Many school and community leaders in the Twin Cities are alarmed by the significant racial disparities in public school suspension rates. According to a joint report by the Minneapolis Foundation, the Minneapolis Public School District, and the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce titled Measuring Up 2002, African Americans account for more than three-fourths of all suspensions in Minneapolis schools. In addition, more than one-third of African American students and one-fourth of American Indian students were suspended at some point from 1998 to 2001. Some parents and administrators have speculated that the racial gap in student test scores is linked to the disproportionate suspension rates among students of color. In addition, significant disparities in suspension rates across racial groups is cause for alarm in its own right.

As part of a long-term, ongoing research project on community-based strategies for improving minority student test performance, the Wilkins Center at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs conducted an analysis for the Minneapolis Foundation on the impacts of suspensions, parental involvement, and textbooks in four Minneapolis public schools. The larger Wilkins Center project received start-up funds from a CURA Faculty Interactive Research Program grant, with additional support provided by the Minneapolis Foundation; the Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Richfield Public School Districts; the United Way; the St. Paul Foundation; the St. Paul Companies Foundation; the Bigelow Foundation; the General Mills Foundation; and the American Educational Research Association. This update focuses on the findings from the Minneapolis Foundation Study regarding the impact of school suspensions.

Our study included both a qualitative review of suspension policies in Minneapolis public schools, and a quantitative analysis of the relationship between sixth-grade suspension rates and seventh-grade scores on the practice Minnesota Basic Skills Test (MBST). The Minneapolis Public School District provided three sets of data for the study: (1) the results of an MBST practice test administered in February 2002 to seventh graders at 26 schools; (2) suspension data for sixth graders at these schools during the preceding school year (2000–2001); and (3) detailed demographic data for seventh graders during the 2001–2002 school year. Of the 1,217 students who were suspended during the 2000–2001 school year, 542 took the MBST practice test and 675 did not.

Disparities in Suspension and Disciplinary Policies. Our qualitative analysis focused on the Minneapolis Public School District’s “City Wide Discipline Policy” (Policy 5200). The policy outlines the types of infractions for which students can be suspended. These infractions include weapons possession, assault, sexual harassment or sexual violence, indecent exposure, possession of alcohol or other drugs, tobacco use, verbal abuse of or disrespect toward school staff or students, personal theft, school property damage, improper activation of fire alarms, trespassing, bus discipline infractions, truancy, and tardiness. Penalties for these offenses vary depending on the seriousness of the offense, the age of the student, and the number of times the student has been charged with the offense. The district policy also outlines requirements for school personnel in the event a student is suspended, including documenting the suspension using a district-provided form, conducting an informal administrative conference with the student, preparing a written readmission plan, and sending a notice of suspension to the student’s parent(s) or guardian(s).

The district policy allows a wide degree of interpretation and flexibility that can result in important differences in classroom management and disciplinary approaches at individual schools. For example, one school we studied has a written policy that stipulates what types of misbehavior teachers should attempt to handle in the classroom, and teams of teachers identify other types of interventions that can be used to change a student’s behavior while keeping them in class. Once these interventions are exhausted, a teacher can send the student to a behavioral room, where a school administrator decides what additional action (e.g., a lunchtime detention, additional time in the behavioral room, an in-school...
suspension, or an out-of-school suspension) is necessary. Another school we examined has no formal policy regarding classroom management and no team behavior modification plan. If a teacher sends a student to the principal's office with a behavioral referral, it becomes the responsibility of the school administrator to investigate the incident and decide what action should be taken. Instead of a behavioral room, this school has only an in-school suspension option. In the case of the first school, if a student is sent to the behavioral room for a half day or whole day, this action is not reported as a suspension.

In contrast, teachers and administrators in the second school who send students to the in-school suspension room for a half day or whole day must report it as a suspension, causing their suspension rates to appear higher than those at the first school. Other differences between schools such as the degree of cultural diversity training provided to staff or the amount of time staff are given to review and discuss discipline and classroom management policies may also affect how district-wide policies are implemented at the school level.

Disparities in Suspension Rates. Most of the previous research on school suspension has found that the suspension rates of students of color are disproportionate to their representation in the school population. We used racial disproportionality ratios to determine whether this is true for the Minneapolis Public School District. At the national level, African American students are suspended at a disproportionate rate to their population in schools (2 to 1) compared to White students (0.8 to 1).\footnote{Based on data from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) and the 1997 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY).}

Disproportionality at the state level in Minnesota is even more marked, with African American students suspended at a rate of 5.6 to 1 compared to 0.7 to 1 for White students. Based on our analysis, the disproportionality ratio for Minneapolis public schools is lower than both the national and state ratios—1.6 to 1 for African American students, and 0.4 to 1 for White students. Although racial differences in suspensions are clearly present in Minneapolis public schools, the racial disproportionality ratios are lower than the national ratios for all students of color except American Indians. However, these comparisons should be viewed with caution. Definitions of suspension and reporting requirements vary among school districts. Moreover, the data for the state of Minnesota report the number of suspensions, whereas the data for Minneapolis refer to the number of suspended students, potentially inflating the state ratio by comparison.

Previous research on school suspension also indicates that African American students are typically suspended for less serious offenses and for longer periods of time than other students. In our study of Minneapolis public schools, we found that African American sixth graders were suspended in essentially equal numbers for fighting and lack of cooperation. In contrast, students of other races were much more likely to be suspended for fighting than for lack of cooperation. Furthermore, although the five most common reasons for suspension were consistent across all racial groups, their prevalence in each group varied.

For Minneapolis sixth graders, the average length of suspension was not that different from one racial group to the next, with each group having an average suspension length of two days. African American students had marginally longer average suspensions (2.04 days) and White students had the shortest (1.87 days). No White, Asian, or Latino student received a suspension longer than five days. There were 16 suspensions longer than five days for the whole district; 14 of these students were African American, and 2 were Native American.

Impact of Suspensions on Test Scores. The conventional wisdom is that suspensions, as a form of enforced nonattendance, reduce opportunities for classroom engagement and the amount of class time a student experiences, thereby hurting academic performance. We used the data obtained from the Minneapolis Public School District to analyze the relationship between suspensions and test scores. Specifically, we analyzed student performance on the 2002 MBST practice test to determine whether being suspended affects a student’s academic achievement. Of the students in our sample who were suspended as sixth graders in 2000–2001, 542 took the MBST practice test in February 2002. The remaining test takers had never been suspended in the sixth grade or were not in the Minneapolis Public School District in sixth grade. The scores for the math portion of the test ranged from 0 to 67 (67 being perfect), with an average (mean) score of 39.03. The scores for the reading portion of the test ranged from 0 to 40 (40 being perfect), with an average (mean) score of 21.87.

We compared the test score means for suspended versus nonsuspended students by racial group. Our analysis demonstrated that for African American and White students, being suspended was correlated with lower scores on both the math and reading portions of the practice test, compared with students of the same racial group who had not been suspended. For American Indian students, being suspended was correlated with lower scores for the...
math portion of the test, but there was no statistically significant difference in reading scores. We observed no statistically significant differences in either math or reading scores for Latino or Asian students who had been suspended compared with those who had not. After controlling for other factors, our analysis revealed that the overall effect of suspension on test scores was very small. After combining math and reading scores, a 1% increase in suspensions resulted in a 0.15% drop in the mean score. Attendance, in general, had a larger effect, with a 1% increase in attendance resulting in a 0.48% increase in test scores. In short, although there is a statistically significant relationship between suspensions and test scores, the impact is very small, and too small to make the claim that the racial disparity in suspension rates is the cause of racial gaps in test scores.

Although our analysis found that suspension itself is not a significant contributor to racial gaps in test scores, this finding does not mitigate the fact that there are large racial disparities in suspension rates in Minneapolis Public Schools, and that suspension policies are not applied uniformly throughout the district. The nature and causes of those disparities are significant, and merit further inquiry and policy consideration. Specifically, school districts and policy makers should evaluate existing suspension regulations with a focus on how specific these policies are, how schools impose and manage suspensions, how school staff interpret different student offenses, how clearly schools communicate the consequences of suspension to students, and how consistently schools report disciplinary action to the district. In addition, school districts and policy makers would do well to continue to monitor the linkage—even if it is a weak one—between academic achievement and suspension among individual racial and ethnic groups. We recommend a longitudinal study of the academic impact of suspensions that examines this issue beyond the seventh grade.

—Charlotte Voight, Julia Blount, and Mary Lou Middleton, contributing writers. A copy of the complete Wilkins Center report to the Minneapolis Foundation, Measuring Up: The Impact of Suspensions, Parental Involvement and Textbooks in Four Minneapolis Public Schools, can be found at www.hhh.umn.edu/img/assets/9680/measuring.pdf.

New Hennepin County Relations Liaison Will Advance Collaborative Efforts

Hennepin County and the University of Minnesota are jointly funding a new liaison position that will strengthen the long-standing relationship between these two entities, bringing University research and technical support directly to bear on service delivery and decision making in Minnesota’s largest county. The position will be administratively housed at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), and is being supported in part by funds from Hennepin County, the University’s Office of the President, and CURA.

Hennepin County initiated efforts with the University in early 2002 to develop a strategic program to foster deeper collaboration around three pressing issues: truancy, uncompensated care, and developmental disabilities. A group of Hennepin County staff and University faculty were brought together to explore possibilities for joint projects around each of these issues, but it became apparent early in the process that the interchange was potentially “boundless in scope” and required a full-time position to direct the effort. After a series of meetings between county and University administrators, the idea was born for a liaison position responsible for fostering collaborations on issues of mutual concern and benefit.

Kathie Doty, a University employee who will report to both CURA director

Tom Scott and Hennepin County deputy administrator Richard Johnson, has been chosen as the new liaison. Doty formerly worked at Hennepin County, holding positions of increasing responsibility in several county departments.

Most recently, she was a public policy consultant working with metropolitan counties, the Metropolitan Council, and other governmental units.

Hennepin County Commissioner Linda Koblick was a key player in developing the joint initiative. “For some time we have felt it was important to establish a strategic alignment between Hennepin County and the University,” Koblick explained. “This initiative formalizes the exchange of ideas and dialogue between county staff who provide services and academic staff who conduct research on public policy issues. It makes sense that the state’s largest county and largest educational institution strategically coordinate our efforts to find the best solutions in this era of shrinking resources.”

Tom Scott called the new initiative “an important step in helping to implement the University’s increasing interest in and commitment to stronger engagement with various communities in Minnesota.” He also noted that this is likely the only such formal liaison arrangement anywhere in the country between a major university and a county government.

The county and University have worked together successfully in the past, including program collaborations, county participation in University advisory groups, and fellowship and internship programs that provided on-the-job learning experiences for students in county programs. In addition, the University has worked with Hennepin County on such issues as the effectiveness of out-of-home placement for children, and the University’s Medical School has a long-standing partnership with Hennepin County Medical Center.