RACIAL BIAS & DISCRIMINATION

Racial disparities in school discipline are stark in California, with 3 times more Black students being suspended than their white peers.[1]

Studies on race and school discipline do not support a conclusion that disparities are based on Black students misbehaving at higher rates. In fact, research has revealed that Black students receive harsher punishments than white students for the same behavior.[2] When implementing discipline strategies, it is important to consider the existence and root causes of disproportionate discipline for students of color and proactively use alternative approaches that directly address racial disproportionality.

CAUSES OF DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT IN DISCIPLINE

IMPLICIT RACIAL BIAS

Implicit or unconscious biases refer to stereotypes that operate without an individual's conscious awareness or control. We are all affected, in one way or another, by the society in which we exist. These attitudes or stereotypes can affect a person's thoughts, actions, and decisions in reference to the subjects of their biases, especially when the person is stressed, tired, or forced to make a decision quickly. Implicit prejudice is understood to reflect associations between social categories (e.g. Black/White, old/young) and evaluations (e.g. good/bad, smart/dumb). Mental connections about the characteristics associated with people of each race develop early, and a study found that around 80% of children had already developed pro-White/anti-Black sentiments by age 6.[3] Latinx students have reported feeling the impact of such implicit bias, for example, in how some teachers have lower academic expectations of them and discourage their class participation.[4]

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism occurs in the education system when schools or districts remain unconscious of issues related to race, or more actively perpetuate and enforce a dominant racial perspective or belief – for instance, that the attitudes and abilities of students of color and their families are a basis for academic or discipline disparities, or that schools that are primarily attended by students of

color need more police because they are more dangerous. It can also be seen in the school context in discipline practices, in the tracking of students of color into lower academic coursework, and in allocating fewer resources to schools and classes with high proportions of students of color.

CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Cultural conflicts exist between the culture of many students of color and the dominant culture of the schools they attend.

Verbal and nonverbal communication differences can further cultural conflict and misinterpretation between school staff and students of different backgrounds. For example, many teachers may misinterpret the more active and physical style of communication of Black males to be combative or argumentative.[5] Accordingly, teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent Black males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority.[6]

Social class, as well as generational and experiential differences, can also increase the divide and subsequent misunderstanding between students and their teachers and administrators – even those with similar ethnic backgrounds.

PROACTIVELY ADDRESSING DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT IN DISCIPLINE

Below are a number of suggestions for how schools can begin to address

the disproportionate impact of school discipline practices on their students of color:

1. Engage in "Courageous Conversations" to Transform School Practice

The authors of <u>Courageous Conversations About Race</u> call upon educators to have real, authentic, and hard conversations about race and racism in their schools, to commit to equity for all students, and to practice "anti-racism" (an ongoing practice of assessing how everyone perpetuates injustice and prejudices toward those who are not members of the dominant race) to change the paradigm and effectively address racial disparities. They have developed a field guide to help create the space and structure for school staff to discuss and address racism in schools.

2. Teach Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (CRCM)

CRCM[7] is a pedagogical approach to running classrooms for all children in a culturally responsive way.

3. Revise Discipline Policies & Practices

In addition to incorporating the evidence based non-punitive alterna-tives to traditional school discipline practices – such as school wide positive behavior interventions and supports, restorative practices, social emotional learning, and trauma sensitive strategies

– removing subjective offenses like "willful defiance" from the menu of disciplinary offenses and ensuring that every offense has clear, objective parameters can help militate against the negative impact of implicit bias in disciplinary decision making.[8]

4. Examine Suspension and Expulsion Data

Regular examination of discipline data – disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any intersection of those identities – can inform decisions about discipline policies that systemically address disproportionate disciplinary outcomes.

5. Increase Awareness of Factors that Influence Discipline Decisions

Teachers and administrators can learn more about the potential for bias when issuing discipline referrals by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Knowing the implicit associations one might make about people of certain identities can help a teacher or administrator begin to work against the effects of implicit bias. Take the IAT online here: implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html.

6. Hire Diverse Instructional and Administrative Staff

Hiring teachers and staff who are from similar cultural backgrounds as the marginalized students of a school can help to positively shift culture in environments where implicit biases have been unchallenged in the past[9]

7. Actively Pursue and Maintain Relationships with Family and Community

Fostering collaborative relationships with individuals who are members of students' culture will increase educators' understanding of student background. These partnerships will, therefore, minimize the number of students who disconnect from the school environment, and assist schools to engage in effective, culturally competent management of student behavior.

8. Employ a "So What" Test

When a student's behavior doesn't conform to a certain expectation, a teacher or administrator can ask him/herself, "So what if the students work together on an assignment instead of alone?" or "So what if the student wants to partially stand while doing his work?" By assessing the potential harm of a behavior, if any, a teacher can direct teaching time and effort at rules that protect and improve student education and learning environments.