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Bias a Factor In Suspending Black Students

By Freddie Allen
NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - A new collection of research shows that despite the myths surrounding black student behavior, poverty and severity of the offense have very little to do with the rate black students are suspended from school.

Rather, the studies point a finger in another direction: the implicit bias perpetrated by school officials.

The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, a group of researchers, educators, advocates, and policy analysts funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundations, compiled the research on school discipline.



Judith Browne Dianis,
co-director of the Advancement Project testifying before Congress on the school-to-prison pipeline. (Photo courtesy Freddie Allen/NNPA)

According to the Collaborative, more than 3 million students from kindergarten to 12th grade were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year, twice the rate of suspensions since the 1970s. Black students are nearly 3.5 times as likely to be suspended than their white peers.

In the briefing paper titled, "Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts about Racial Differences in Behavior," researchers from the Equity Project at Indiana University in Bloomington found that "there is simply no good evidence that racial differences in discipline are due to differences in rates or types of misbehavior by students of different races."

Research also showed that despite popular myths the relationship between poverty and disruptive school behavior has been overstated.

When researchers looked at middle school referrals, white students were more likely to get sent to office over "observable offenses" such as smoking and vandalism and black students were disciplined more frequently for subjective reasons including disrespectful behavior, loud noise and defiance.

"In other words, regardless of a school's official disciplinary policy, there are a variety of factors involved in determining a student's punishment, not the least of which is the mood, ideology, philosophy, values, and biases of the adults making that decision," stated the briefing paper on implicit bias. "The more subjective the category of offense - i.e., insubordination, disobedience, disruption, defiance - the greater the risk that bias (either explicit or unconscious) will seep into the process."

Researchers often use the Implicit Association Test to measure implicit bias.

"Researchers have found that 80% of tested whites and 40% of tested blacks show a pro-white bias," stated the briefing paper. "They consistently implicitly associate blacks with negative attitudes such as bad and unpleasant, and with negative stereotypes such as aggressive and lazy."

Researchers from the University of Wisconsin developed a "toolkit" of strategies to combat implicit bias including stereotype replacement, counter-stereotypic imagining that involves thinking about a famous or familiar person that debunks the stereotype, learning about a person's background and developing an individualized response, tastes, hobbies, and family, and perspective-taking.

"All children deserve access to a quality education, but too often, children of color are pushed out of the classroom - not because they're behaving any worse than other students, but because of harsh and often discriminatory school disciplinary policies," said Judith Browne Dianis, co-director of the Advancement Project and member of the research collaborative. "While the notion of a post-racial society is aspirational in theory, racial discrimination in school discipline is a major problem."

The Collaborative also recommended that schools utilize "a systematic protocol" such as the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines instead of zero tolerance policies that quickly usher students down the school-to-prison pipeline.

The Collaborative researchers reported that, "Use of the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines across schools in Virginia was associated with a 19% reduction in the number of long-term suspensions and an 8% reduction in the number of short-term suspensions, greater than schools not using the Guidelines."

The Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines entail communicating with the students involved, distinguishing between real and fleeting threats, and intervening before any threats escalate into violence.

The Collaborative briefing paper on new research stated: "Use of the Guidelines was associated with reductions in suspensions for all racial groups included in the study, as well as a reduction in disproportionality between black males and white even after controlling for school size and poverty."

In schools that didn't follow the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines, there was a six point gap between black male and white male student long-term suspension rates, compared to a three point gap in schools that followed the guidelines.

The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative recommended a range of interventions including building supportive



President Barack Obama recognizes Medal of Honor honorees, from left, Staff Sergeant Melvin Morris, Sergeant First Class Jose Rodela, and Specialist Four Santiago J. Erevia, during the Medal of Honor ceremony in the East Room of the White House, March 18. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Obama gives Medal of Honor to 24 vets from 3 wars

By Jim Kuhnhenn

WASHINGTON (AP) - Twenty-four mostly ethnic or minority U.S. soldiers who performed bravely under fire in three of the nation's wars finally received on March 18 the Medal of Honor that the government concluded should have been awarded a long time ago.

The servicemen - Hispanics, Jews and African-Americans - were identified following a congressionally mandated review to ensure that eligible recipients of the country's highest recognition for valor were not bypassed due to prejudice. Only three of the 24 were alive for President Barack Obama to drape the medals and ribbons around their necks.

"Today we have the chance to set the record straight," Obama said. "No nation is perfect, but here in America we confront our imperfections and face a sometimes painful past, including the truth that some of these soldiers fought and died for a country that did not always see them as equal."

The three surviving recipients - Vietnam veterans Jose Rodela, Melvin Morris and Santiago Erevia - received a prolonged standing ovation at Obama's side, their faces set in somber acknowledgement of the honor.

Rodela was a 31-year-old company commander of a Special Forces strike group on Sept. 1, 1969, in Phuoc Long Province, Vietnam, when he and his company of Cambodian soldiers whom he had helped recruit came under fire from North Vietnamese Army troops.

According to his Medal of Honor citation and supporting documents, the battle lasted 18 hours and 11 men in his company were killed and 33 others wounded.

The citation states that late in the battle, Rodela "was the only member of his company who was moving and he began to run from one position to the next, checking for casualties and moving survivors into different positions in an attempt to form a stable defense line. Throughout the battle, in spite of his wounds, Rodela repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to attend to the fallen and eliminate an enemy rocket position."

In an interview with the Army News Service last December, he said simply, "We trained for this and I would have done it again."

Morris was a staff sergeant during combat operations on Sept. 17, 1969, near Chi Lang, South Vietnam. According to the Pentagon, Morris led soldiers across enemy lines to retrieve his team sergeant, who had been killed. He single-handedly destroyed an enemy force hidden in bunkers that had pinned down his battalion. Morris was shot three times as he ran with American casualties.

Morris received the Distinguished Service Cross in April 1970. That same month, he returned to Vietnam for his second tour.

"I never really did worry about decorations," Morris told The Associated Press last month. But he said he fell to his knees when he received the surprise call from Obama with news that he was to be honored.

Erevia was cited for courage while serving as a radio-telephone operator on May 21, 1969, during a search-and-clear mission near Tam Ky, South Vietnam. He was a specialist 4 when his battalion tried to take a hill fortified by Viet Cong and North Vietnam Army soldiers. The Pentagon says he single-handedly silenced four Viet Cong bunkers.

As for the medal, he told the publication Soldier Live last month, "I'm only thankful I'm getting it while I'm alive."

Among those who received a posthumous medal was Leonard Kravitz, an assistant machine gunner in the Korean War who is credited with saving his platoon by providing cover for retreating troops. He died in the attack. He is the uncle of singer and actor Lenny Kravitz, who attended Tuesday's ceremony.

Tuesday's mass ceremony, the largest since World War II, was the result of an Army review conducted under a directive from Congress in the 2002 National Defense Authorization Act. The law required that the record of each Jewish-American and Hispanic-American veteran who received a Service Cross during or after World War II be reviewed for possible upgrade to the Medal of Honor.

The Pentagon said the Army reviewed the cases of the 6,505 recipients of the Distinguished Service Cross from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars and found an eligible pool of 600 soldiers who may have been Jewish or Hispanic. The Army also worked with the National Museum of American Jewish Military History, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA and the American GI Forum, the largest Hispanic-American veterans group, to pinpoint potential medal recipients.

During the initial review, investigators found that other soldiers who had received the Distinguished Service Cross appeared to meet the criteria for a Medal of Honor and the directive was expanded to permit them to be considered for the upgraded honor.

Voter ID bill gets first look by NC House panel

RALEIGH (AP) - The political divide in the first state legislature fully in Republican hands widened March 15 as GOP lawmakers pushed a bill that would force voters to show a photo identification card when casting a ballot.

Democrats believe the legislation is aimed at keeping their voters away from the polls, but Republicans said their intention is deterring voter fraud at a time that early voting weeks in advance of Election Day is growing more popular.

"The door is wide open to be exploited fraudulently," said Rep. Tim Moore, R-Cleveland, one of the bill's co-sponsors. The bill "simply provides safeguard against voter fraud."

But Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, said the proposal would thwart voting by blacks, who may be more likely to lack a state-issued ID. "What you're doing is an abomination on the right to vote with this bill," he said.

A state Board of Election study of registered voters found that about 1 million voters did not match with Department of Motor Vehicles records of state-issued licenses or ID cards. Of that 1 million lacking the primary state-issued IDs, more than half were registered Democrats, more than 277,000 Republicans and 219,000 unaffiliated voters.

The bill sets aside \$600,000 to help county election boards create new voter identification cards, but opponents said the experience of other states shows it could be 30 times that amount.

Sponsors plan to change the measure ahead of an expected vote in the House Elections Committee next Wednesday after several flaws in the language were pointed out. Michaux noted college students attending a private school such as Duke or Davidson couldn't use their student ID to vote because it wasn't issued by the state, while those attending a public university could.

For two hours before the committee hearing, lawmakers heard from dozens of people mobilized to speak on the voter ID bill. The Rev. William Barber, president of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told committee members that voter fraud isn't an issue. He likened it to a form of Jim Crow voter suppression in the 21st century.

"It is ridiculous. It is regressive. It is wrong and its implementation will constitute a political form of racism and classism," Barber said as he offered the committee chairman a copy of the 15th Amendment that ensured blacks had the right to vote. "We need to end this foolishness."

Several speakers opposed to photo identification before voting also could make it difficult for people with disabilities, recent college graduates and married women who changed their names close to an election to vote.

Bob Hall, director of the nonpartisan Democracy North Carolina, called the bill "as phony as a three-dollar bill."

"It has an appearance of being genuine, but if you hold up to the light and examine it more closely, it's a sham. It's a political trick," he said. But other speakers have said the identification will ensure people are who they say they are when the vote and should speed up the voting process.

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