

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Promoting racial equity in education

By Samone Oates-Bullock

Despite progress on some fronts, questions of race and racism remain front and center in the debate over education in North Carolina. Nearly two decades into the 21st Century, inequity and lack of access continue to serve as debilitating roadblocks to many students of color. Compared to white students, students of color are more likely to attend schools that are underfunded and overcrowded, that have fewer up-to-date materials, less technology and a lower percentage of highly qualified teachers. And while racial equity is often a topic that goes unaddressed due to fear of controversy, it must be at the forefront of the conversation if our state hopes to create meaningful progress in this vitally important arena.



A CLOSER LOOK AT DISPARITIES

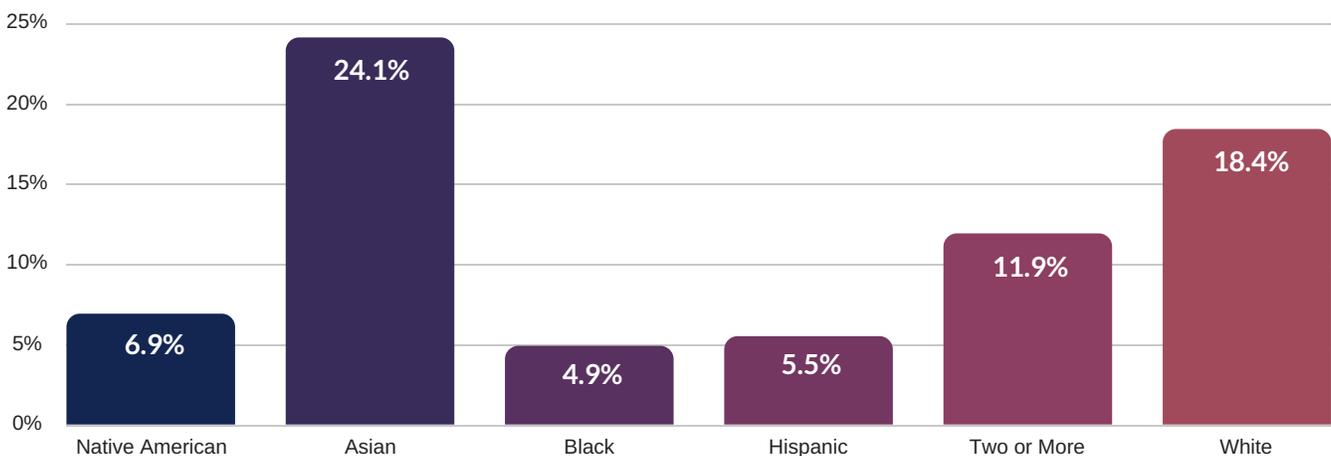
- Currently, there is a much higher percentage of students of color than teachers of color in North Carolina's public schools.

	Teacher Percentage (2015)	Student Percentage (2015)
Black	15%	25.5%
Hispanic	<5%	16.8%
White	80.1%	49.1%
Other	<5%	8.6%

Source: [DPI Statistical Profile](#)

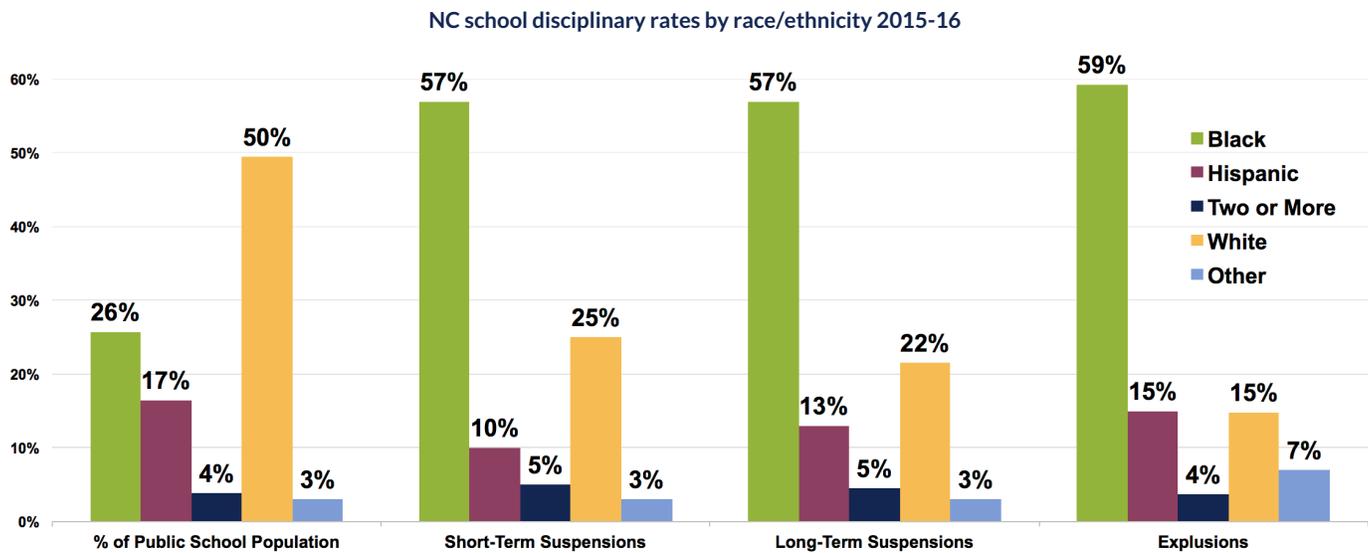
- Children of color are underrepresented in Academically and Intellectually Gifted Programs (AIG).

Percentage of each Race/Ethnicity enrolled in AIG Programs (2016)



Source: [DPI AIG Child Count, Statewide Overview, April 2016-2017](#)

● **Black and Hispanic students are suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates.**



Source: DPI Consolidated Report 2015-16

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

While addressing deeply ingrained issues like racism and racial inequality will obviously require decades of sustained public intervention on multiple fronts, there are some relatively simple and straightforward near-term policy changes that have the potential to make a real and important difference. Here are four:

● **Make racial equity and multicultural education a permanent part of teacher preparation programs**

Teachers play a critical role in shaping the way students view the world, and with this comes significant responsibility. It is imperative that the teachers in our classrooms have a holistic view of the world. Through racial equity and multicultural education training, teachers will become more prepared to engage with students of different races, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, religions, genders, and sexual orientations. In addition, teachers will become more aware of how their biases impact their student's learning environment and performance.

To achieve this, North Carolina should strive to make racial equity and multicultural training a mandatory part of its teacher preparation curriculum – something that has thus far only been implemented on a very limited basis. Training could be offered through a separate certification that all aspiring teachers would be required to complete.

● **Expand the Teaching Fellows program to include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and increase outreach to low-income high schools.**

North Carolina recently restored the [N.C. Teaching Fellows Program](#) for the 2018-19 academic year. The program will be offered to high school seniors, and college students at [Elon University](#), [Meredith College](#), [N.C. State University](#), [UNC-Chapel Hill](#) and [UNC-Charlotte](#), the majority of which are predominantly white campuses.

The failure to extend the program to HBCU's constitutes a huge missed opportunity to diversify the teaching profession in a public school system in which the majority of the student population is made up of students of color and the teaching staff remains predominately white.

Studies show that student performance, graduation rates and opportunities for pursuing higher education all rise measurably when students have exposure to teachers of similar racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. By expanding the Teaching Fellows program to include more HBCU's and increasing outreach to low-income schools across the state, North Carolina would offer more students of color the opportunity to enter the field of education.

A [study](#) published by the Institute of Labor Economics found that low-income Black students in North Carolina who have just **one** Black teacher in third, fourth, or fifth grade are **less likely** to drop out of high school and **more likely** to consider attending college.

● Make sure the most vulnerable schools are staffed with high-quality teachers

Meager teacher salaries combined with disproportionate funding have increased the difficulty of recruiting and retaining more experienced educators. Instead, our most vulnerable schools are primarily staffed with educators who are new to the profession. Many policies are based on the promise that financial incentives are the sole solution for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, however, there are numerous other factors that influence teachers' decision-making including location, working conditions, administrative support, and mentorship opportunities.

In order to boost recruitment and retention, North Carolina should include both financial and non-financial incentives in its recruitment strategies, including appropriate pay increases, a mentorship network, and access to additional preparation courses and learning opportunities. In 2015, South Carolina **launched** a promising new teacher recruitment and retention initiative designed to find and keep good educators, specifically in rural areas or communities with high teacher turnover. Those agreeing to work in districts where teacher turnover exceeds 12% would have access to a variety of financial and non-financial incentives.

● Help reduce unnecessary suspensions/expulsions by implementing restorative justice practices

Large numbers of North Carolina students are being swept into what is known as the “**school-to-prison pipeline**” – a system of policies and practices that pushes children, especially children of color, out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system. This system results in the disproportionate assignment of school suspensions and expulsions to youth of color, and in particular, Black youth. The lack of cultural competence among teachers can cause Black youth to be improperly viewed as more aggressive or as threats to other students' safety. Addressing this issue is vital because the impact of suspensions and expulsions extend well beyond the classroom. Harsh disciplinary policies can negatively affect student achievement and have long-term impacts on social mobility and quality of life.

In order to address school discipline disparities, North Carolina should work to implement a statewide restorative justice program. Restorative Justice is an effective alternative to harsh disciplinary policies that focuses primarily on repairing harm by including all stakeholders in the process. Restorative justice brings together all parties in a safe environment in order to promote dialogue, accountability and a stronger sense of community.

Campbell Law School runs a **restorative justice clinic** in which it receives referrals from juvenile intake counselors, juvenile court, the local school system and private individuals who have been affected by crime or disruptive behavior.

85 PERCENT

percent of cases referred to the RJC are **successfully mediated**.

1. <http://ftp.iza.org/dp10630.pdf>

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