



DisCrit Disproportionality: African American family and community perspectives on what causes SFUSD to disproportionately represent African American students in special education services

Research Memo November 2020

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This research memo used the following data sources:

- *AAPAC Meeting: Underserved and Overrepresented: June 18; 2018-2019 Stakeholder Feedback*
- *AAPAC/CAC Community Café*
- *COVID Response Groups, Learning While Black*
- *General parent feedback CEIS Findings*
- *Evidence, and Recommendations are drawn from parents' own words whenever possible.*

Finding 1: Black students feel disconnected and disenfranchised from school

Root cause: Discipline Policies and Practices

Evidence:

- o Missing student voice
- o African American kids in predominantly white schools are being mistreated or treated differently
- o Black students are acting out because they are neglected
- o No specific support for black girls
- o Children at a very early age are aware of disproportionality based upon their observation
- o Students feel disenfranchised
- o Fear of Black boys and girls
- o Black student feeling the difference in treatment and are aware that white children are treated better
- o African American kids in majority white schools are made to feel on their own
- o Black kids feel disenfranchised and struggled to communicate/ articulate to staff
- o Criminalizing of Black boys by staff
- o Need to address slurs (use of N-word) and other maltreatment of Black students
- o Black students and families have no sense of community especially if they are coming on the other side of the city
- o Having a positive principal or teacher can make all the difference

Recommendations:

1. Give kids a voice in their education, schools, and district
 - a. Believe the stories that students share with us (school, community agencies)
 - b. Listen to Black youth when they say something is not working
 - c. Ask them consistently how SFUSD can do better and implement their suggestions
2. Provide leadership opportunities for Black student
 - a. Create more student-led conferences
 - b. Also, students should not be the primary communicators between home and school
3. Create community for Black youth at school purposefully
 - a. Establish BSU's at all SFUSD schools
 - b. Provide adults at all schools who collaborate with Black youth on school improvement
4. Get to know the Black students outside of the classroom
5. Make sure all schools are diverse
6. Provide English learner support for ALL English learners
7. Highlight Black youth's strengths
 - a. Resist criminalizing Black children's ways of knowing, behaving, and learning
 - b. Position Black youth as experts in their own lives

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Finding 2: Educators are punitively responding to behavior which results in overidentification of Black youth for special education and disproportionate suspensions

Root cause: Interventions and Referrals

Evidence:

- o Staff response to student behavioral issues is very reactive
- o Misunderstanding of language and behavior of Black students lead to overidentifying
- o Higher achieving students who are bored are exhibiting behavior that bothers the teachers
- o Misbehavior and exclusion from typical classroom activities becomes normative
- o Teachers have given up on our Black kids
- o Black students are being expelled for things that white students commonly do
- o Stop sending children to the office. They are not interested in learning about what is happening to the child, they just start the paper trail on a student
- o Behavior sometime occurs when students don't want to show what they didn't know
- o Reactive responses to behavior do not support learning
- o Black students in the office too often
- o Who actually cares about these Black youth?
- o Black child with IEP spent most of the day in the office because teachers and staff don't know how to support her
- o They fear our Black children
- o Using behavior plans to try to change the child's behavior does not address the issue
- o Behavior is subjective and based on race
- o Educators need to recognize progress. You should document and praise it

Recommendations:

1. Engage Behavior reframe,
 - a. Not all behaviors are bad or need to be sent to office
 - b. Figure out root cause and address it, Instead of punishing behavior,
2. Find alternatives to assess students
 - a. Assess beyond academic or behavioral assessments
 - b. Create assessments that find the strengths of Black youth
 - c. Use assessments that show progress and regularly share and praise that growth.
3. Create solution-oriented referrals
4. Focus behavior plans on how adults interact with and respond to Black youth
5. Standardize practices for resolving conduct related situations

Finding 3: Special education instruction is often poor quality

Root cause: Instruction and Assessment:

Evidence:

- o Observations are problematic-very brief and not enough time or environments
- o Black youth should not be identified because educators do not understand their learning or behavior or want them out of their classroom
- o Segregating Black kids because of their disability is not ok
- o Teachers not in a position to diagnose
- o Students are labelled inappropriately and incorrectly by teachers
- o Special education is a dumping ground
- o What is happening in special ed with culturally responsive teaching?
- o No one is addressing the real concerns around Black children with IEPs.
- o Sometimes IEP does not match what the student presents in the classroom
- o Educators don't breakdown language and next steps per IEPs
- o Teachers feel unequipped and see sped as an avenue to push students out
- o Once Black kids get the label, the label impacts instruction and behavioral response

Recommendation:

1. Identification process needs to be robust
 - a. Observations should include multiple settings and sustained periods of time
 - b. Parents needs to be including authentically and treated as expert team members
 - c. More training for teachers to identify what is and is not a disability and the strengths of Black youth
 - d. There should be clear standards for what will be accomplished and what expectations and procedures are for exit
2. Provide special education supports in regular classes
 - a. Keep Black youth in regular classrooms with support consistently
 - b. Recognize that special education classrooms often make behavior worse
 - c. Track the growth of Black youth in behavior and learning
3. Require that special educators are included in all anti-racism training, ethnic studies pedagogy, and culturally responsive curricula
 - a. Track the implementation of these training, pedagogy and curricula in special education classrooms
 - b. Expect engaging texts and resources that reflect Black lives in special education classrooms
 - c. Address current events as part of instruction in special education classrooms
4. Increase quality of special education instruction and assessment
 - a. Eliminate remedial education disconnected from Black kids' lives
 - b. Increase challenging curriculum with support
5. Help families understand child's different learning styles once identified

Finding 4: Parents feel excluded from and uninformed about the IEP process and their rights

Root cause: Instruction and Assessment

Evidence:

- o After IEP, no one talks about the next steps or plan for the child within the school site.
- o Families need to be told who their support team is—no one is clearly identified
- o Unclear on ability to exit IEP and other rights
- o Waiving your right is sometimes used in the Educational process
- o Not feeling good at IEPs- feeling manipulated
- o Parents are not being informed about rights
- o Parents do not know they can get their children out of Special Education

Recommendations:

1. Create clear communication PRIOR to disability diagnosis and IEP
 - a. Describe what the process is for identifying and creating extra support
 - b. Share more information with parents about potential accommodations and supports
 - c. Identify support team explicitly prior to diagnosis
2. Provide clear and consistent communication around IEPs
 - a. Establish professional development for educators communicating SPED information to families
 - b. Clarify process of an IEP in accessible language
 - c. Suggest what can parents do between IEP meetings
 - d. Identify support team explicitly, particularly as it changes
 - e. Produce better materials (e.g. pamphlet) needed to explain IEP process and rights
3. Create Accountability system to track how IEPs are being followed that is accessible to parents
4. Combine student conferences with IEP updates more information and time
5. Share clear standards for opting out of SPED services and regularly revisit as an option

Finding 5: Educators do not know how to reach or teach Black youth

Root cause: Differential Access to Educational Opportunity

Evidence:

- o Teachers not equipped to manage all academic levels
- o Teachers see sped as a means to get kids out of their classroom
- o Stop shifting responsibilities to families
- o Limited teacher flexibility when it comes to meeting with black families
- o Teachers wash their hands of them when they found out in SPED
- o Why are Black students invisible in the classroom?
- o Black students are not a priority
- o Black children labeled problems
- o Hard to get services for children who have fallen behind in their academics
- o Black students are not achieving at high levels
- o The students get a label put on them
- o No accountability in RTI/MTSS systems
- o Teachers are using and saying N-word in conversations and when addressed continue to use the word
- o Schools don't understand the language barrier exists between the students and educators which leads to children being referred
- o School sites are not addressing or supporting African American students who are really suffering academically

Recommendations:

1. Teachers need to investigate-
 - a. Learn What works for this kid?
 - b. Go to the first teacher and ask them for help.
2. Teachers need to be encouraged ask for tools and admit when they do not feel equipped
 - a. Administration needs to listen to teachers and support them
 - b. District needs to provide tools to teachers
3. Increase various strategies for engaging Black kids
 - a. Incorporating teaching opportunities that allow for movement
 - b. Imaging Black kids as experts instead of problems
 - c. Create flexible homework policies
 - d. Acknowledge progress of Black students
4. Provide education /training offered to non-black families/staff about macro aggression and the feeling of Black students
5. Intervene before the IEP
6. Improve accountability system to assess equality

Finding 6: The district has engendered distrust through ignoring, labeling, and disrespecting parents, along with promising and not delivering

Root cause: Family and Community Partnerships

Evidence:

- o Lack of trust for the school district
- o We feel unheard by their school and district
- o Promises by schools and the district to African American families have been made and broken
- o SFUSD educators labeling black parents as the problem
- o Stop caring about how I look and instead listen to what I say
- o Labels about parents form quickly and “Filling” stereotypes
- o If I come in angry, it is because I know I need to protect my child
- o Missing connection with parents and community
- o They don't have to be afraid of us, parents, black people
- o Staff Ignoring families
- o Lack of due diligence to know child or family
- o Negative interactions about their children, often in the form of judgment about their children's behavior.
- o Parents feeling isolated
Parents feel judged when wanting what is best for their kids
- o Black families/parents feeling like they have to fight an uphill battle to get their children educated.
- o Fear of Black people hinders communication and collaboration
- o Parents feeling disrespected by their child's teacher
- o Breakdown in communication/ relationships with a school.
- o Not feeling connected to their child's school
- o The feeling of disrespect from so many schools and the district
- o Parents are scared, not being able to trust that a school would actually treat their children right
- o Parents have the right to meet more than 1x/yr
- o System is broken, distrust
- o If it's hard to connect with the parent, teachers give up instead of working hard or accessing a different resource
- o Non-Black people have a fear about going to black families and ask for help with students
- o Families told by school sites they don't have the resources to help support the student academically
- o Families have a hard time accessing services
- o Families should have information that helps them understand what kids should know at each grade level
- o Lacking partnership with families
- o Wants educators to sit and talk,
- o Families need access to tools to support student learning
- o Need to involve parents
- o Parent participation is contingent on work schedule
- o Navigating the system is hard - training parents

Finding 6: The district has engendered distrust through ignoring, labeling, and disrespecting parents, along with promising and not delivering. (continued)

Root cause: Family and Community Partnerships

Recommendations: Deeper academic partnerships with families from all educators (e.g. district leadership, principals, teachers, staff)

1. Create a space where Black and Brown families feel trust in the larger school community
 - a. Invite family participation often in classrooms, schools, events
 - b. Trust Black families and listen to their voices
 - c. Install proactive mechanisms in place for parents to be heard and not after problem have already occurred
 - i. Send parent agenda before meetings
 - ii. Provide surveys to capture parents voice for SSC decisions
 - d. Having AAPAC at all SFUSD schools
 - e. Build family-school partnerships early (around kinder)
 - f. Establish dedicated advocate for Black families at each school site
 - g. Make sure school events/performances are affordable for families
 - h. Encourage families to develop sense of leadership
 - i. Provide robust support for incoming families navigating the system, especially at transition times (entry to kinder, middle, and high)
 - j. AAALI extended into elementary schools
2. Need Superintendent to speak up and consistently give a feeling of confidence he is committed to Black students and families
3. Learn about the Black community and about parent experience to understand the student's education foundation so they know how to reach us
 - a. Get to know the student/families outside of the classroom
 - b. Educate school staff in how to service Black families
4. Facilitate community for Black families, especially when families are from other parts of the city
 - a. The school should provide access to Black families for outreach so they can make sure all Black families are connected;
 - b. Educate white in how to service Black families; Teaching Parent governing groups (PTA,SSC,ELAC) to be more welcoming;
 - c. More representation of Black Families and support on the Westside of SF
5. Provide parents more information on teacher training
 - a. How are funds being allocated?
 - b. When is institutional racism being discussed?
 - c. What strategies are being presented that we can expect to see implemented?
 - d. Provide more information about PITCH in the Bayview
6. Inform parents about factors that impact success
 - a. Provide Examples and resources that help parents identify grade level curriculum
 - b. Explain and have demo workshops modeling comprehensive approach to literacy
7. Hiring Black Parents or staff to talk to Black Families for support
 - a. Parents can support school endeavors in the community
 - b. Parents can educate and communicate with other parents on advocacy and engagement

Finding 7:¹ ***Specific educators (e.g., teachers, Deans, security, other school staff) are over-referring

Root cause: Teacher Expectations and Misconceptions

Recommendations: Focus on changing how adults interact with kids

1. Analyze for educators who are over-referring Black students:
 - a. for suspensions
 - b. special education
 - c. who are not displaying cultural humility
 - d. spikes in identification of ED in middle-9th grade
2. Create and Share tracking system with parents
3. Hold educators accountable to change how they interact with kids
 - a. Get rid of teachers who are abusive to Black children
 - b. Create professional development for over-referring educators
 - c. Shift from punitive mindset around behavior

Finding 8: Educators are not equipped or engaged in conversations around race, Black culture, and/or racism with parents and students.

Root cause: Educator Expectations and Misconceptions:

Evidence:

- o The students need an outlet from someone who looks like them
- o Continued to be told by staff and other parents that race does not always have to be talked about
- o Educators not knowledgeable or respectful of others culture
- o There is NO cultural humility offered within schools
- o No Black teachers
- o Not enough support on school sites to advocate for African American students
- o What are the resources to intervene on school sites in scenarios of macro aggression?

Recommendations:

1. Increase Black educators at all levels (principals, school leaders, deans, teachers, staff)
2. Have dedicated advocate/family liaison at each school site to intervene (staff using racial slurs, macro/micro aggression)
3. Provide training for all educators on how to recognize racism against Black children, families, and communities

¹ Findings with *** mean that these themes emerged consistently in the data and the same phrases were used repeatedly. Instead of writing the phrases over and over, there may be a small sample of evidence or none, and then recommendations. Given the density of these themes they were important to share.

Finding 9: School leaders have not addressed parental concerns about race and racism in instruction and behavior

Root cause: Educator Expectations and Misconceptions:

Evidence:

- o Principals are insensitive and don't know how to address issues of race especially when race is involved.
- o Issues are swept under the rug
- o Staff at school site including Principal doesn't take my concerns about my son academics seriously
- o Unfair disciplinary decisions by principals
- o Administration feels like they need to have control
- o If there is no leadership on site what do the Black students do or who do they turn to?
- o Called administration board about the use of the N word by a high school teacher and nothing was addressed
- o Principal meetings have been denied

Recommendations:

1. Leadership needs to support, encourage, and enforce centering Black students
2. Focus principals on teachers to increase learning and engagement with African
3. Train Principals on how to deal with racial injustices on school sites
4. Make sure Principals are available to Black families
5. Provide principals alternatives to exclusionary discipline
6. Principals need to focus on hiring more Black educators
7. Increase amount of Black principals

Finding 10: Lack of culturally responsive, anti-racist teaching, ethnic studies curriculum, cultural humility

Root cause: Cultural Dissonance

Evidence:

- o Culturally responsive teaching is not happening.
- o Lack of training or teacher's demonstrate resistance, or do they not have the systems/support to provide culturally responsive teaching;
- o Lack of cultural understanding,
- o No instruction during Black History Month;
- o Lack of Black History Month celebrations;
- o Do our students really receive ethnic studies?
- o Need culturally relevant curriculum;
- o No celebration of Black History Month within school site;
- o It's important for students to see themselves in their education;
- o Implementation strategies for Culturally responsive curriculum;
- o Black History should be incorporated in the curriculum year around;
- o Have Ethnic Studies be taught by ethnic people starting freshman year of high school;
- o Continued need to cultural humility training for staff;
- o Lack of books, events, units, experiences, and curricula that represented their children in consistently positive ways;
- o children's/community's history and experience is not taught generally, or acknowledged with respect, across many schools
- o the lack of celebration of Black History month outside of Bayview schools;
- o decline in recognizing Black history month;
- o Missing proper training and tools Culturally responsive;
- o How is Black culture connected in the lessons?
- o Lack of inclusivity in immersion programs

Recommendations

1. Need culturally competent educators (teachers, staff, and principals)
 - a. Train all educators, staff on cultural humility;
 - b. Learn about other schools' implementation experiences, curriculum, perspective
 - c. Address teachers who are not culturally competent
2. Required Ethnic Studies at all school sites for everyone
 - a. Ethnic Studies need to be as much about the present as it is the past;
 - b. Teach other kids about African American History and what it's like as an African American Kid today;

Finding 11: ***Bias and systemic racism in SFUSD must be acknowledged and dismantled

Root cause: Cultural Dissonance

Evidence:

- o* Bias and systemic racism,
- o* Continue work on implicit bias;
- o* Addressing bias,
- o* Address macro/micro aggressions towards AA students at school sites via trainings;
- o* Hard to navigate the system and it isn't equitable;
- o* Students and families are greatly impacted by implicit and explicit bias;
- o* Implicit Bias: unconsciously aware—hardwire

Recommendations:

1. Increase cultural competency,
2. Teach ethnic studies at all grades
3. Establish professional development
4. Hold teachers accountable when incidents occur

*Finding 12:*** The loss of Black families and communities in San Francisco has resulted in Black youth experiencing cultural isolation within school sites*

Root cause: District socio-demographics

Evidence

- o* Cultural isolation within school sites;
- o* Very little support for African American students at predominantly white schools;
- o* Need 100% safe sanctuaries for Black students at school sites

Recommendations:

1. Opportunities for Black kids to increase sense of belonging;
2. Building affinity spaces for students and families at schools with designated staff of color to support