

# GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR ADDRESSING SUSPENSION DISPROPORTIONALITY

**Dr. John O'Connor**

*The IDEA of 2004 requires State Education Agencies and school districts address disproportionality for students with disabilities. John O'Connor is the Assistant Superintendent for Student Services with the Atlanta Public School System. For several years, he has worked to improve racial and ethnic disproportionality in special and general education.*

It is very clear that in the United States some racial/ethnic groups of students with disabilities are over-suspended for disciplinary reasons. African American students with disabilities across the country, for example, have a much higher risk of being suspended than students from other racial and ethnic groups. This is a tragedy and we must address it. As special education leaders, we are charged with addressing suspension disproportionality for students with disabilities. This issue is extremely complicated. Unfortunately, in this article I am not offering a clear set of solutions. Even though much has been written about suspension disproportionality (the clear evidence that it exists, potential causes and theoretical solutions) a clear path for improvement has been elusive. There are many opinions and opinion-based articles available, but there is very little replicable research on how to correct the issue. In the absence of universally accepted researched-based solutions, I am offering some questions and ideas that may be helpful as you engage your district in this extremely important and valuable work.

## **Is suspension disproportionality a “disability” issue?**

No. The 2004 IDEA federal legislation addresses suspension disproportionality exclusively for students with disabilities. The truth is that the over-suspension of some students with disabilities is merely a symptom of a larger problem. School districts are not merely over-suspending some minority students with disabilities. They are over-suspending select minority students who do not have disabilities. We cannot correct disproportionality for students *with* disabilities in isolation. In fact, since we know that disproportionality impacts non-disabled students, we have the moral obligation to address it for all students even if IDEA only speaks toward students with disabilities. By addressing the larger issue for all students, we will in turn impact suspension rates for students with disabilities.

Therefore, analyze the suspension patterns for “all students” by race and ethnicity and share that information with your

district leaders. Hopefully, that will start some momentum so that interventions are not driven by the Special Education Department in your district. Addressing suspension disproportionality for all students cannot be seen as a special education issue. It must be addressed by all educators. The Special Education Department can certainly play a part, a big part, but the major momentum and activities to correct this issue must be led by the overall administrative leaders in order to impact all students.

## **Do you have misconceptions about suspension disproportionality?**

Maybe. When we think about the over suspension of some minority groups, a certain image comes to mind. The average person envisions a school with a highly diverse student population. As students are referred to the office for disciplinary incidents, we envision that different consequences – particularly suspensions – are meted out to students from different racial/ethnic groups.

This perception of suspension disproportionality may not be true in your school district. In the U.S., unfortunately many *schools* are relatively mono-ethnic while the *district* may be diverse. In some schools, the overwhelming majority of students may be from one racial/ethnic group. Some schools have a student body that is overwhelmingly white while other schools are predominantly African American or Hispanic etc.

I previously worked in an enormously diverse school district. We had around 100,000 students with the majority being African American. The English Learner population exceeded 10,000 students and was growing by 1,000 students a year. There were roughly 170 countries and 140 languages and dialects represented. We also had one of the largest refugee resettlement areas in the country. Even with that diversity, almost all of the schools were relatively mono-racial or mono-ethnic. In fact, in all but a few schools, wide-ranging racial or ethnic diversity did not exist. The overwhelming majority of schools were almost exclusively African American. There were a few schools whose student body was almost exclusively white and a few schools had a majority of Hispanic students. So even in a school district that benefited from great diversity, that diversity did not exist at the local school.

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If these enrollment patterns exist in your school district, you can't see suspension disproportionality at the school level. It only becomes apparent when data are aggregated at the district level. How does this impact our work? Focus on clear communication and messaging. Many school principals have asked, "How can my school be disproportionate? If I suspend virtually any student, they are going to be African American because my student body is almost exclusively African American." In that school, you can't see disproportionality. There are virtually no students from different races and ethnicities to compare suspension patterns. The school administration is not seeing a diverse group of students being referred to the office to await their consequences. Therefore, you have to message that the suspension patterns in this school far exceed the suspension patterns in other schools. Students (who in this example are African American) at this school have a greater risk of being suspended than students from other schools (who are not). This then leads to discussion about interventions. In this scenario, the interventions should focus on schools that have a high rate of suspensions across their student body.

This may not be the case in your district. The common perception of disproportionality may be actualized in your schools. At each of your schools, there may be a wonderful degree of diversity. Either way, it is worthwhile to dig a little deeper across the district and at each school to determine the patterns that can potentially help lead to effective interventions.

### **Is PBIS the answer?**

Maybe. Maybe not. Many conversations about suspension disproportionality lead to discussions about Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. I am confident that PBIS, when implemented with fidelity across a school, can increase students' appropriate behavior and reduce Office Discipline Referrals and suspensions. Therefore, it is a very good thing. The question, though, is does it impact racial/ethnic disproportionality? In order for this to be the case, the variable of PBIS, must have a greater positive impact on the group of students who are over-suspended than other groups of students. If PBIS was equally implemented in all schools across a district with the same level of fidelity, does the variable of PBIS reduce suspension at a greater rate for the over-suspended group than other students? If all groups of students see the same level of reduction in suspensions, then the climate of the schools and overall student behavior may improve, but the statistical disproportionality remains the same.

I don't think that we have clear and compelling evidence that PBIS has a greater impact on over-suspended student groups when compared to other groups. Over the last several years, thousands of schools have implemented PBIS. Many of these large cohorts have been sponsored, for lack of a better term, through federal grants or State Education Agencies. The data is certainly available to determine if large-scale reductions in disproportionality have resulted from PBIS initiatives, but that clear evidence seems to be elusive.

PBIS, when implemented with fidelity, is a very good thing. But, if equally applied to all schools, does it correct disproportionality? Perhaps not.

But, there is another option. What if PBIS was not equally applied? What if schools in a district were ranked ranging from high suspension practices to low suspension practices? Then, PBIS was applied only to those schools that had the highest suspension practices. If those schools had a student body made up largely of students from the over-suspended group, then disproportionality could be reduced.

It would never be appropriate to only apply PBIS to schools with higher populations of minority students because of the race and ethnicity of the students. In fact, making any decision about any student based on his race or ethnicity is wholly inappropriate. But, if your district implements PBIS in schools with the highest suspension patterns and those schools are mostly made up of students from the over-suspended group, then disproportionality can theoretically be statistically and pragmatically impacted.

### **Is cultural competency the solution?**

Many individuals offer cultural competency as the answer for correcting suspension disproportionality practices. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, objective replicable research is needed on this intervention. That is not to say, that it may not be helpful, but it certainly warrants further investigation before we determine the validity of this approach toward correcting suspension disproportionality.

Another barrier to this supposed solution might also exist. The common perception of disproportionality also contains the element of cross racial suspensions and disciplinary actions. Many assume that the teachers who refer students to the office and the school administrators who suspend the students are a different race or ethnicity than the over-suspended students. That may or may not be the case. If

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over-suspensions were caused by different races or ethnicities between the administrators/teachers and students, then suspension disproportionality would not exist in schools and districts where the student body is the same race and ethnicity as the teachers and administrators. Across the country, is suspension disproportionality evident in school districts in which the teachers, school administrators, and students are primarily the same race or ethnicity? Unfortunately, yes.

Suspension disproportionality exists in a wide variety of school districts, where there is great diversity between the adults and students and also in districts where the adults and students are the same race and ethnicity.

Therefore, the theory that cultural competence training would eliminate the over-suspension of some racial and ethnic groups is highly suspect. I certainly acknowledge that culture goes well beyond race and ethnicity. Certainly all members of a racial or ethnic group do not share the same culture. Conversely, individuals from the different races and ethnicities can share the same culture. I suggest that if you are considering cultural competency training as a corrective intervention, determine if the vendor can show that their interventions have reduced suspension disproportionality. Also, determine if the adults and students in your school have the similar cultural experiences, thereby limiting the potential impact of that intervention.

**Is suspension disproportionality caused by: racism in our society, socioeconomic factors, high risk neighborhoods, vulnerable family situations, or poor role models in our celebrity culture?**

All of these factors and many other non-school issues probably contribute to suspension disproportionality. Many school

personnel will want to spend a tremendous amount of time discussing non-school issues and how those factors must be corrected before we can truly move forward. Some of these points may be legitimate but we, as educators, cannot control them. We would make much more progress in our schools if somehow all elements of our society were aligned toward supporting our young people. In an ideal world, there would be no racism and all of our students would be living in stable homes. There would be no poverty and all famous athletes and actors would be good role models. That would be ideal, but it is not likely to happen. Even if our society does not make movement on any of those issues, we still have our obligation as educators. We must still find a way to improve our schools so that all of our students are supported and spend their time in class rather than in suspension. Lack of movement on our societal issues does not absolve us, as educators, of our obligation to reduce suspension disproportionality.

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## CASE ELECTION 2013

Results Announced at Annual CASE Joint Membership/BOD Meeting, San Antonio, TX

Dr. Mary Kealy (VA), Past President, announced the 2013 elections results at the Annual CASE Joint membership/Board of Directors meeting held Wednesday, April 3, 2013 at the San Antonio Grand Hyatt. Dr. Kealy thanked all the very capable nominees and announced, Julie Bost (NC), the current CASE secretary as the Secretary for



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the 2013-15 term. Julie is completing the term for Laural Jackson (AK) who had to resign due to being elected to the CEC Board of Directors. President VanderPloeg appointed Mrs. Bost in January to complete Mrs. Jackson's term. Julie has represented NC at the BOD meeting in the past and had several NC CEC positions.