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Data shows racial gaps in Colorado public-school suspensions

Minority students' rates still higher than whites'

By **Burt Hubbard**
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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.

In the 2008-09 school year, about 70,000, or 8.5 percent, of the state's 818,000 students were suspended, expelled or disciplined for being disruptive, according to a Denver Post analysis of newly released data. Reasons ranged from drug, weapon and alcohol infractions to disobedient and detrimental behavior, the most common — and subjective — reasons.

But while black students make up just 5.9 percent of the student population, they were the subject of 12.7 percent of the discipline cases, up from 11.7 percent five years ago. White students, who were about 61 percent of the population, were the subject of 46.8 percent of discipline cases.

Latino students make up 28.4 percent of the population and were involved in 37 percent of discipline cases, another persistent gap.

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 and 8.5 of 100 students overall.

In the Colorado Springs 11 district, 31 percent of black students were suspended, expelled or disciplined last year. The district's student population is 11 percent black.

"It's discouraging," said Mike Poore, deputy superintendent for the Colorado Springs 11 school district.

"On expulsion, suspension, achievement, we have not closed the gap. We should be called out for that, I guess. We're working hard to make changes."

The racial gaps also are large when gender is considered. Among male students, 23.7 percent of blacks faced discipline compared with 14.9 percent of Latinos and 9.5 percent of whites, the analysis showed.

The gaps among racial groups have remained constant over the years, said Janelle Krueger with the Colorado Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools division.

"Every race and ethnicity is flat-lined, and it struck us in the face how alarming that is because you are looking at institutionalized attitudes and behaviors," Krueger said.

The disproportionate rate of suspensions for black students needs to be addressed to improve achievement, said Dr. Levester Lyons, president of the Aurora branch of the NAACP.

"Emotional trauma"

"Some students suffer emotional trauma when they are suspended or expelled, which may cause them to be rebellious when they return back to campus," Lyons said. "Students who feel suspension or expulsion was unjustified may lose trust in the education system."

Among school districts with sizable black student populations, Colorado Springs had the highest discipline rate for those students, 31 percent, followed by Aurora at 23 percent and Denver at 19 percent. The rate is up in Colorado Springs from five years ago but down in Denver and Aurora.

Poore said the Colorado Springs school board wants to reduce both the discipline and achievement racial gaps by 10 percent this year.

"We're really bothered by this," he said.

In Aurora, the school district is in the midst of providing "equity training" to administrators and teachers to get a better handle on why suspension rates are high for black students and lower the gap, said Superintendent John Barry.

"We're trying to figure that out. I don't have a good answer for that now," Barry said. "Over-representation is a concern."

Lyons said the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is working with Barry and the district to set up pilot programs to address suspensions and expulsions among minority students.

"That doesn't mean that the Aurora Public School District doesn't have issues they need to address internally, such as increasing diversity among its staff and evaluating instructors, staff and administrators who have a history of disproportionately disciplining African-American students," Lyons said.

Among the difficulties in addressing the gap is determining whether black students are suspended for different offenses at varying rates compared with other races. While the most common offenses for discipline for "disobedient" or "detrimental" behavior, both more

subjective offenses than weapons possession, for example, the state does not require school districts to submit racial breakdowns for each offense.

There are bright spots in the data. From the 2000 school year to the 2008 school year, the percent of students disciplined in Colorado fell from 11.1 percent to 8.5 percent.

Judith Martinez, with the Colorado Department of Education's Prevention Initiatives, said the decline is a move away from no-tolerance policies and toward a state program on a positive behavior system.

"For a period of time, there was really a trend of zero tolerance," Martinez said.

Pilot program

Under the positive-behavior approach, schools are trained to identify conduct, such as respect, it wants students to emphasize and come up with rewards and punishments, she said.

"That way, all the teachers know how to respond early and appropriately as opposed to punitively and reactionary," said Cindy Wakefield, a state preventions initiative specialist.

Different approaches are reflected in the data.

The Colorado Springs school district combines the positive-behavior approach with a no-tolerance policy toward student behavior, said Elaine Naleski, spokeswoman for the district.

Colorado Springs, which disciplined 17 percent of its students last year, had the highest overall suspension rate among Front Range school districts, except Sheridan, during a time when suspensions statewide were falling. Sheridan, with only 1,640 students, disciplined 21 percent of its student body.

On the other end of the spectrum, Boulder Valley schools use formal suspensions as a last resort after trying to work out problems with students, said administration official Michele DeBerry. Only 3 percent of Boulder students faced discipline last year.

Denver's rate fell from 13 percent to 11 percent, and Aurora dropped from 15 percent to 13 percent of all students.

Denver Public Schools revamped its disciplinary approach several years ago after a study by Padres Unidos, an advocacy group, found that district disciplined too many students for nonviolent offenses and disproportionately targeted minorities.

It also de-emphasizes sending students home as part of the suspension instead of keeping them in school.

"I think we've taken a totally different look at it," said Cheryl Karstaedt, outgoing director of DPS Student Services. "Kids aren't going to learn if they aren't in school."

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