**BLACK STUDENTS ARE SUSPENDED AT THE HIGHEST RATE FROM ARIZONA SCHOOLS, DATA SHOWS**

[Lily Altavena](http://www.azcentral.com/staff/10058804/lily-altavena/), Arizona RepublicPublished 6:00 a.m. MT April 15, 2019 | Updated 12:40 p.m. MT April 27, 2019

Arizona students are more likely to be suspended from school if they aren't white.

Black and Native American students are suspended from Arizona schools at higher rates than white students, according to an analysis by The Arizona Republic of the most recent federal discipline data.

The disparities are the most stark for black students. While 5% of the state's students are black, they accounted for 13% of all out-of-school suspensions for the 2015-2016 school year. While 5% of the state's students are Native American, they accounted for 9% of all out-of-school suspensions for the 2015-2016 school year.

That imbalance in punishment is flipped for white students. While white students made up 40% of the student population in 2015-2016, they accounted for 29% of out-of-school suspensions, according to the federal data.

Hispanic students were punished proportionate to their population, but at a slightly higher rate than white students.

About 13.9% of the state's black students, 10.4% of Native students, 5.5% of Hispanic students, 4% of white students and 2.4% of Asian students were punished with one or more out-of-school suspensions in the 2015-2016 school year.

The data confirms a rallying cry parents and community members have made for years: Students of color are punished at higher rates than white students.

Anabel Maldonado is lead organizer with ACLU Arizona's Demand to Learn program, which works to eliminate unfair disciplinary practices. She said she's seen circumstances where students of color are eventually pushed out of school after multiple suspensions.

"The numbers show what we know anecdotally to be," she said. "Students of color, students of color with IEPs (individualized education programs), students of color with discipline records are being pushed out at much more frequent rates than their white peers."

Missed days add up, particularly for students picking up math and reading skills.

Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation — where discipline is up to school officials — are nearly three times as likely to cross paths with the juvenile justice system the next year, [according to the ACLU's national branch](https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/school-prison-pipeline-infographic). Those numbers tie into what's known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Janelle Wood is the founder of Black Mothers Forum, which advocates for equitable discipline practices in Arizona schools. Her group chose to focus on school discipline out of concern for the state’s children of color.

"The school-to-prison pipeline became very apparent to us," she said. "We needed to focus in on the schools, because they're very much a part of the pipeline."

**Annotations**

**PUNISHED AFTER AN ATTACK IN A SCHOOL HALLWAY**

Activists caution that the story doesn't end with federal data, but with students like 15-year-old Samuel Osornio.

Pushed up against a wall by a classmate in the breezeway of Mesa High School, Samuel said he was fighting back. He said he punched his attacker — another student twice his size who had tried to attack him earlier in the day— in the face in an act of self defense.

The fight ended the same way for Samuel and the other student: a 10-day out-of-school suspension. Samuel was also barred from school activities.

His punishment felt unreasonable, he said.

The high school sophomore is a trombone player and the suspension came at a formative time for his high school band career: He would miss a regional competition he'd practiced for months to make, was banned from performing at the district's band festival, and could not travel to play at Northern Arizona University.

Plus, the punishment would extend past his suspension: he was kicked out of the school musical's pit orchestra, he said.

For 10 days in February, Samuel stayed home. He practiced his trombone. He [created an online petition signed](https://www.change.org/p/mesa-public-schools-change-school-policy-on-self-defense?recruiter=74047341&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_initial.pacific_post_sap_share_gmail_abi.gmail_abi&utm_term=psf_combo_share_abi.pacific_post_sap_share_gmail_abi.gmail_abi&recruited_by_id=693d3c30-69fd-11e3-8d66-f33c6158aae8&utm_content=fht-14302647-en-us%3Av6&fbclid=IwAR049UpApiB9-8V0xWCEfKwUrzrQGDCgvjDk6KvKmWpId8xQ5yYACxZ_RiQ) by more than 2,400 people who supported changing Mesa Public Schools' discipline policy to offer more leniency in cases like Samuel's.

Samuel is Latino. His mother, Dennise Osornio, said she hopes his race had nothing to do with what they feel was a harsh punishment. But she can't be certain, she said.

"Almost every single teacher, every administrator I talked to were all white," she said. "I don't know if that made a difference in their decision."

A spokeswoman with the district, Heidi Hurst, said she could not comment on a specific student's situation but added that district punishments [come with a range of prescribed consequences](http://www.mpsaz.org/communications/library/files/2018-19_secondary_guidelines_eng_web.pdf).

Samuel's punishment fell within that range.

**Annotations**

**THE NUMBERS**

Federal officials released the 2015-2016 data in 2018. It includes every district and charter school in the state. Among the findings of The Republic's analysis of those numbers are:

* Nearly 70 district and charter schools had overall out-of-school suspension rates equal to or higher than 1 in 4 students in 2015-16.
* The Don Mensendick School in the Glendale Elementary School District and T.G. Barr School in the Roosevelt Elementary District gave out-of-school suspensions to 60% of enrolled black students in 2015-16, the highest percentage for district schools with more than 50 black students.
* RCB Medical Arts Academy in Phoenix gave out-of-school suspensions to 52% of its black students and Riverbend Prep in Laveen gave out-of-school suspensions to 48% of its black students, the highest % for charter schools with more than 50 black students.
* Vulture Peak Middle School in the Wickenburg Unified School District gave out-of-school suspensions to 73% of its Hispanic students and Pima Rose Academy, a charter in Tucson, gave out-of-school suspensions to 65% of its Hispanic students, the highest percentage for any schools with more than 50 Hispanic students.

Federal discipline data isn't perfect.

A few schools reported disciplining more students than the total number of students they reported as enrolled. About 20% of the state's schools — a little more than 400 — either did not report or reported that they gave zero out-of-school suspensions in the 2015-16 school year.

An investigation into more recent school data by The Republic indicates the trend of disproportionately disciplining minority students is continuing.

Arizona's district and charter schools are required to submit discipline data from the 2017-2018 school year this spring for the next round of federal data.

Through public records requests, The Republic obtained that data early from seven large metro-Phoenix districts: Tolleson Union High School District, Peoria Unified, Laveen Elementary School District, Glendale Union High School District, Deer Valley Unified, Dysart Unified and Kyrene Elementary District.

In each of the districts, black students accounted for 10% or more of all out-of-school suspensions. Those percentages were higher than the percentage of black student enrollment in every case, sometimes twice as high.

Derek Fahleson, Tolleson Union's director of athletics, safety and security, said the district tries to intervene before students are disciplined.

"Our philosophy is to be proactive in our approach to discipline by using intervention specialists, school resource officers, social workers, counselors, teachers and administrators to minimize the number of discipline infractions," he wrote in an emailed statement.

He added that ninth-graders have higher discipline numbers, likely because of the transition from middle school to high school.

**Annotations**

**BUCKING THE TREND**

Some schools are outliers in the numbers.

A charter school in Pinal County called Imagine Coolidge Elementary gave 50 out-of-school suspensions in 2015-2016.

While black students accounted for 9.3% of the student population, they accounted for 4% of out-of-school suspensions. The trend was also reversed for Hispanic students, who made up 53.1% of enrolled students and 48% of the out-of-school suspensions.

“If the children see people who look like them, if they have role models, there's that connection.”

Clara Thigpen, principal of Imagine Coolidge Elementary

Clara Thigpen, Imagine Coolidge Elementary's principal, said the numbers are the result of a conscious effort by teachers to understand their students. Imagine Coolidge serves free breakfast and lunch to all of its students, an indicator of a school with high poverty levels.

The effort to better understand the school's diverse student population starts in the summer before school starts, she said.

This year, teachers piled into a school bus in the summer heat and took a "field trip" through different neighborhoods in Coolidge where students live.

"That activity was truly an eye-opener for many of our teachers," she said. "Educating teachers about the children that they're going to be working with every single day, I think it's so important."

Thigpen thinks there's a disconnect in many schools between children and teachers.

"So much of that is coming from just a misunderstanding of our children and culture," she said.

She said the district also works to assure students have teachers who reflect their diversity.

"If the children see people who look like them, if they have role models, there's that connection," she said.

**Annotations**

**IMPLICIT BIAS BY TEACHERS?**

It's been more than a year since Wood and her group, the Black Mothers Forum, started raising concerns over discipline at the Kyrene Elementary School District, which includes Ahwatukee, south Tempe and west Chandler.

Their members have told board members about children they say have been punished unfairly.



**Janelle Wood, founder of the Black Mothers Forum, holds a news conference at the Kyrene School District's office in Tempe on Oct. 23, 2018, to address claims of racial discrimination and bullying. (Photo: Thomas Hawthorne/The Republic)**

In one case, a black student, 11 at the time, was punished for crossing his arms when speaking to a teacher, one of the mothers said. The district recommended he attend an alternative school.

In another case, a parent said after a fight spurred by racial slurs, her son — the target of the slurs — was the only student punished.

Wood said she often hears of cases where black children are singled out by teachers and held to different, higher standards than other children.

"We have zero tolerance for misbehavior of children that are children," she said. "And what's happening is we're finding that their behaviors are being criminalized by the policies that have been put in place."

In March, Kyrene awarded a contract to Corwin Consulting to train staff on equity and diversity, according to a district news release.

“You'll see that happen time and time again, where, again, Johnny is getting additional chances. ... But Jamal or Joaquin, you'll send him to the office right away.”

Richard Crews, parent and activist

The company will provide "support for the creation of practices to eliminate barriers to inclusion, increased awareness of equity issues, capacity building of knowledge and skills among district staff on restorative discipline, mediation and conflict resolution."

Wood said that move is a start, but that she'd like to see the district hire someone full time.

And the problem isn't limited to Kyrene, she said.

Disproportionate discipline, as evidenced in the data, happens across the state.

Richard Crews, a father and activist in south Phoenix, said his 6-year-old son Malachi, who is black, spent about 15 of the first 25 days of school in and out of in-school and out-of-school suspensions in the Phoenix Elementary School District.

Malachi, he said, got in trouble for a few different reasons: What teachers said was disruptive behavior, and for play sword fighting after a substitute teacher showed the movie Aladdin.

Malachi has noticed differences in punishments handed down to black and white children, Crews said.

"Brown kids get in trouble for things that peach kids don't get in trouble for," he said his son observed.

The problem is rooted in implicit bias, Crews said. Teachers may not consciously detect that they're treating white and black students differently.

"You'll see that happen time and time again, where, again, Johnny is getting additional chances. ...You're not sending Johnny to the office," he said. "But Jamal or Joaquin, you'll send him to the office right away."

Sara Bresnahan, a spokeswoman for the Phoenix Elementary district, said improving equity, including in discipline, is included in the district's planned strategic vision for 2025. Like other districts, Phoenix Elementary has hired a national consultant to help improve policies.

**Annotations**

**RESCINDING OBAMA-ERA DISCIPLINE POLICIES**

The fight over disproportionate discipline is playing out on a national stage, too.

While black males make up 8% of the student population in the U.S., they accounted for 25% of out-of-school suspensions, according to a [federal analysis of discipline data](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf). Hispanic males accounted for 13% of all students and 15% of out-of-school suspensions.

Black females accounted for 8% of the student population and 14% of out-of-school suspensions.

Hispanic females accounted for 13% of enrollment and 6% of out-of-school suspensions.

Education secretary Betsy DeVos announced in December that she will rescind Obama-era school discipline policies meant to correct disproportionate discipline numbers.

The Obama Administration guidance recommended schools find alternatives to suspensions and other common discipline measure, endorsing a move to restorative justice policies to tamp down on disparities in discipline rates.

It's unclear how rolling back those policies could affect Arizona and other states.

Over email, Maldonado wrote that she believes that rolling back the guidelines likely impacts how Arizona schools implement their discipline policies.

The Trump Administration commission for school safety, convened after the Parkland school shooting, called for punishment decisions to be left to individual school administrators.

"(The Obama-era policy) creates a chilling effect on classroom teachers’ and administrators’ use of discipline by improperly imposing, through the threat of investigation and potential loss of federal funding, a forceful federal role in what is inherently a local issue," the December 2018 report stated.

**Annotations**

**HOW SUSPENSION CHANGES A STUDENT**

Gregory Broberg, who researches inequity in discipline at Arizona State University, wants to study the long-term effects of multiple suspensions on students.

"We know students get suspended over multiple situations," Broberg said. "We don't know how this changes them over a period of time."

In-school and out-of-school suspensions are some of the most common forms of discipline used by school administrators and teachers, he said. And while those methods have been around for a long time, they make it harder for a student to stay in school when they're seen as troublemakers.

“We know students get suspended over multiple situations. We don't know how this changes them over a period of time.”

Gregory Broberg, Arizona State University researcher

"It's very, very difficult to bring them back in because students label that student as a problem — that's not necessarily the peer that you want to hang around with," he said. "It just seems to escalate."

Broberg pointed to decade-old research that shows suspension correlates with school dropout and delayed graduation rates. He wants to study that issue further.

Coolidge, where Thigpen's school is, sits near a constellation of correctional facilities. The principal is acutely aware of the school-to-prison pipeline.

"If we're suspending black children or black boys more than we are suspending white children, then what message are we truly sending to them? And what are we setting them up for later on in life?" she asked.

Samuel said he felt wronged by his punishment. So did his mom, who said she couldn't understand why her son, a nearly straight-A student, would be on the receiving end of a 10-day suspension for a fight he didn't start.

"He has never missed a day of school," she said. "He loves school. ... He's never been in trouble before."

**Annotations**

**FINDING DISCIPLINE SOLUTIONS**

Arizona schools are taking a variety of discipline approaches.

Some schools use programs like [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)](https://www.sanfordharmony.org/), which emphasizes good behavior over bad behavior. Others follow the Sanford Harmony approach, which encourages stronger classroom relationships, according to the program's website. And several districts are focusing on restorative justice practices, which includes peer mediation and even teen court.

There might be too much variety in approach, Broberg said.

"Some schools have five different initiatives going on," he said. "It's the age-old adage of focusing on too many things."

And there's no consensus about which program is most effective, he said. His hope is to bring the districts together for a summit to talk about different discipline practices and reach a better understanding of what's best for students.

To Wood, one of the most fundamental solutions to unequal discipline is in whether student demographics are reflected at the head of the classroom.

"We do not have an adequate representation of black teachers and administrators at the school levels and in the district level here in Arizona," she said. "Even though we have a small population of black children and black students, we still don't have enough teachers to even reflect that population."

A [Brookings Institution analysis of student and teacher demographics](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/brookings_pubs/51/) in Arizona shows that the state's teacher demographics have not kept up with changing student demographics over the past few decades. An overwhelming majority of the state's teachers are white, according to that data.

Wood said some districts, like Phoenix Union High School District, are finding other ways to help address the discipline inequity issues.

That district, she said, saw disproportionate discipline numbers and acknowledged there was a problem. Phoenix Union is "integrating those restorative justice practices into every facet of life," Wood said.

Restorative justice includes holding students accountable for their actions while focusing on repairing harm caused by the student. [Practices include apology letters](https://education.asu.edu/news/puhsd-restorative-justice)and in-depth conversations among students, teachers and administrators.

Anecdotally, it seems like restorative justice is successful, Broberg said.

"One of the reasons why we always talk about restorative practices is because you have to almost restore that kid back into the environment," he said.

But he cautioned that those practices take more time than other disciplinary measures. Time that schools may not always want to spend.

Samuel's district, Mesa, is the biggest in the state. District spokeswoman Helen Hollands said Mesa does practice restorative justice, but also follows the prescribed district discipline guidelines, which include minimum and maximum punishments.

A short suspension, 10 school days or less, and parental involvement is the minimum punishment for fighting, the offense Samuel was written up for. The maximum punishment is expulsion. Hurst wrote that in fights, the question of whether both students receive the same punishment "depends on the situation" and fight participants are dealt with individually.

Samuel fought back because he was cornered, he said. In his petition, he wrote, "The school had the audacity to suggest I let the attack happen until 'A staff member arrives.'"

The district's rationale — and the punishment handed down — still doesn't make sense to him.

"This is way too harsh for something that wasn't even my fault," he said.

**Annotations**

**FOLLOW UP PARAGRAPH:**

What do YOU think is the reason why minority students are suspended at a higher rate than white students? Cite facts/reasons from the text to back up your argument.