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Griego: A 35-year-old replay on school suspensions

By Tina Griego
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A quiz.

In what years were the following written:

A) "Racial gaps in suspensions — Black public-school students in Colorado are nearly three times as likely to face serious discipline as their white peers, a disparity that is persistently growing despite efforts to curb it. . . . Expressed as a rate, 18 of every 100 black students and 11 of 100 Latino students faced serious discipline, compared with 6.5 out of 100 white students."

B) "Minority school suspensions a shocker — Suspensions last year of more than 47,000 students, including disproportionate numbers of black and Hispanic males, have prompted educators and policymakers to ask why. Nearly half of all black males in Colorado's middle and high schools were suspended last year, along with nearly a third of Hispanic males and one in every six white males."

C) "Suspensions impact some children more than others. While the largest numbers of suspended children are white, proportionately suspensions hurt more children who are black, poor, older and male. Most striking is the disparate suspension of black schoolchildren. They are suspended at twice the rate of any other group."

A was published this week.

B comes from a story printed in this paper in January 1996.

The last is from a study drawn from suspension data submitted to the federal Office for Civil Rights by 2,862 school districts, from an independent survey of more than 6,500 families in nine states and the District of Columbia, and from more than 300 additional interviews with school officials and community leaders.

It was published by the Children's Defense Fund in 1974.

Thirty-five years pass, and we're still asking why. Thirty-five years and we're still falling into predictable camps.

On one end of the spectrum are those who say the problem is racism, individual, institutional. On the other are those who say black and Latino kids are disciplined at higher rates because they misbehave at higher rates. Both are oversimplifications.

In post-desegregation 1974, the Children's Defense Fund found much racism but argued it was "part and parcel of a pervasive intolerance by school officials for children who are different in any number of ways."

In 2010, the data raise more questions than answers. It doesn't tell us minority kids are receiving harsher punishment than white kids for the same misbehavior. Districts don't have to report racial breakdowns for each offense. It doesn't say black and Latino kids are misbehaving more. It tells us they are reported more.

The most common offenses reported by school districts fall into the categories of "detrimental" and "disobedient." What that is often lies in the eye of the beholder.

Beware of generalizations and assumptions because it's a "very complex issue," the Colorado Department of Education's Janelle Krueger says. It was she and her colleagues who plotted four years of state discipline data and found themselves stunned.

Year after year, with almost no variation, about 19 percent of black students were disciplined. Year after year, about 14 percent of American Indian, 13 percent of Latino, 7 percent of white and 5 percent of Asian students were disciplined.

"The data, on the surface, is only data," Krueger says. "It's factual. It's intended to prompt questions. This appears to be a trend. Why isn't it changing? What would cause it to change? This is a pattern across all races, including whites."

I once observed a young and valiant teacher trying to handle his first freshman class. They were openly, breathtakingly defiant. He posted the rules. He spoke to them in a calm voice. They reduced him to tears.

About 95 percent of the students were Latino. But 95 percent of them also were entering high school far below grade level. I'm talking fourth-, fifth-, sixth-grade reading levels. Many could not do the work. So, yes, some misbehaved because they could, but some acted out of shame and frustration and false bravado. Several would cut class and fall further behind. They were punished for their truancy with out-of-school suspension. Explain the logic of that.

I put the scenario to Marco Nuñez, director of organizing for Padres Unidos, a nonprofit that has helped move Denver Public Schools' discipline policy away from a reliance on suspensions and police citations.

Núñez asked: "When you have 4 out of 100 students who are proficient in math, when you have such a huge achievement gap, what relation does that have to behavioral issues?"

Add that question to the mix, and ask another one: What are the consequences of disproportionate suspension rates of blacks and Latinos?

Easy answer. It means they're out of class more than their peers. It means they are falling further behind. It means they are at far greater risk of dropping out of school.

The data are what they are and demand thought, soul-searching and more digging. Or in 35 years, we'll be reading the same headline.

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