



Undermining Opportunity: **Race, Gender, and Discipline Disparities**

By
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Although no one was injured and no property was damaged, Kiera was arrested, charged with two felonies, suspended from school for 10 days, and sent to an alternative school. Public outcry resulted in the dropping of the felony charges and Kiera graduated from high school, but her family accumulated significant legal fees and it may take years to remove the felony arrest from her records. While Kiera continues to pursue her passion for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in college, such overly punitive practices often discourage African American girls from pursuing STEM and even from staying in school. Experts note that many students subjected to overly punitive discipline practices suffer from feelings of disengagement from the learning environment and stigmatization.

African American girls are especially vulnerable to being targeted for overly punitive discipline. During the 2011-2012 school year, 12 percent of African American girls in K-12 schools received an out-of-school suspension—six times the rate of white girls—and more than any other group of girls and most boys. Although African American girls comprise less than 17 percent of all female students, they were 31 percent of girls referred to law enforcement, and 43 percent of girls subjected to school-related arrests. African American girls being pushed out of school and into the juvenile justice system are fueling the school-to-prison pipeline and making girls the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system population. Oftentimes, African American girls are penalized for minor and subjective offenses, such as “disrespect.” The report examines the role of race and gender stereotypes and bias and

*A*lthough many African American girls were pivotal in advancing educational opportunity before and during the Civil Rights era, the educational outcomes of African American girls are being undermined by practices influenced by race and gender bias, including overly punitive discipline practices in schools. A recent report by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Inc. and the National Women’s Law Center¹ highlights how race and gender stereotypes and bias combine to impact the educational and life outcomes of African American girls and women. The confluence of race and gender stereotypes and bias in the application of discipline particularly illustrate how the educational outcomes of African American girls are being undermined.

Sixteen-year old African American student Kiera Wilmot’s story exemplifies how these issues manifest for many African American girls. Kiera conducted a science experiment combining aluminum foil and toilet bowl cleaner, which resulted in a small explosion.

*I refuse to accept the view
that mankind
is so tragically bound
to the starless midnight
of racism and war that
the bright daybreak
of peace and brotherhood
can never become a reality...
I believe that unarmed truth
and unconditional love
will have the final word.*

~ Martin Luther King, Jr. ~



how they contribute to discipline disparities and other disparities impacting the educational outcomes of African American girls. For instance, educators’ stereotypes of African American girls as “loud” and disrespectful often result in interpretations of African American girls’ behavior, such as “speaking up” or being assertive, as confrontational, or not “ladylike” (all code for not conforming to society’s standard of feminine behavior). The report calls for an end to such discriminatory practices based upon race and gender. Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibit such discriminatory practices and policies in public schools, and federal oversight and enforcement is key to addressing such prevalent disparities.

Among the report’s recommendations to address such disparities is a recommendation for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights to investigate the extent to which school discipline policies disproportionately impact girls of color. Another recommendation is for schools and districts to provide girls, particularly those with a history of trauma, with culturally appropriate social and emotional learning programs that teach skills for responding to conflict in constructive ways. Early screening for trauma will also help to appropriately identify victims, provide them with needed services, and prevent them from being improperly targeted as aggressors. The educational success of African American girls, and all students, depends upon the implementation of such alternatives to overly punitive discipline practices that push students out of school and

¹ *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity*, The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. and the National Women’s Law Center, available at http://www.naacpldf.org/files/publications/Unlocking%20Opportunity%20for%20African%20American%20Girls_0.pdf.



Janel George is Education Policy Counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), where she uses legislative and policy advocacy to promote racial justice and equal opportunity. She works on a broad range of education issues, including early childhood education, special education, access to higher education, equitable resource distribution, among many others.

She works with a broad group of stakeholders within coalitions and campaigns to eliminate racial disparities and promote equitable school policies and practices. Ms. George also works closely as a federal liaison for the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC), a coalition of 83 organizations across the country, to promote positive and inclusive school discipline policies and curb the use of exclusionary and overly punitive disciplinary practices that push students out of school and fuel the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Ms. George received her law degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School, where she served as a Managing Editor of the Wisconsin Law Review.