

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Student Perceptions of School Fairness, Discipline, and Racial/Ethnic Conflict

Introduction

California schools have seen improvements in the rates of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) over the past decade¹. However, studies have shown students of color as well as special education students and students who identify as LGBTQ+ are the most likely to experience forms of exclusionary punishment, when compared to their peers, without evidence of higher rates of poor behavior^{2,3,4}. Furthermore, these disparities persist despite the recent declines in suspension and expulsion rates¹. Exclusionary discipline is associated with poor short-term academic and socio-emotional outcomes such as low grades, absences, and dropping out of school¹. In the long-term, students who experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline may also be at higher-risk for contact with the criminal justice system—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline”². Because most exclusionary discipline cases involve minor offenses and are initiated at school officials’ discretion, addressing issues of implicit bias, fairness, and cultural sensitivity are imperative to ensuring equitable disciplinary practices in schools and equitable outcomes for all students².

Previous California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) factsheets have examined school contextual factors related to gaps in academic achievement across racial and ethnic groups. They found that Black/African American and Latinx students were less likely to feel respected by school staff and more likely to experience unfair disciplinary practices and tension compared to White and Asian students^{3,5}.

In recent years, additional questions have been added to the CHKS Secondary School Climate Module to assess students’ school climate perceptions particularly relevant to racial and ethnic equity: fairness, rule clarity, disciplinary harshness, cultural sensitivity (respect for diversity), and racial/ethnic conflict. This factsheet describes racial/ethnic differences in these measures using 2018-20 data. Composite scores for each measure were calculated using the average percent of students that indicated “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” across the items that comprise each scale. Racial and ethnic backgrounds of the 855,502 7th, 9th, and 11th graders who completed the survey are presented in Table 1. For this factsheet, the middle school sample includes grade 7 students only and the high school sample includes students in grades 9 and 11.

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic background of students completing the survey

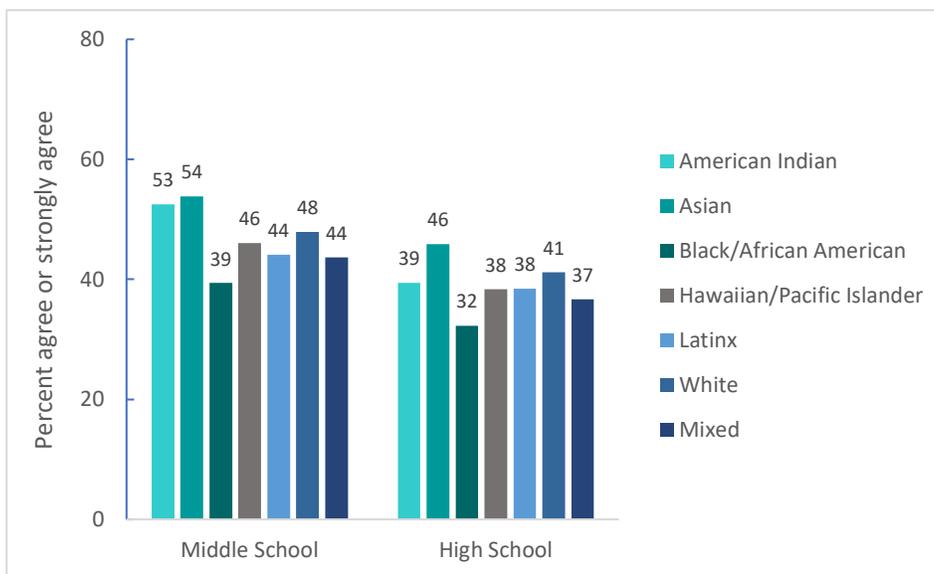
Race/Ethnicity	Middle School (Grade 7)	High School (Grade 9/11)
Latinx	53%	52%
White	18%	22%
Asian	11%	12%
Two or More Races	12%	9%
Black/African American	3%	3%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%	1%
American Indian	2%	1%

Key Takeaways

- Overall, racial/ethnic group differences in perceptions of Fairness, Rule Clarity, Disciplinary Harshness, Cultural Sensitivity, and Racial/Ethnic Conflict mirror the disparities that exist in the educational system and in the U.S. as a whole.
- By far, Black/African American students reported the highest levels of Disciplinary Harshness and Racial/Ethnic Conflict and the lowest levels of Fairness, Rule Clarity, and Cultural Sensitivity across the seven groups examined. In contrast, Asian and White students reported the lowest levels of Disciplinary Harshness and Racial/Ethnic Conflict and highest levels of Fairness, Rule Clarity, and Cultural Sensitivity. Depending on the outcome and school configuration, Mixed Race, Latinx, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian students reported levels between those of Black/African American students and Asian and White students.
- Racial/ethnic disparities in perceptions of school climate are substantial and indicate that there is much that schools can do to create equitable, safe, and more inclusive environments to improve the school experiences of students of color.

Fairness

Exhibit 1. Fairness by student race/ethnicity and grade level



Fairness represents the degree to which students believe that they are treated respectfully and that school rules are enforced fairly (Table A1). A minority of secondary students report high levels of agreement on school fairness, with most groups averaging between 32% and 48% agreement (Exhibit 1). Only middle school American Indian and Asian students report levels above 50%. Students in high school reported lower levels of agreement than students in middle school.

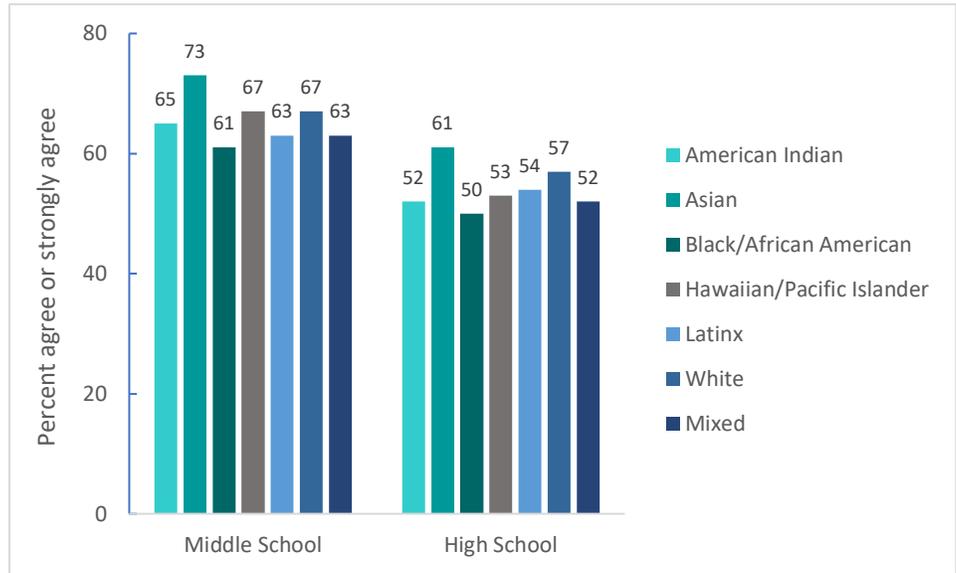
Black/African American students reported the lowest levels of fairness. On average, only 39% of Black/ African American middle schoolers and 32% of high schoolers agreed or strongly agreed on the items in the scale. In contrast, Asian students reported the highest levels of agreement on fairness (54% and 46%). Mixed Race, Latinx, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and White students reported levels of fairness between the levels reported by Asian and Black/African American students, with Whites reporting the highest levels of agreement (48% and 41%) among those groups.

Rule Clarity

Similar to what was observed with the fairness measure, high school students reported lower scores on rule clarity (Exhibit 2). Scores ranged from 61%–73% for middle schoolers and 50%–61% for high schoolers. All racial/ethnic groups reported scores above 50, indicating that at least half the students in each group understand school rules.

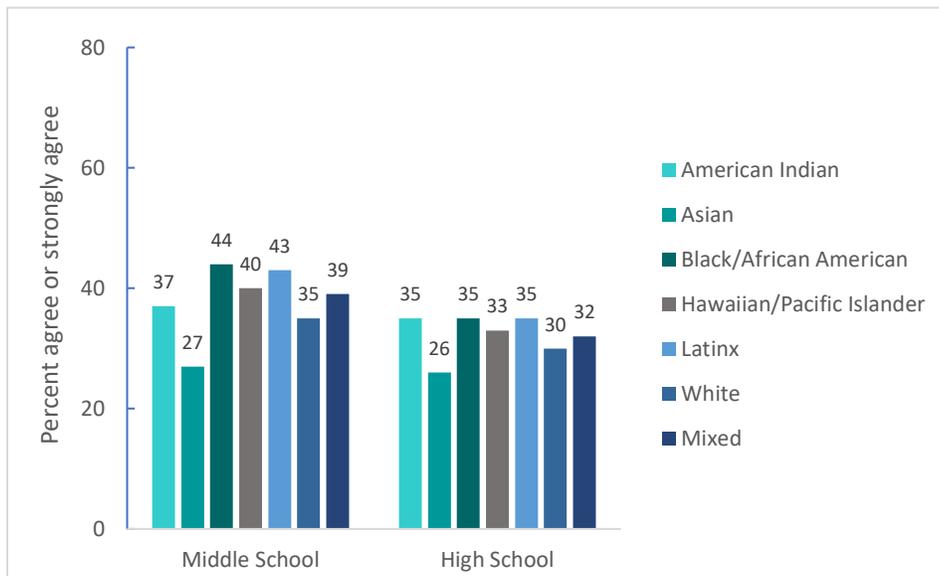
For both middle and high school, Asian students reported the highest level of rule clarity, followed by White students. Black/African American students were least likely to agree that school rules are clear in both middle and high school at 61% and 50%, respectively.

Exhibit 2. Rule Clarity by student race/ethnicity and grade level



Disciplinary Harshness

Exhibit 3. Disciplinary Harshness by student race/ethnicity and grade level

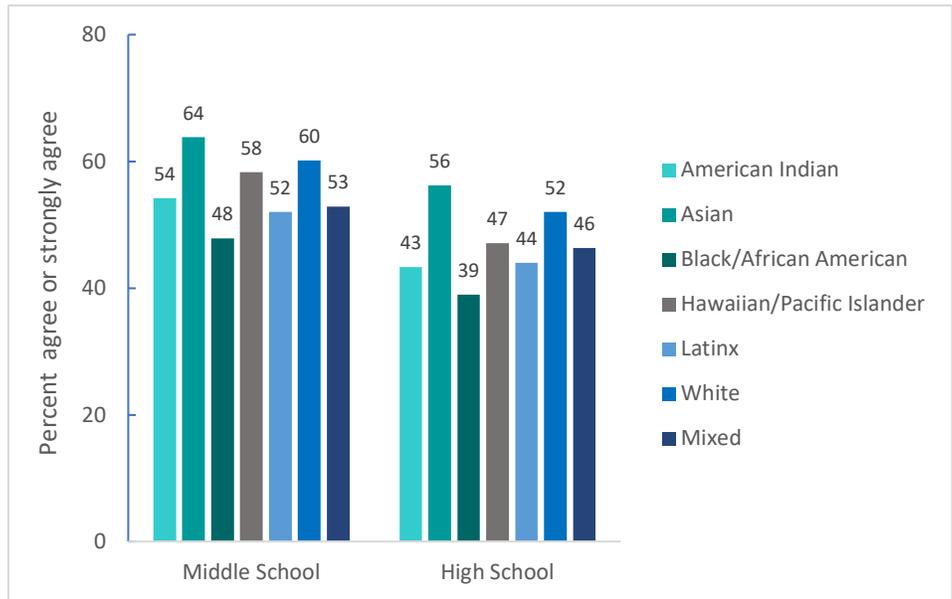


Between 26% and 44% of secondary students agreed that their school implemented overly harsh disciplinary practices. Black/African American and Latinx students reported the highest levels of disciplinary harshness while Asian students reported the lowest levels. White students reported levels that were higher than Asian students but lower than other groups.

Cultural Sensitivity

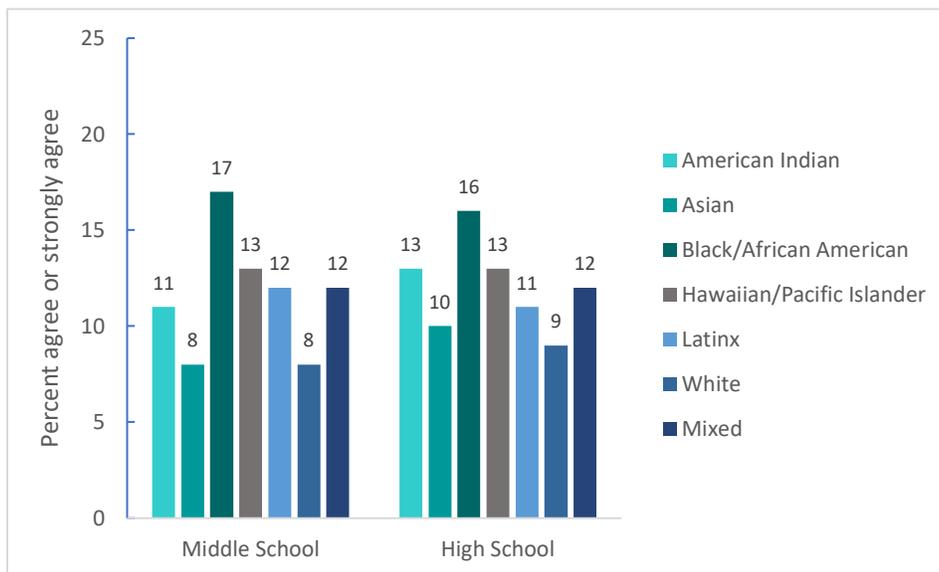
Cultural sensitivity, or respect for diversity, is generally higher among middle school students than high school students. Black/African American students were the least likely to agree that their school was culturally sensitive, while Asian and White students were the most likely to agree on the items in this scale. American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, Latinx, and mixed ethnicity students reported levels between that of Black/African American students and Asian and White students.

Exhibit 4. Cultural Sensitivity by student race/ethnicity and grade level



Racial/Ethnic Conflict

Exhibit 5. Racial/Ethnic Conflict by student race/ethnicity and grade level



Middle and high school students report similar levels of racial/ethnic conflict. Black/African American students reported the highest levels of racial/ethnic conflict, while White and Asian students reported the lowest levels. Notably, Latinx students did not report high levels of racial/ethnic conflict, despite reporting relatively poorer results on the previous measures. These results may be related to Latinx students attending schools with predominantly Latinx enrollments.

Implications

Differences in student perceptions of fairness, rule clarity, disciplinary harshness, cultural sensitivity, and racial/ethnic conflict among students of color may be indicative of unequitable disciplinary practices in schools. Said practices may translate to poor academic and socio-emotional outcomes for these students. While schools are responsible for ensuring the safety of the school community, it is also imperative that schools address the ways in which its disciplinary practices can be improved to better the outcomes of its students. Studies have pointed to implicit bias and restorative justice training for faculty and staff as well as connections between schools and behavioral health services as potential methods to alleviate this issue¹.

Suggested citation: Murphy, E., & Hanson, T. (2021). *Racial and ethnic disparities in student perceptions of school fairness, discipline, and racial/ethnic conflict*. CHKS Factsheet #18. San Francisco, CA. WestEd.

Endnotes

1

Losen, D.J. & Martinez, P. (2020). Is California doing enough to close the school discipline gap? Los Angeles, California. The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

2

Morgan, E., Salomon, N., Plotkin, M., & Cohen, R. (2014). The school discipline consensus report: Strategies from the field to keep students engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system. New York, NY: Council of State Governments, Justice Center.

3

Shirley, E.L.M. & Cornell, D.G. (2012). The contribution of student perceptions of school climate to understanding the disproportionate punishment of African American students in a middle school. *School Psychology International*. 33(2), 115–134.

4

Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., & Levine, P. (2005). Changes over time in the early postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities: A report of findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NTLS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NTLS2). (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2005).

5

Factsheets 9 and 14 (see <https://calschls.org/resources/factsheets/>).

Table A1. List of Selected Measures

Construct	Item(s)	Operationalization
Student Race/ Ethnicity	"What is your race?" "Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?"	Determined by responses marked by student. Race and ethnicity were treated as mutually exclusive categories (i.e., "White" refers to "Non-Latinx White").
Fairness	"Adults at this school treat all students with respect." "Students treat teachers with respect." "The school rules are fair." "All students are treated fairly when they break school rules."	The average percent of students indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the items on the scale.
Rule Clarity	"The school clearly informs students what would happen if they break school rules." "Rules in this school are made clear to students." "The school makes it clear how students are expected to act."	The average percent of students indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the items on the scale.
Disciplinary Harshness	"The rules in this school are too strict." "It is easy for students to get kicked out of class or get suspended." "Students get in trouble for breaking small rules."	The average percent of students indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the items on the scale.
Cultural Sensitivity	"Students in this school respect each other's differences." "Adults in this school respect differences in students." "Teachers show that... it is important for students of different races and cultures ... to get along."	The average percent of students indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the items on the scale.
Racial/Ethnic Conflict	"I have been disrespected by an adult at this school because of my race, ethnicity, or culture." "There is a lot of tension... between people of different cultures, races, ethnicities."	The average percent of students indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the items on the scale.