

Successful Practices in Addressing Disproportionality

A PROCESS FOR REVERSING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN EDUCATION

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Ever more, educators are discussing the problem of disproportionality. That more schools are becoming aware of this multifaceted issue is great news. If we want to improve student learning outcomes and prepare all for successful futures, we have to acknowledge and address disproportionality.

Disproportionality is defined as “comparing the proportion of target-group students in the general population with the proportion of target-group students in the population of students who received a particular disciplinary action.” It can appear across, but is not limited to, racial, gender, and economic lines.

As we expand and deepen our conversation about and understanding of disproportionality, we need to take care to avoid its misuse and overuse. In conflating issues of disproportionality with other issues, we risk diluting or weakening our efforts to identify and address the root cause of disproportionality.

Even when disproportionality is well understood, there are common pitfalls that can derail the best efforts to resolve it. Disproportionality tends to arise from a convoluted and nuanced set of circumstances. It demands a structured, thoughtful process designed specifically to unpack its roots, avoid pitfalls and errors, and devise solutions that will significantly boost the likelihood that the disproportionality gets corrected.

As a successful practice in addressing disproportionality, we suggest the following proprietary five-step process. To contextualize this process, we will use the example of disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions (OSS). Presently, OSS disproportionality is getting widespread attention. And rightfully so; OSS translate into lost instructional time, which translates into decreased achievement, dropping out of school entirely, and a cascading set of challenges that can pose a long-term, detrimental impact on the lives of our students.

STEP 1. IDENTIFY THE DISPROPORTIONALITY

In the relatively early stage of this conversation, it is not atypical to see some sort of crisis prompt a school's recognition of disproportionality. A complaint to the Civil Rights Office or low achievement might force a school to discover a disproportionality. As the conversation expands and evolves, it is best to build a practice of proactively and consistently looking for disproportionality before it spirals out of control and into a crisis.

A district can have multiple coinciding disproportionalities, and each one must be subject to this process in full. To identify disproportionality, we look at the rate of indicator occurrence in relevant subgroups and as a share of total student population.

Consider a fictional elementary school. In the 2013-14 school year, there were 256 African-American students, accounting for 64% of enrollment; 56 Hispanic students, accounting for 14% of enrollment; 60 white students, accounting for 15% of enrollment; and 28 students or other racial demographics, accounting for 7% of enrollment.

There were a total of 50 OSS in the 2013-14 school year. In Figure 1, we see how OSS rates compared to enrollment rates within each subgroup. Thirty-seven of all OSS from were given to African-American students, comprising 74% of total OSS for that year. Five were given to Hispanic students, seven to white students, and one to the remaining students.

In an ideal world, a school would not need to give any OSS. Our objective on the way to that ultimate goal is to strive to give OSS at a consistent rate across subgroups. In other words, perhaps a school with a high OSS rate could set out first to lower it to a rate of 10%—consistently across subgroups.

In our example, it is obvious that far more African-American students were given OSS than their peers in other subgroups. To determine the disproportionality in this subgroup, we find the difference between the percentage enrollment of African-American students, or 64%, and their OSS rate, or 74%. This comes to a 10% disproportionality.

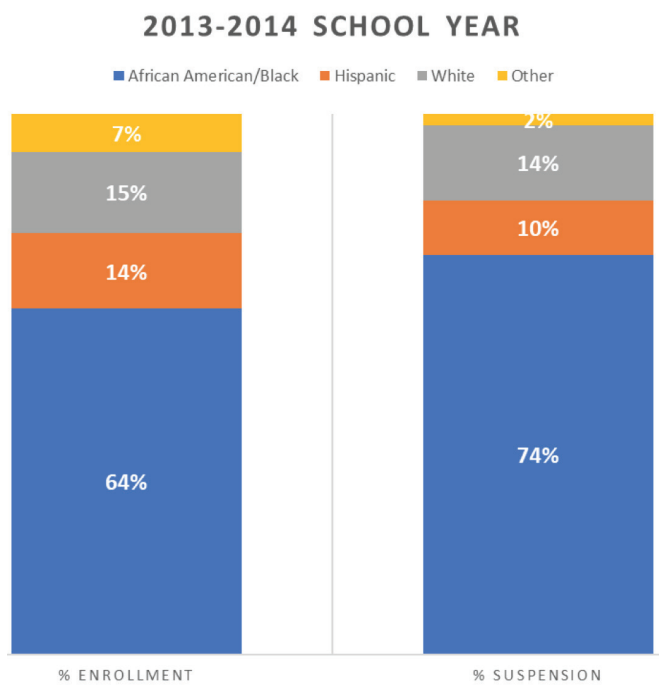


Figure 1

STEP 2. DETERMINE THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE DISPROPORTIONALITY

A solution is only as good as its alignment to the problem at hand. Therefore, we have to do a root cause analysis for every disproportionality on our campuses. If we don't, we risk implementing a solution that addresses something else entirely and then feel confused when the problem fails to improve. In doing a thorough root cause analysis, only then can you and your team design an aligned solution with a high likelihood of success.

Using the OSS example, we will begin by asking leading questions to help unearth the possible drivers behind it. What is the most relevant data we need to examine to understand our OSS disproportionality, and are we collecting that data? Which student behaviors are resulting in OSS? Which are not? Is there a particular class where more referrals are given? These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions used to launch an OSS root cause analysis.

Root cause analyses require candor, courage, and sometimes difficult conversations. They demand probing questions, even those that could make some uncomfortable. Throughout, it is important to remind everyone that this dialogue and any discomfort it might bring is, ultimately, for the lives and futures of all students.

Those who lead a team through this inquiry must take care to create a safe environment, encourage honest feedback, and reassure all involved that the point of the exercise is not to find fault, but to identify necessary solutions and make improvements. Thought must also be given to the best forum for a specific conversation, e.g., group, workshop, whole school, or one-on-one, etc. The idea at this stage is not to shame anyone, but to bring awareness to often-unconscious biases or patterns so that they can be rectified.

STEP 3. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS FOR IMPACT

The meticulous disaggregation of data and honest dialogue of step 2 will begin to reveal the necessary solutions. A root cause analysis is like peeling back an onion to get to the heart of the matter. There are endless possible drivers of a disproportionality. But more often than not, they fall into one of three categories: rigor, relevance, or relationships. In most cases, a disproportionality is linked to some breakdown or gap in efforts to achieve rigorous instruction that pushes students to think deeply and independently, deliver learning that feels directly relevant to future careers, or build meaningful relationships with every last student.

Once you and your team have a grasp on the root cause of the disproportionality, you are ready to apply strategies to address each. What matters at this stage is taking care to find or create a solution that addresses each specific root cause. Otherwise, efforts might not be effective. It is also possible you find there is more than one root cause behind one disproportionality. Just as your students are not one size fits all, the inroads to reversing subgroup disproportionality and serving their achievement needs will not be either. Realize that addressing disproportionality often means you are using multiple strategies.

While clear communication is necessary in every step of this process, it takes on heightened relevance at this point. Leadership must keep their finger on the pulse of what is happening with regard to solution implementation and progress toward desired outcomes. Using an aligned management system is often the most effective approach. Such systems serve to align all efforts and processes to clearly defined and communicated goals. When using an aligned management system, all data, timelines, task assignments, accountability measures, communications, etc., are organized around goals. With all pertinent information consolidated and focused on the objective, communications can be streamlined, more efficient, more accessible, and clearer.

STEP 4. RECOGNIZE AND MONITOR PROGRESS

We use certain formulas to determine disproportionality and its rates. But we cannot use the same formulas to monitor the efficacy of its solutions. This is the most common pitfall when it comes to disproportionality. It is a simple mistake to make, but one that is also simple to fix.

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SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING DISPROPORTIONALITY

Returning to our example, we looked at OSS rates between subgroups as part of the total school population to identify disproportionality. In the 2013-14 school year, African-American students represented 74% of all OSS, as shown in Figure 1. What happens if we apply that same formula to monitor progress? After the school implemented strategies, in the 2016-17 school year they found that African-American students accounted for 100% of all suspensions. In looking at these percentages—where subgroup OSS percentages are compared as parts of total OSS—it appears that the OSS rate has gotten worse for African-American students.

An important mantra of disproportionality must be to always look at the numbers behind the percentage rates. To monitor progress, we cannot look only at how subgroup rates compare to each other as part of the whole, nor can we look exclusively at disproportionality. We must monitor progress within each subgroup, comparing each subgroup's OSS rate to itself across time and examine the raw numbers behind each subgroup's disproportionality across time.

The data (seen below in Figure 2) behind the percentage rates reveal that the school has actually made enormous progress.

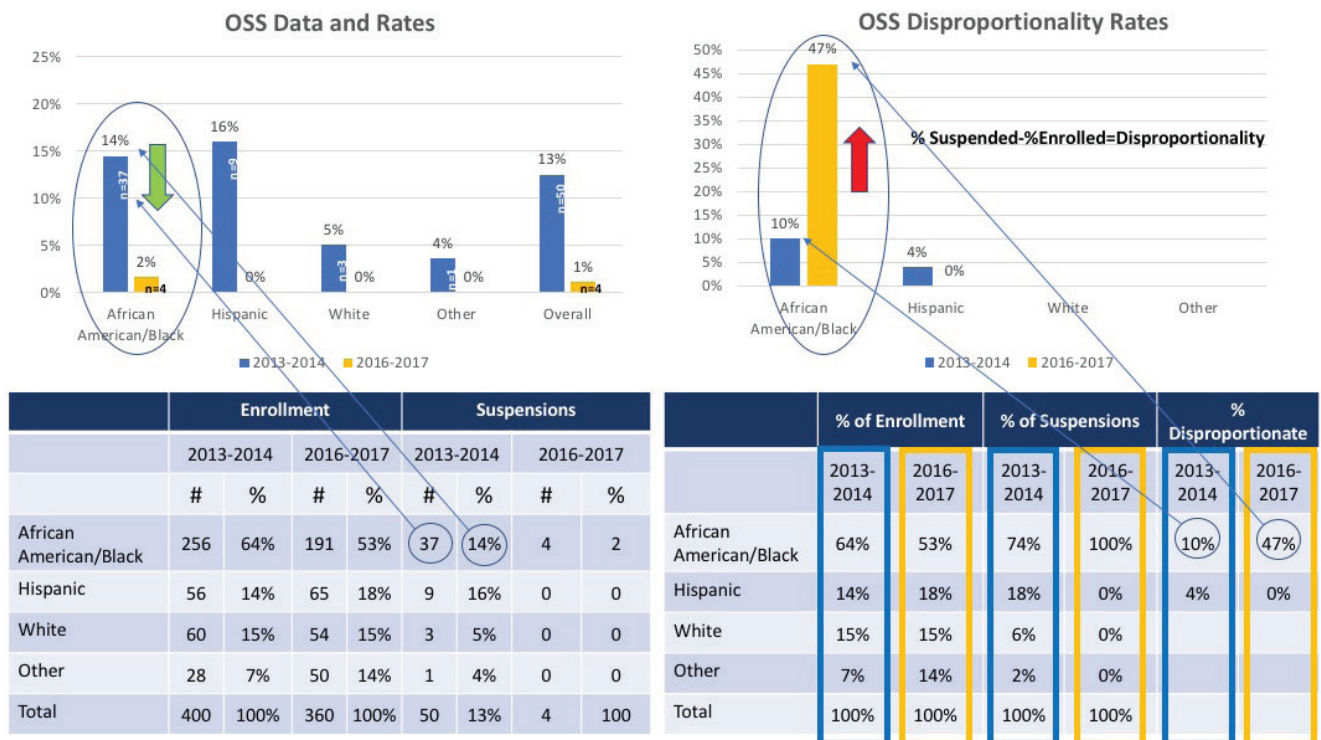


Figure 2

Figure 3

The number of OSS dropped significantly in all subgroups and in the school at large. Clearly, the strategies the school applied were working. To reveal the extent of their improvements, we compare OSS rates in each subgroup. In the 2016-17 school year, there were only four OSS given to students. While they were all given to African-American students, this is a great improvement from the 50 OSS

given in the 2013-14 school year and toward the goal of zero OSS annually. As we can see in Figure 2, there were 191 African-American students enrolled in the 2016-17 school year. Four students from this subgroup were given OSS, amounting to their OSS rate of 2%, down from 14% in the 2013-14 school year.

We must again use caution when we compare the disproportionality rate for African-American students between both school years. For the 2016-17 school year, given that these students comprised 53% of enrollment, their new disproportionality rate is 47% (shown in Figure 3). This is a 37-percentage point increase from the same rate in the 2013-14 school year. In looking only at the percentages, it appears that disproportionality rate for African-American students has gone up, when it has actually improved.

The problem of looking only at percentages should be evident. When it comes to disproportionality, percentages are important in step 1—to identify disproportionality and its severity. Once we reach step 4, percentages will be misleading. Instead, we focus on the raw data to ascertain if solutions are or are not working.

STEP 5. CONTINUALLY IMPLEMENT AND ADAPT REFORMS BASED ON IMPACT

Addressing disproportionality is an ongoing and iterative process. It is not too dissimilar from a tech company's process of launching a mobile phone app. When we use an app on our phones, the app is sending data to the developer. In turn, the developer is analyzing aggregate user data and regularly issuing updates, or iterating the app, for improved user functionality. When it comes to implementing and adapting strategies to improve disproportionality, we are doing something similar—continually collecting and analyzing new data, culling insights, and iterating strategies based on those insights.

In step 5, we repeat steps 2 through 4 as many times as necessary to make certain a disproportionality has been eliminated. Using new information revealed by repeating steps 2, 3, and 4, we adapt reforms to maintain a high level of impact. The reason these steps must repeat is because it is not unusual for strategies to lead to initial improvements and then stall. This is because strategies might show great alignment to some but not all root causes driving disproportionality, and additional root causes can sometimes reveal themselves over time. Meaning, a strategy might be effective in addressing disproportionality for a large share of students within a subgroup. If the strategy plateaus, then doing another root cause analysis could reveal another driver impacting the share of students within a subgroup you have not yet been able to help. This will not always mean you have to disregard the strategy that has worked for some students; it might mean you have to introduce an additional one to reach all students.

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Disproportionality is complicated and layered. That is why it is so important to routinely collect data, routinely monitor progress, and routinely ask what is working, what isn't working, and why so that strategies can be adjusted for continued impact. From there, we must take care not to let a disproportionality we have successfully reversed creep in again.

CONCLUSION

Addressing disproportionality is a process that requires enduring vigilance and care. It is also one that poses great hope—in fulfilling our duty to provide for all students an education with both equality and equity. In consciously working to avoid unconscious, biased patterns that do any disservice to any students. In serving all of our students' achievement needs. And in doing everything we can to guide all students into successful futures and lives. Now more than ever, it is imperative that the conversation about successful practices to address disproportionality be held in all districts and with all stakeholders—for all students.

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Bill Daggett, Ed.D., is the founder and chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education. ICLE's Daggett System for Effective Instruction[®] and Rigor/Relevance Framework[®] are the cornerstones of many school improvement efforts throughout the United States. Thousands of school districts have sought Dr. Daggett's guidance for planning and implementing systemic change. If you would like his assistance in your district, please contact Karen Wilkins at 518-723-2057 or KWilkins@LeaderEd.com.

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