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Study racial disparity in student discipline

School districts should be required to keep detailed data in order to understand why minorities are more likely to be disciplined.

By The Denver Post
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Statistics showing Colorado's minority students are disproportionately more likely to be disciplined than their white peers are troubling and need further study.

A story by The Post's Burt Hubbard last week spelled out how, for instance, black students are three times more likely to be disciplined than white students.

What the statistics don't tell you is why there is such a disparity. One way to get closer to the answer, we think, is to require school districts to keep detailed statistics that are broken down by race and offense.

School administrators then could look at what presumably are non-subjective offenses, such as weapons possession, and look at the racial breakdowns. Comparing those to the subjective offenses, where school personnel make the determination that a student is disobedient, can provide some finer information as to who is being disciplined and why.

Are minority students being disproportionately disciplined for displaying "detrimental behavior"? If so, then school administrators need to ask questions as to why.

The answers could be attributable to cultural differences between staff and the student body, or they could be rooted in behaviors attributable to a lack of a structured home life.

No one should make assumptions about what such rough data really mean without investigating. And you can't investigate unless the data are specific.

The state ought to require school districts to collect data by offense, broken down by race and school.

Overall, though, the broad, general statistics are cause for concern.

Hubbard's analysis found big disparities. It showed 18 of every 100 black students and 11 of 100 Latino students faced serious discipline. That compares to 6.5 out of 100 white students.

Aurora Superintendent John Barry is among the school administrators who are working to figure out what is at work behind the numbers. The district is providing "equity training" to administrators and teachers to get at why suspension rates are high for black students.

One step that Denver Public Schools has taken, which we think is a very good idea, is to reduce its reliance on out-of-school suspensions to discipline children. After all, they're there to learn, and we think in-school suspensions — basically staying in study hall all day — are far preferable to sending them home to get into more trouble.

The statistical disparities pose troubling questions that must be answered and addressed. We hope the state and districts come up with sound answers.