



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

School district records in Oregon clearly demonstrate that students of color are more often suspended or expelled than their white peers. "We are not treating all kids equitably and that needs to change," said Dana Hepper, who has served as advocacy director for Stand for Children Oregon.

Unequal School Justice

continued ▲ from front

Education, the advocacy groups together recommended the development of a data tool to make yearly discipline data from school districts more easily available to members of the public, families and educators.

The new state website, which breaks down the data by race and ethnicity, district by district, allows viewers to easily understand the charts and tables.

According to a recent report issued by Multnomah County's Commission on Children, Families, and Communities, African American students in the Portland area are suspended and expelled 2.5 times more often than white students for subjective infractions, such as "disruptive conduct" and "disrespect."

The same study found that Latino students are 1.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled for the same offenses.

April Campbell, participant of the Tribal Government to Government Education Cluster of Oregon, pointed to similar patterns affecting Native American students.

"Native American students attend public schools all over our state, and many of our youth receive harsher discipline," said Campbell, who is an active member of the organization. "Like other students of color, their needs are not being met and their achievement suffers. It is my hope to bring awareness to this issue as well as find positive solutions so that all students can be successful."

Although there is a whole sleuth

of disciplinary issues for youth within the Oregon school system, Campbell said there is a major need to educate educators on how to approach different learning styles.

"If a student is suspended, and you are not working with them to solve the behavior communication issue, then they are going to continue that behavior until they end up suspended again," she said. "I think a big piece is just educating educators on learning styles and even the cultural aspect of Native students."

Campbell said, however, the issue spans across the board for minority youth within the state. "This is why this group had representation from a variety of ethnicities," said Campbell, who is excited about the new database, which she believes, will bring more awareness.

Once you are aware of the issue then you can fix it that is kind of what we are hoping, she said.

"This tool will highlight the need for all school districts to build more cultural responsiveness in their programs to help prevent more students from losing valuable school time and create more equitable practices to ensure students' success," said Inger McDowell, community organizer for the Urban League of Portland.

McDowell said, the Urban League felt it was an important issue because high proportion of those being 'pushed out' of the school system, which means repeatedly disciplined for subjective infractions, are black and Latino students.

"The blame could go many

ways, but what is more important is that we are working towards solutions that actually help schools that are having poor track records with high disc issues," she said. "The reality we want students to stay in school."

McDowell said, the new data base will definitely help Portland, which is the largest school system in the state, with 47,000 students and 82 schools.

"There is an opportunity with this particular data base tool to see which schools are really struggling and find a way to help them," she said.

"They want kids to graduate from high school, but if they are being pushed out, how are they supposed to graduate?" she asked. "There needs to be a commitment to keep kids in schools and find an alternative to expulsion."

Hepper agreed. "Now anyone can see in their school district what is happening, in terms of student discipline," she said.

"We hope it empowers people to get involved and informed."

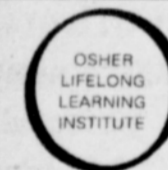
For the future, representatives from the advocate organizations said they will continue to encourage state education policy makers to improve legislation and create intervention strategies, which have been successful to keep students in school and improve education outcomes.

"The next thing we want to continue to work on is to ensure the practices that decrease suspension and expulsion and increase student safety are implemented in more communities," said Hepper.

We really just need to raise standards, added McDowell. "We

need to work together to improve the education system because it can't be done alone."

For more information, visit the new data web site at educationdataexplorer.com.



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