



School discipline biased toward minorities

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By NAT HENTOFF

President Barack Obama is being criticized by some black citizens for paying hardly any attention to the continued presence of Jim Crow in this land. But his Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection statistics for 2009-10, which covered 72,000 schools in 7,000 districts, accounting for around 85 percent of American students from kindergarten through high school, disclose:

"One in five black boys and more than one in 10 black girls received an out-of-school suspension. Over all, black students were three and a half times as likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers" ("Black Students Punished More, Data Suggests," Tamar Lewin, The New York Times, March 6, 2012).

Moreover, under the harsh, too often automatic "zero tolerance" policies in many of our public school districts, "Hispanic and black students represent 45 percent of the student body, but 56 percent of those expelled under such policies."

While there continues to be enormous national coverage of the fiery battles over teacher evaluations in our schools, there is hardly any mention of what Secretary of Education Arne Duncan accurately declares:

"The undeniable truth ... that the everyday education experience for too many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise."

And dig this: Suspended students who are targeted by color and ethnicity often drop out of school; some expelled students, also with nowhere to go, turn to crime. This everyday experience of rejection is what some critics call "the school to prison pipeline."

As a reporter some 30 years ago, I visited a New York state prison for juveniles charged with serious crimes. (Uneasily, I interviewed a youth being held for murder while alone with him in his cell.) I asked the warden for the educational backgrounds of the inmates and was told that more than 80 percent had been suspended or expelled from school.

So I was not at all surprised to see this headline in The New York Times: "Many in U.S. Are Arrested by Age 23, Study Finds" (Erica Goode, Dec. 19, 2011).

Goode reports that this study, "the first since the 1960s to look at the arrest histories of a national sample of adolescents and young adults over time ... did not look at racial or regional differences, but other research has found higher arrest rates for black men and for youths living in poor urban areas."

Bearing in mind that racial segregation in many city schools continues due to legal residential segregation, the March 6 Times story on school punishments notes that:

"Schools with a lot of black and Hispanic students were likely to have relatively inexperienced, and low-paid, teachers."

These teachers are involved in the process of deciding the suspensions or expulsions.

Another "everyday experience of rejection" while still in school is being placed in seclusion or restraints. And, Goode writes, this same national study reveals "students with disabilities make up 12 percent of the student body, but 70 percent of those subject to physical restraints."

And wouldn't you know that while "black students with disabilities constituted 21 percent of the total ... 44 percent of those (blacks) with disabilities (are) subject to mechanical restraints, like being strapped down."

This is America? The American Civil Liberties Union's Deborah J. Vagins, senior legislative counsel at its Washington office, comes to this inevitable conclusion:

"The harsh punishments, especially expulsion under zero tolerance and referrals to law enforcement, show that students of color and students with disabilities are increasingly being pushed out of schools, oftentimes into the criminal justice system" (The New York Times, March 6, 2012).

And what will the rest of these kids' lives be like thereafter? No one checks to find out.

During the Republican presidential candidates' extensive debates, I was not aware of any concern with this largely unmentioned national shame.

Nor, as far as I know, has President Obama referred to this crucial, urgent need for education reform during his many self-congratulatory fundraising speeches.

At least a New York Times' March 6 editorial, calmly titled "The Wrong Approach to Discipline," did insist that "states and local districts must revisit 'zero tolerance' policies, which are increasingly common in schools and often cover too broad a range of misbehaviors."

So much more must be done. The editorial does ask the Office of Civil Rights to press "school systems with the worst records to develop fair and sensible strategies that involve working with troubled children and their families instead of reflexively showing them the door."

Why stop at schools with just the worst records?

Furthermore, who will hold these schools that fail to make substantive change accountable? And how? Will we hear more specific strategies from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan or his Republican successor? Where is Congress?

And, yes, where is the NAACP? The Congressional Black Caucus?

If the much embattled, controversial city, state and national teachers' unions want to earn more respect and restorative influence, now is the time for them to get involved -- quickly, loudly and persistently!

The dead-end future for so many young Americans will continue if the rest of us choose not to protest and organize against this endemic shame.

We have an annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day. For what purpose?

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