

# OPINION

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## Too Many Suspensions, Expulsions for Black Students

Unfair school discipline to minorities

BY VANESSA R. GASTON  
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When people talk about eliminating the achievement gap, they tend to focus on one area—academic achievement—which is usually defined as getting students to pass standardized tests. I hear little conversation about how students of color, especially African Americans, are disproportionately dropping out of school or being forced out of school through repeat suspensions or expulsion.

If we are to succeed in eliminating the achievement gap, we must address this issue. Not only is the current educational system failing to teach students of color and low-

income students, but it also is unfairly punishing them and pushing them out of the system.

In February 2005, the Juvenile Rights Project completed a 3-year study on the overrepresentation of children of color in school discipline incidents. It found that the Oregon Department of Education and most school districts have not consistently tracked suspensions and expulsions by race. However, Portland Public Schools has col-

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lected this information.

Findings from the study indicate that during the 2002-03 school year, PPS enrolled 52,969 students and had 2,324 major disciplinary referrals resulting in suspension or expulsion. While Caucasian students represented 60.3 percent of enrolled students, they made up 38.4 percent of the major disciplinary referrals. African Americans represented only 16.5 percent of enrolled students, but accounted for 43.5 per-

cent of all major disciplinary referrals. During that same year, 8.1 percent of African Americans students were suspended or expelled compared to only 2.24 percent of Caucasian students.

Research studies find no evidence that African Americans misbehave at a significantly higher rate than other children, yet they are much more likely to be punished. Why is this the case? JRP's report indicates that children of color are

punished more severely than others due to cultural differences and lack of training and resources for teachers. The report emphasizes what most of us already know—that children of color and low-income children are often taught by less experienced teachers (usually Caucasian) in overcrowded classrooms with outdated books and inadequate supplies. Lack of parental involvement among minorities is another factor, as these par-

ents often have overburdened lives and failed experiences with the school system.

According to the JRP study, African American students feel that teachers and principals are deliberately targeting them, while Caucasian teachers and students believe the treatment is objective. This finding suggests that racial biases (conscious or unconscious) permeate the school environment.

A high school principal recently told me that if a child cannot read by the third grade, he will begin acting out in class because he does not understand the lesson. Many times, teachers misinterpret that frustration as a behavioral issue rather than a learning difficulty, and children are punished instead of helped.

The disproportionate number of disciplinary referrals among students of color is alarming when one considers the impact on stu-

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## Double Standard Black leaders face biased scrutiny

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

It's not enough that most black political leaders have to fight their way to the top, overcoming all sorts of political and social racism—from both the general population and colleagues. Once there, they are expected to walk a rigid line or risk having their every misstep publicly criticized.



*Blacks have always had to 'do better' to succeed — get better grades, work longer hours, do more in less time.*

TIME magazine recently named Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley one of the "5 Best Big City Mayors." The weekly cited the rejuvenation of Chicago's downtown area, expanding green space throughout the city and a declining murder rate when explaining why Daley made the cut.

In the very same issue, Kwame Kilpatrick of Detroit and John Street

of Philadelphia, both African-Americans, were named two of the worst big city mayors.

TIME called Kilpatrick to the carpet for using city funds to lease a vehicle when city jobs and 24-hour bus service were eliminated in an attempt to manage the city's \$230 million budget deficit. TIME doesn't discuss Detroit's residential and commercial construc-

tion boom, major road and transportation improvements and riverfront overhaul, all initiatives begun during Kilpatrick's tenure.

Mayor Street was singled out for having what TIME calls "corrupt" friends, despite there being no evidence that Street has been involved in any wrong doing. The magazine goes on to state that Street has made 'considerable' progress in

the contrary — all public officials — both black and white — should be held accountable for their actions. This isn't always the case.

TIME's article makes no mention of Daley's scandal-plagued Hired Truck Program that has, so far, resulted in over a dozen indictments and has dominated Chicago headlines. The editors also chose to ignore the funds

turning around Philadelphia's low-income communities. But that apparently didn't factor into the editor's decision making.

This is not to say that black leaders shouldn't be held to high standards. Quite

the city's 165 'favored' trucking firms have paid Daley and his brother since 1996. The magazine does state that corruption has "caught up with" Daley's allies, but that he himself has "avoided implication." If Mayor Street can be negatively judged for his 'corrupt' friends, why can't Mayor Daley?

to be seen if the real culprits will be brought to task.

Blacks have always had to 'do better' to succeed — get better grades, work longer hours, do more in less time. As a people, we have come to accept this as a byproduct of living in a society where we are not treated equally.

What we should not accept is this double standard where white politicians walk under a positive spotlight, regardless of whether or not it is deserved, and black leaders are constantly thrust under this 'interrogation' lamp.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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