

Study: Black students disproportionately punished in WV schools

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A new report says that while blacks made up only 5 percent of students in West Virginia K-12 public schools in the 2011-12 academic year, they represented 11 percent of students who received out-of-school suspensions and 8 percent of those who were expelled.

The study — “Disproportionate impact of K-12 suspension and expulsion on Black students in southern states,” released Tuesday by the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education — analyzed West Virginia and a dozen other states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

All 13 states, which doled out 55 percent of black out-of-school suspensions in public schools nationwide, showed a racial disparity.

Edward Smith, a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education and co-author of the study, said national news media attention and education seems to focus on the coasts and the Northeast.

“We certainly want to make sure that, nationally, we don’t lose sight of the South,” Smith said.

Black students represented a much higher percentage of enrollment in the other states studied; next to West Virginia, Kentucky had the next lowest proportion, at 11 percent. However, West Virginia and five others — Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia — suspended blacks at rates double their representation in student populations.

The study used data reported to the federal Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. More recent data reported by the West Virginia Department of Education, for the 2013-14 school year, shows that while black students still made up only 5 percent of students that school year, they represented 8 percent of all students referred for discipline actions. All other race and ethnic categories were disciplined at rates comparable to their representation in the student population.

“Risk ratios revealed Black students to be two times more likely to experience single suspensions, and 2.5 to 3 times more likely to experience multiple suspensions,” the state department’s Office of Research stated in a report it released in May. “Black students were at increased risk of experiencing expulsion.”

The state also has released information suggesting that students who are disciplined more score lower on standardized tests.

The state’s reports don’t break the discipline data down by district, but the University of Pennsylvania study does. While 12.7 percent of Kanawha County’s students identified as black in the 2011-12 school year, 23.3 percent of the students who received out-of-school suspensions from Kanawha schools identified as black. That was 1.8 times their representation in the student population.

Blacks only represented 2 percent of students in Putnam County, but they accounted for 6.7 percent of suspensions, or 3.3 times their representation in enrollment there.

Three Mountain State school districts suspended black students at a rate more than five times their representation in enrollment. They all had black student populations under 2 percent of total enrollment:

Hampshire County, where blacks were 12.2 percent of all students suspended despite comprising only 1.6 percent of enrollment, for a rate of 7.7 times their representation

Randolph County, where blacks were 6.2 percent of all student suspended despite representing only .8 percent of enrollment, for a rate of 7.4 times their representation

Wayne County, where blacks were 7.5 percent of all students suspended despite representing only 1.2 percent of the student population, for a rate of 6.2 times their representation

The superintendent of Randolph's school district didn't return a request for comment Tuesday. The superintendent of Hampshire County's schools, Skip Hackworth, said Tuesday he hadn't seen the report but that his own review of the data from the federal Office for Civil Rights didn't reveal any discipline problems for the 2011-12 school year. Both superintendents have been in their positions less than a year.

The Lincoln and Pleasants school districts suspended their black students at a rate of 4.5 times their representation in the population. Overall, the report showed 39 of the state's 55 counties had racial disparities in discipline; the study didn't provide data on Calhoun and Taylor counties. Smith said he didn't know specifically why, and said the districts in the studies represented all those that reported data to the U.S. Department of Education.

He suggested those reviewing the data should consider the impact that "just a few, or perhaps a dozen students receiving disciplinary actions would have on the entire school population," in some West Virginia districts, but he also noted there's "really no number and no threshold as to which pronounced negative impacts unveil themselves."

He suggested schools in the states studied eliminate "zero tolerance" policies regarding student discipline and provide professional development to counter racial bias. When asked what impact wider societal disparities harming blacks — like higher rates of poverty — might have on black students' behavior, he said he doesn't know if there's any credible evidence to suggest black students actually misbehave more than whites. His report cites other research showing that blacks are more likely to be disciplined for more subjective offenses — like disrespect, excessive noise and loitering — than white students, who were more likely to be suspended for things like smoking and vandalism.

"We would hope that education systems, school districts and schools are better than the larger society, that they not just reflect the larger society," he said. "That they hold themselves to a level of humanity that are perhaps not seen in other institutions in the states."

The study cites others' research indicating that the racial disparity issue appears at the start of public education.

“Despite the regularity with which racial disparities and racism in school discipline have been documented, Blacks and other students of color continue to be suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups,” the study says. “During the 2011-12 academic year, Black kids comprised only 18 percent of preschoolers in the U.S., but were 42 percent of students suspended once and 48 percent of students suspended multiple times from preschools.”

Missy Ruddle, the Kanawha school district’s assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, said the county knows suspensions don’t help kids, and it started looking closer at student discipline data around the 2011-12 school year that the University of Pennsylvania’s study concerned. She said school leaders see the racial disparity and are working to address it, including through cutting back on out-of-school suspensions in the past few years, undertaking community programs to aid the many black students on Charleston’s West Side and providing professional development to address racial bias among school employees.

“We haven’t won the war, probably, but we are looking at how we are addressing our discipline,” Ruddle said.

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