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NAACP Legal Defense Fund Releases Report on the Effects of Implicit Bias in School Discipline for Students of Color

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) released a [new report](#) today titled, “Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline.” The report not only explains the ways in which implicit bias – subtle, subconscious beliefs on race – held by teachers, administrators, and school resource officers (SROs) leads to the over-disciplining students of color, but offers a range of recently developed interventions that have been effective in limiting the harmful effects of implicit bias.

“Addressing implicit bias in schools is essential to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, which wreaks havoc on students of color,” said [Ajmel Quereshi](#), Senior Counsel at LDF and co-author of the report. “Instead of readily excluding students from the learning process, educators should heed our recommendations to create an environment that promotes social belonging for all students regardless of race.”

Civil rights advocates, as well as the general public, have long been aware of racial disparities in school discipline. As early as 1974, civil rights advocates highlighted that Black students were 2 to 3 times more likely to be suspended than white students. Sadly, little progress has been made in reducing these disparities. In 2012, for example, Black students made up only 17 percent of students in the United States but accounted for 40 percent of out-of-school suspensions and were three times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school. While 6 percent of all K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions during the 2013-14 school year, the percentage was 18 percent for black boys; 10 percent for black girls; 5 percent for white boys; and 2 percent for white girls. This wide racial disparity persists despite gender and age differences.

The disparate punishment for Black students in our nation’s schools can have dire consequences beyond their K-12 school experiences. Once a Black student is suspended, the chances that he or she will drop out of school, become unemployed, and enter the criminal justice system rises dramatically.

New interventions that put more attention on student-teacher relationships and the social and psychological factors contributing to these relationships have begun to lessen the extreme levels of discipline administered to Black children. The report discusses a number of these strategies, including the “wise feedback” intervention, which focuses on providing

clear feedback in a manner that prevents students from believing that the teacher may harbor a negative bias against them. Another technique detailed in the report is the “empathic discipline” intervention, which exposes teachers to their kids’ personal stories so that they can gain insight into the experience of racially stigmatized students in school. This exposure encourages teachers to use discipline as a chance to build a relationship with the student and cultivate a learning opportunity.

“The over-disciplining of students of color presents a crisis for our young people, our schools, and our criminal justice system,” said [Jason Okonofua](#), Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley and co-author of the report. “The interventions and recommendations offered in our report could significantly improve the fairness of school discipline, helping to ensure that every student has a meaningful opportunity to succeed.”

Beyond these interventions, the report also offers specific recommendations for school districts on how to better address implicit bias, and how to mitigate the harm caused by discretionary offenses and school resource officers. These recommendations have already shown promise in ameliorating the over-disciplining of students of color, and in creating a safer learning environment where all students feel inspired to succeed.

The report was published with the guidance of the Legal Strategies Collaborative, a group of 15 organizations that focus on limiting the school-to-prison pipeline, and was made possible by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

Read the full report [here](#).

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.