

**Interrupting the Precursors to Disproportionality in Special Education
Toward Black Student Thriving in SFUSD
Practice and Research Brief, Winter 2025**

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This research brief summarizes project findings from Year 1 (2023/24), the first half of Year 2 (the current year), and the next phase of work, which will comprise in-depth, site-level exploration and analyses of Black students' experiences in SFUSD. This project's purpose is to understand drivers of persistent racial disparities in special education placements, positioning discipline as a precursor, to develop and implement changes in school and district systems.

Year 1 Findings: Two Focal Themes

During Year 1 (detailed in this [brief](#)), working groups (Appendix A lists participants) examined current and historical district documentation, data, and research. This multilayered work resulted in the prioritization of two focal themes to guide the subsequent systems transformation work: ***A Shared Governance Approach*** and ***Precursors to Racial Disparities***. Grounded in these two themes, working groups of SFUSD leaders and interdisciplinary researchers identified the following core aspects to address in the systems change work that is needed:

1. **Shared Governance Sustained by the Cultural Wealth of Black Families and Community.** Black family partnerships will be the foundation for the design of a model of shared governance with our Black families and community. Informed by research based principles of effective partnerships, a redesigned governance system will center Black families' cultural wealth and reciprocity in relationships with Black families, positioning the wisdom and experiences of families and communities as assets. The new governance model should be sustained by critical systems of support to ensure sustainability (e.g., stable funding, ongoing opportunities for capacity building, input from multiple voices situated at various levels of the system and community).
2. **Data Infrastructure:** The district's data infrastructure is fragmented, user-unfriendly, and at times duplicative. Efforts to address racial disparities require an integrated data infrastructure that allows site-level practitioners and system leaders to access data, in real-time, to inform practice.
3. **Dual Focus on Systems Change and Caring Learning Ecologies:** Solutions must be grounded in a "double move." That is, reforms must simultaneously target systemic transformations (see #6) and learning ecologies designed with an ethos of caring and belonging.
4. **Policy and Procedural Consistency:** Although SFUSD has policies regarding exclusionary practices (e.g., checks on discipline for Black students), there is a systemic lack of understanding and capacity for coherent implementation. General education staff need to develop and build actionable understanding of policies and practices that offer identity-sustaining, rigorous learning experiences for Black students with and without disabilities. The district also requires safeguards that ensure consistent and accurate implementation of policies and procedures early on in the referral pipeline.
5. **Accountability for Systems of Support:** As such, SFUSD needs accountability systems that ensure consistent implementation of Tier 1 practices. Current accountability systems are weak and inconsistent.
6. **Key Structural Changes:** There is a sense of urgency to enact structural changes, including increasing the staff diversity, building capacity to implement practices that meet policy goals, and monitoring implementation of equity-centered approaches.

Year 2 Preliminary Findings: Analysis of Black Student Referrals to Special Education

We analyzed initial referrals to special education with district-wide data spanning 2013/14 to 2023/24. Novel aspects of this analysis included using initial referral as the metric of interest, disaggregating to the site level, and combining multiple years to consider patterns over time. We found that:

1. On average, **Black students at elementary and K–8 schools were 5 times more likely to be referred to special education** compared to all other students.
2. At 50 of 70 elementary and K–8 sites, **Black students were at least (and often greater than) 3 times more likely to be referred to special education** compared to all students.
3. Disproportionate referral of Black students isn't driven by a few sites; **it's a district-wide problem.**
4. There are **two different types of high-referring sites**, and we need to understand precursors to disproportionality in each: sites with high proportional enrollment of Black students and sites with low proportional enrollment of Black students.

Years 2 and 3: Next Steps

From now through the beginning of Year 3 (2025/26), we will:

1. Expand the referral analysis with data on community/neighborhood resources, discipline, and school culture-climate.
2. School profiles of high- and low-referring sites will be built to offer a more comprehensive view of each type of site.
3. GIS maps will be built representing the spatial distribution of disproportionality in referrals to special education. Characteristics of school neighborhoods will also be included in these maps to visualize potential resources (e.g., learning organizations such as libraries, community advocacy agencies, NGOs, family based organizations, church-based learning programs, etc.)
4. Refine understanding of Black family partnerships from programs like AAPAC, Mastering Cultural Identity, and Shoestrings. This analysis will inform the design of a shared governance structure. SFUSD's AAALI initiative team will lead this work.
5. Based on the risk analysis, partner with 2–4 school-site teams to:
 - a. Perform an in-depth, site-level analysis: Document conditions, policies, programs, and practices associated with high- and low-referral rates of Black students to special education with the goal of understanding precursors to referrals and levers that support positive student learning trajectories.
 - b. Co-design and test improvements to universal site systems for Black students in the 2025/26 year.
6. Develop a plan for reforming SFUSD's data infrastructure, including: (a) building a singular, coherent platform holding all student data, (b) improving data quality through consistent data entry, and (c) building capacity to use (i.e., aggregate, interpret) data, in real time, for ongoing improvement of universal practices and systems for Black students.

Appendix A Project Participants

Year 1 (2023/24) Project Team	Year 2 (2024/25) Project Team
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alfredo J. Artiles, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Aydin Bal, <i>University of Wisconsin, Madison</i> ● Ja’Nya Banks, <i>U.C. Berkeley</i> ● Mildred Browne, <i>Independent Consultant</i> ● Miguel De Loza, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Margaret Farruggio, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Edward “Eddie” Fergus, <i>Rutgers University</i> ● Allison Firestone, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Lauren Katzman, <i>Arizona State University</i> ● Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez, <i>Vanderbilt University</i> ● Patricia Martinez-Alvarez, <i>Teachers College, Columbia</i> ● Rebecca Neri, <i>WestEd</i> ● Mariana Pacheco, <i>University of Wisconsin, Madison</i> ● Luci Parker, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Thomas Philip, <i>U.C. Berkeley</i> ● Edward "Eddie" Rivero, <i>Columbia University</i> ● Jean Robertson, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Carlos Sandoval, <i>WestEd</i> ● Tesha Sengupta-Irving, <i>U.C. Berkeley</i> ● Laura Sterponi, <i>U.C. Berkeley</i> ● Amanda Sullivan, <i>University of Minnesota</i> ● Sepehr Vakil, <i>Northwestern University</i> ● Laura Wentworth, <i>California Education Partners</i> ● Michelle Wilkerson, <i>U.C. Berkeley</i> ● Shameeka Wilson, <i>Stanford University</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alfredo J. Artiles, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Mildred Browne, <i>Independent Consultant</i> ● Michelle Casas, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Rebecca Cruz, <i>Johns Hopkins University</i> ● Lavar Edmonds, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Laticia Erving, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Margaret Farruggio, <i>Independent Consultant</i> ● Allison Firestone, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Eric Guthertz, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Chris Lukinbeal, <i>University of Arizona</i> ● Isun Malekghassemi, <i>Johns Hopkins University</i> ● Mauricha Robinson, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Regina Piper, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Bobby Pope, <i>SFUSD</i> ● Hari Subramonyam, <i>Stanford University</i> ● Laura Wentworth, <i>California Education Partners</i>