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School discipline tougher on African Americans

By Howard Witt

Tribune senior correspondent

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In the average New Jersey public school, African-American students are almost 60 times as likely as white students to be expelled for serious disciplinary infractions.

In Minnesota, black students are suspended 6 times as often as whites.

In Iowa, blacks make up just 5 percent of the statewide public school enrollment but account for 22 percent of the students who get suspended.

Fifty years after federal troops escorted nine black students through the doors of an all-white high school in Little Rock, Ark., in a landmark school integration struggle, America's public schools remain as unequal as they have ever been when measured in terms of disciplinary sanctions such as suspensions and expulsions, according to little-noticed data collected by the U.S. Department of Education for the 2004-2005 school year.

In every state but Idaho, a Tribune analysis of the data shows, black students are being suspended in numbers greater than would be expected from their proportion of the student population. In 21 states—Illinois among them—that disproportionality is so pronounced that the percentage of black suspensions is more than double their percentage of the student body. And on average across the nation, black students are suspended and expelled at nearly three times the rate of white students.

No other ethnic group is disciplined at such a high rate, the federal data show. Hispanic students are suspended and expelled in almost direct proportion to their populations, while white and Asian students are disciplined far less.

Yet black students are no more likely to misbehave than other students from the same social and economic environments, research studies have found. Some impoverished black children grow up in troubled neighborhoods and come from broken families, leaving them less equipped to conform to behavioral expectations in school. While such socioeconomic factors contribute to the disproportionate discipline rates, researchers say that poverty alone cannot explain the disparities. "There simply isn't any support for the notion that, given the same set of circumstances, African-American kids act out to a greater degree than other kids," said Russell Skiba, a professor of educational psychology at Indiana University whose research focuses on race and discipline issues in public schools. "In fact, the data indicate that African-American students are punished more severely for the same offense, so clearly something else is going on. We can call it structural inequity or we can call it institutional racism."

Academic researchers have been quietly collecting evidence of such race-based disciplinary disparities for more than 25 years. Yet the phenomenon remains largely obscured from public view by the popular emphasis on "zero tolerance" crackdowns, which are supposed to deliver equally harsh punishments based on a student's infraction, not skin color.

That's not what the data say is happening. Yet the federal Education Department's Office of Civil Rights, which is charged with investigating allegations of discriminatory discipline policies in the nation's public schools, has opened just one such probe in the past three years. Officials declined requests to explain why.

There's more at stake than just a few bad marks in a student's school record. Studies show that a history of school suspensions or expulsions is a strong predictor of future trouble with the law—and the first step on what civil rights leaders have described as a "school-to-prison pipeline" for black youths, who represent 16 percent of U.S. adolescents but 38 percent of those incarcerated in youth prisons.

Relatively few school districts scattered across the country have begun to acknowledge the issue of racial disparities in discipline and tried to do something about it.

In Austin, after administrators discovered that black youths accounted for 14 percent of the school district's population but 37 percent of the students sent to punitive alternative schools, they introduced a program in some schools based on encouraging positive student behaviors rather than punishing negative ones.

At one school, Pickle Elementary, which serves mostly Hispanic and black students, the results were dramatic—disciplinary referrals dropped from 520 in 2001-2002 to just 20 last year.

"I am not going to give up on a child and suspend him or send him to an alternative school," said Julie Pryor, who was the principal of the school when the behavioral program was implemented and is now a district administrator. "Washing our hands of a child will never change his behavior, it just makes it worse. These are children. It's up to us to be creative to find ways to help them behave."

But academic experts say many more school administrators, when confronted with data showing disparate rates of discipline for minority students, react like officials in the small east Texas town of Paris and strenuously deny accusations of racial discrimination.

Paris is the sole school district in the nation currently under investigation by the federal Education Department to determine whether higher discipline rates for black students there constitute institutionalized discrimination. The probe has been under way for more than a year.

"The school district has been a leader and very progressive when it comes to race relations," Dennis Eichelbaum, the attorney for the Paris Independent School District, said in an interview earlier this year.

That perspective is not shared by the families of many of Paris' black students, who make up 40

percent of the school district's nearly 4,000 students.

"They say there's no racism here, but if you go inside a school and look in the room where they send the kids for detention, almost all the faces are black," said Brenda Cherry, a Paris civil rights activist who assembled some of the complaints that sparked the federal investigation. "Unless black people are just a bad race of people, something is wrong here."

Exactly why black students across the nation are suspended and expelled more frequently than children of other races is a question that continues to perplex sociologists.

Socioeconomic factors are certainly at play, researchers believe.

"Studies of school suspension have consistently documented disproportionality by socioeconomic status. Students who receive free school lunch are at increased risk for school suspension," according to "The Color of Discipline," a 2000 study by Skiba and other researchers in Indiana and Nebraska. Another study concluded that "students whose fathers did not have a full-time job were significantly more likely to be suspended than students whose fathers were employed full time."

But those studies and others have repeatedly found that racial factors are even more important.

"Poor home environment does carry over into the school environment," said Skiba, who is widely regarded as the nation's foremost authority on school discipline and race. "But middle-class and upper-class black students are also being disciplined more often than their white peers. Skin color in itself is a part of this function."

Some experts point to cultural miscommunications between black students and white teachers, who fill 83 percent of the nation's teaching ranks. In fact, the Tribune analysis found, some of the highest rates of racially disproportionate discipline are found in states with the lowest minority populations, where the disconnect between white teachers and black students is potentially the greatest.

"White teachers feel more threatened by boys of color," said Isela Gutierrez, a juvenile justice expert at the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, a watchdog and policy group. "They are viewed as disruptive. What might be their more assertive way of asking a question, for example, is viewed as popping off at the mouth."

Nor has the decline of court-ordered integration across the nation and the gradual resegregation of urban schools in recent decades made much difference in disciplinary rates. Even in urban schools where most of the students are black, black youths are still disciplined out of proportion to their population, the data show. In Washington, D.C., for example, black students are 84 percent of the public school population but 97 percent of the students who are suspended. Other researchers believe that zero-tolerance policies, which encourage teachers and administrators to crack down on even minor, non-violent misbehavior, are exacerbating racial disparities. Some states, such as Texas, are so zealous that they have criminalized many school infractions, saddling tens of thousands of students with misdemeanor criminal records for offenses such as

swearing or disrupting class.

The school security climate, in turn, can reinforce race-based expectations about which students are most likely to require discipline.

"Most suburban schools, where the students are more likely to be white, purchase security equipment that is meant to protect children—for example, hand scanners that make sure that the parent/guardian picking up the child is legitimate," said Ronnie Casella, an expert on the criminalization of student behavior at Central Connecticut State University. "In contrast, urban schools choose equipment such as metal detectors and surveillance cameras that are meant to catch youths committing crimes."

The new behavioral program being tried in Austin, and some 6,500 schools nationwide, seeks to turn zero tolerance on its head in a bid to slash the number of suspensions, expulsions and other punishments meted out by teachers.

Called "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports," the intensive regimen requires a commitment from an entire school, including training of students in the behaviors that are expected of them and re-education of teachers and administrators in the use of positive motivational techniques.

The interactions of individual teachers with their students are minutely scrutinized by a team of experts to pinpoint communication breakdowns, and specialized counseling teams are deployed to work with students who present the most serious discipline issues so that classroom teachers are not left to deal with the problems on their own.

"Most schools use a get-tough, punish-the-kids kind of perspective, which results in the kinds of racial disciplinary disparities we see across the country," said George Sugai, a professor of education at the University of Connecticut who helped create the positive behavioral program. "We come at it from the other perspective: If you teach kids the behaviors that are expected, you have a greater likelihood of success. It's really more about changing how adults interact with kids than it is about changing the kids."

Schools like Pickle Elementary in Austin that are using the positive behavioral program often report sharp reductions in their disciplinary referrals. But Skiba, who is currently studying the effectiveness of the program, cautions that it does not always eliminate racial disparities.

"They've been very successful at reducing rates of suspension and expulsion while making schools function more effectively," Skiba said of the schools using the program. "But if you look at the data by race, what you find is that some discrepancies still exist. It's not enough to put this program in place and say, 'We are happy to reduce our rates of suspension,' because what we might have done is reduce our white suspensions and increase our African-American suspensions. There's just no silver bullet for this problem."

hwitt@tribune.com

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