

## OVERVIEW

The disproportionate representation of students of color in special education and school discipline is one of the most pressing challenges facing the field of education. Statistics describing disparities in the education of students of color present an alarming picture. In the state of Indiana:

- African American students are 2.6 times more likely than White students to be identified as Mentally Disabled.
- African American students are 1.6 times more likely than White students to be identified with an Emotional Disability.
- In a rapidly changing field in which inclusion is the norm, African American and Latino students are more likely than other students to be served in separate classes, and less likely to be served in general education classes
- African American students are 4 times more likely than White students to be suspended out of school and over 3 times as likely to be expelled. Native American, Latino, and Multiracial students are also over-represented in statewide rates of out-of-school suspension.
- African American students are 3.6 times more likely than White students to be referred to alternative education programs, while Latino students are 1.5 times more likely than White students to be in those programs.

These sources of disproportionality are related to substantial racial and ethnic disparities in Indiana in both achievement and dropout/graduation rates.

## FACTORS THAT CAUSE OR MAINTAIN DISPROPORTIONALITY IN EDUCATION

Researchers in the field of education have attempted to describe the causes of this complex issue and develop strategies for remediation since the 1960's. Several hypotheses regarding the causes of disproportionality have been posed. They include:

- *Testing Bias*: Although in general there is not extensive evidence of test bias, some studies have shown the possibility of bias due to administration or language issues.
- *Poverty*: Family and community poverty have been shown to create educational disadvantage, and poverty affects students of color to a disproportionate degree. But poverty does not fully explain racial and ethnic disparities; race also contributes above and beyond poverty.
- *Unequal Educational Opportunity*: The educational opportunities of students of color are often limited by poor facilities and inadequate resources, under-representation of students of color in curriculum, and fewer highly qualified teachers.
- *Special Education Eligibility Process*: It is unclear to what extent special education decision making contributes to disproportionality, but the system is often geared to providing services only after children fail.
- *Behavior and Discipline*: Although consistently disciplined at a higher rate, there is no evidence that students of color engage in rates of disruptive behavior.
- *Cultural Mismatch*: In schools that are becoming highly diverse in many school districts, Indiana's teaching force, like most of the nation's, is predominantly white. Concerns have been raised that issues of cultural mismatch may contribute to disproportionality in achievement and discipline.

## FUNDING AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES FOR ADDRESSING DISPROPORTIONALITY

Federal and state regulations concerning disproportionality in special education have been strengthened considerably as a result of the most recent amendments to special education law, IDEA 2004. That law

mandates that states monitor the extent of disproportionality in special education, identify school districts with significant disproportionality, and require those districts to re-allocate funds in order to reduce disproportionality. States, including Indiana, are currently in a process of identifying those most disproportionate districts and assisting them in addressing disproportionality at the local level.

Disparities in achievement are technically addressed through federal mandates in *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), requiring disaggregation by race/ethnicity of achievement data as part of monitoring a school's progress. There have, however, been insufficient federal funds to assist schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress; this failure to provide increased resources to failing schools has meant that NCLB sometimes has the effect of penalizing communities with inadequate schools, rather than improving schools and closing the achievement gap in those communities. There appear to be no federal or state criteria or funding mechanisms outside special education for addressing disproportionality in other areas, such as suspension/expulsion, alternative programs, or gifted/talented programs.

If the State of Indiana has a responsibility for educating Indiana's children, then it also has a responsibility to ensure that education is delivered equitably and fairly for *all* children. The Education subcommittee believes that, to make progress in the state in addressing disproportionality, the accountability model being used in special education must be generalized to other areas in which there are racial and ethnic disparities. That is, local data on disproportionality must become the basis for an accountability system, including minimum criteria and mandated corrective action plans for school corporations failing to reach those criteria. At the same time however, such a system cannot be simply an unfunded mandate. Rather, schools and school districts must be supported in putting into place practices, policies, and procedures that hold promise for reducing racial and ethnic disparities.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

Fortunately, there is a substantial knowledge base regarding best practices to address disproportionality. Best Practice strategies to address the issue of disproportionality, including:

- *Targeting Early Literacy Skills:* With early detection and intervention, it is possible to significantly reduce the proportion of children with reading difficulties. When students have the skills they need to be good readers, better academic and behavioral outcomes are observed.
- *Implementation of a Response-to Intervention Framework:* Response to Intervention (RTI) is an emerging approach to meeting the needs of all students in which students exhibiting academic or behavioral difficulties are provided evidenced-based interventions at the first sign of difficulty.
- *Utilizing Cultural Responsive Pedagogy and Classroom Management:* Culturally responsive curriculum, instructional strategies, and classroom management strategies incorporate the cultural knowledge and experiences of diverse learners in an attempt to make learning encounters more relevant and effective, thereby increasing achievement.
- *Strengthening Family and School Partnerships:* Enhancing collaboration among schools and families results in better outcomes for children. Research indicates that increased levels of parent involvement are associated with improved academic achievement, more positive behavior, improved attendance, and reduction in drop-out rates.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The education sub-committee is in the process of reviewing data concerning disproportionality, and promising practices for addressing disparities, with the goal of identifying the most promising strategies in policy and practice that could address the various sources of disproportionality in education in Indiana.

We welcome hearing your thoughts as we move forward with the Commission's work. Please refer to the commission's web site for the latest available information about our efforts, at [www.socialwork.indiana.edu](http://www.socialwork.indiana.edu).