



## Study: Black boys suspended more, in early grades

Black students also are disproportionately more likely to be restrained

By Kristen Taketa

California's Black students, Black boys in particular, are far more likely than their peers to be suspended or expelled throughout their school career, especially during kindergarten through third grade, a recent study by San Diego State University professors found.

Black students are suspended more often than any other student racial group in California.

In 2018-2019, the last school year of complete data, Black students had a 9 percent suspension rate compared to 4 percent for students overall.

The rate gets even higher for Black middle school boys — almost one out of every five were suspended at least once, compared to 13 percent of Black middle school girls and 7 percent of middle school children overall, said Luke Wood, a San Diego State education professor who co-authored [the report](#).

For Black middle school boys who are foster youth, the rate rose to 36 percent, the report said.

The report also highlighted new state data released in December that show Black students are more likely to be secluded or restrained in school.

Black students made up 19 percent of students who were physically restrained and 31 percent of students who were mechanically restrained in California, even though they made up 5 percent of statewide enrollment, the report said.

Wood found that the widest disparity for suspensions was in the early elementary grades. Black boys were more than five times as likely as their peers to be suspended in kindergarten through third grade.

“It’s hard for me to imagine how a child as young as being preschool-age could be suspended or expelled from school,” said State Superintendent Tony Thurmond during a Wednesday panel discussion.

“Yet that is the case that we see. There is a trend where our babies are literally pushed out of school, and that continues through elementary school, middle school and high school.”

The racial disparities in school discipline exist because of educators’ biases, said Frank Harris, postsecondary education professor and co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego State.

“These stereotypes are often unconsciously held by educators and have an influence on the ways they teach and serve students of color,” Harris said during the panel discussion.

Many Black families say educators often assume their children will be troublemakers, or they have referred to their children as aggressive, destructive or defiant — even in their earliest years at school, Wood said. Many said their children were singled out for discipline when other students were involved, and that educators did not listen to or believe their children.

Studies have shown that suspensions are associated with increased chances of students dropping out or [becoming incarcerated](#) later in life.

“What they’re doing is you’re taking away, you’re stealing from a child their inherent desire to learn, to be in school, to want to excel in that environment and you’re instead driving them toward the school-to-prison pipeline,” Wood said in an interview.

## Discipline in San Diego

San Diego County districts overall do not have egregiously high suspension and expulsion rates, but their rates still reflect disparities, Wood said.

Seven percent of Black students countywide were suspended in 2018-2019, compared to 3 percent of all students, according to state data.

The report named four schools in the county among 50 schools statewide that were tops in suspension rates for Black students: Vista Unified’s Madison Middle, San Diego Unified’s Montgomery Middle, Oceanside Unified’s San Luis Rey Elementary and Sweetwater Union High’s Granger Junior High, all of which suspended at least a third of their Black students in 2018-2019.

San Diego Unified, the county’s largest district, suspended 9 percent of its Black students compared to 4 percent for all students.

That was the same rate as five years prior. The fact that San Diego Unified has not in recent years reduced its discipline rates for Black students shows the district has not delivered on equity for students, Wood said.

“There’s a narrative out there ... that things have gotten better and outcomes have improved,” Wood said. “Well, if you look over the past five years, that’s not actually true.”

The San Diego Unified school board approved a new policy last year that aims to address the district’s racial disparities in discipline and reduce suspensions overall.

Part of a series of ongoing racial equity reforms partly spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement, the policy replaces in-school suspensions with alternatives to suspension programs, and it requires that schools exhaust “restorative” interventions before suspending a student out of school.

District spokeswoman Maureen Magee said there has been improvement; the district’s 2018-2019 Black student suspension rate is down 15 percent from 2013, and its Black student expulsion rate is down 30 percent.

Also student arrests by school police have declined by 79 percent in the past decade, she said, and the district is working to reform school police.

“Urban districts across California continue to struggle with this issue, which is a legacy of systemic racism in our state,” Magee said in an email. “The ‘discipline gap’ in San Diego Unified is the same as the statewide average — which highlights the urgent need for reform.”

Wood also noted that the Grossmont Union High School District has long had significantly higher expulsion rates for students overall and for Black students in particular.

The district had a 0.51 percent expulsion rate overall in 2018-2019, compared to the state average of 0.09 percent. For Black students, the district had a 1.5 percent expulsion rate, compared to a state average of 0.19 percent for Black students.

Grossmont expelled 89 students that year.

Grossmont Union High spokesman Collin McGlashen said in an email that, when doing comparisons, it’s important to note that Grossmont only consists of high schools.

“We acknowledge what our data says, and we’re always working to improve,” McGlashen wrote. “The progress that’s been made over time is the result of a thoughtful approach that involves an ongoing evaluation of discipline practices and data monitoring. While the 2019-20 data comes from July to mid-March (pre-COVID), it nonetheless demonstrates a significant reduction in our expulsion rate.”

Some people have questioned why organizations fixate on the Black student suspension rate, considering it is one metric out of many to evaluate schools.

### Focusing on Black students

For example, San Diego Unified officials and others have disagreed with the local NAACP branch when it said last month that Superintendent Cindy Marten had not delivered on equity promises, mainly because the district still has a disproportionately high suspension rate for Black students. Her supporters said Marten has made accomplishments in equity, such as increasing the percentage of all graduating students, including Black students, and increasing those who qualify for admission to state universities.

Wood does not believe there is too much focus on Black student discipline rates.

He said the Black Lives Matter movement has homed in on the disproportionate experiences of Black people, especially Black men, being hyper-criminalized by police. The direct parallel between that and schools is exclusionary discipline and punishment, such as suspensions and expulsions, Wood said.

“Suspensions are an indicator of an overall experience that influences outcomes in attendance, outcomes in school climate, outcomes in math and reading performance, graduation outcomes,” Wood said. “Suspensions are basically the entryway to understanding what those challenges are.”

To reduce harsh discipline and address the racial disparities, Wood proposed training future and current teachers on implicit bias, microaggressions, inclusive teaching practices and positive behavioral interventions.

He also called for suspensions and expulsions to be banned in the early grades.

He recommends that schools not receive any attendance-based funding when they suspend students; he said schools can still get money for the first day they suspend a student.

“Otherwise, schools receive monies for services and support that they are not actually providing,” the report said.

Wood also suggested setting suspension requirements that are age-appropriate and prohibiting schools from informally suspending students, such as by asking students to leave or marking them absent instead of suspended.

Suspension rates declined last school year largely due to the pandemic cutting the school year short. But Wood said harsh discipline and discipline of Black students in particular has not gone away.

He said many families have told him their children have been digitally isolated in Zoom breakout rooms or were otherwise excluded from participating in online class, he said.

“A lot of people would think, hey, it’s COVID, fewer students are getting suspended or expelled because they’re simply at home,” Wood said. “And that is true, but only to a certain extent. The same practices are playing out, but they’re playing out in a Zoom environment.”

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