral reasons. As low-income students are 21% more likely to receive a suspension compared to higher income students. This trend has worsened in recent years. And boys are 54% more likely to receive a suspension than girls.

*These analyses ruled out other factors that contribute to suspensions, like students’ office referral reasons over the course of a year, special education status, and the demographics of their school.*
RESTORATIVE APPROACHES

- Students who receive RA in response to a referral in the first semester are much less likely to be referred back to the office (OR = 0.22, p<.001) or suspended (OR = 0.57, p<.001) in the second semester. In short, RA has a very strong protective effect on both office referrals and suspensions.

- Receiving RJ does not appear to reduce the district-level effect of other risk factors, such as race, class and gender on a students’ likelihood of referral or suspension in the second semester. This lack of effect may simply reflect the low number of students who receive RJ in the first semester (n= 336; 5.4% of all students referred to the office in the 1st sem.), and that students of color, low income youth, and students with disabilities are no more likely than their peers to receive RJ.

- To leverage restorative practices so that they reduce disparities, this practice should focus attention toward low-income youth of color with disabilities.

*These analyses ruled out other factors that contribute to office referrals and suspensions, like students’ office referral reasons over the course of a year, special education status, and the demographics of their school.