

# **The Treatment of African-American Female Students in an Urban School District in the Midwestern United States**

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## **Abstract**

This research project examined the unfair treatment and disciplinary actions for African-American female students in an urban school district. The authors studied students in grades nine through 12 in both an early college high school and a traditional high school. Results indicated that African-American female students are often treated as older than they were and sexually more mature than female Caucasian students. In addition, the suspension and disciplinary rates were abnormally high in our African American population.

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**Keywords:** African-American, female students, school suspension, school disciplinary rates.

## **Introduction**

There has been much discussion in the literature that African-American female students (AAFS) often have to face unfair treatment and disciplinary actions due to bias. Many AAFS believe that they are treated differently than Caucasian female students (CFS) particularly for detrimental behaviors such as disrespect, excessive noise and profanity. AAFS high schools are six times more likely to receive out of school suspensions or in school suspensions. In many urban schools, nearly 45% of suspended students are AAFS. In fact AAFS are the highest group of suspended students of all racial ethnic backgrounds (Losen, 2015; Inness-Thompson, 2018; Annamma, et al., 2019).

There are several studies indicating that AAFS receive more teacher disapproval and punishment for being assertive. Sometimes teachers even express hostility towards these students. When teachers expressed disapproval and punishment for being assertive, often AAFS become defensive and disengage (Blake, et al., 2010).

It is more likely that AAFS receive harsher punishments than CFS. In fact, there appears to be a need for specific training for teachers, counselors and

administrators to understand the inherent bias towards AAFS. In recent years, alternative approaches have been used towards helping AAFS. These include zero-tolerance policies, preparing personnel to face bias and other racial issues, building teacher-student relationships, having school counselors teach students how to tell their stories, and using positive behavior supports. Of all these essential interventions, it seems most important that teachers and students have positive relationships. This increase in engagement and classroom management often decreases discipline problems and office referrals. Teaching can be enhanced by learning cultural competence and clear student behavioral standards. In addition, parental involvement has also been found to change the outcomes and perceptions of AAFS. Although many parents of AAFS do not go to college, these parents can provide moral and physical support for their students. Unfortunately AAFS who don't have parental support are generally less successful both in academics and within the school environment (Skiba, et al., 2002; Smith & Harper, 2015).

### **Materials and Methods:**

The purpose of this study was to understand how AAFS were treated in two different urban school environments. The goal of this study was to help these students and create a more positive school environment where teachers and administrators can be less biased in treatment and discipline.

The high schools in the study were from a high poverty school district where 100% of the students participated in the national school lunch program. The Youngstown area school District has one of the highest poverty rates among cities in the United States. The median income in the city is below \$23,000 per family. Unemployment rates even in the best of times are often between 10 and 13%. In fact, in previous years, the school district was determined to be a failing district by the state of Ohio. A CEO was appointed by the governor to lead the school district and the school board was absolved of most of its responsibilities. When listing state school report cards, the district has often received an F grade in annual ratings.

For our study, AAFS participants were randomly chosen and completed a 13-question survey. The survey was developed from a thorough review of the research literature with a particular emphasis on the recent studies of Annamma et al (2016) and Epstein, Blake and Gonzalez (2017). The surveys were distributed in the school counselor's office over a period of several weeks. School records were examined regarding school suspension and expulsion rates. The intent of the study was to examine the student high school experience.

**Results of the Study:**

*Early College and Traditional High School survey results*

	Early College %	N=45	Traditional %	N=25
Questions	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Do you think adults treat you as if you are older than you are?	<b>82</b>	18	<b>76</b>	24
2. Do you think adults in your school know you?	<b>80</b>	20	<b>56</b>	44
3. Do you think teachers treat you unfairly because you are African American/Hispanic?	13	<b>87</b>	20	<b>80</b>
4. Have you ever been disciplined at school?	<b>53</b>	47	40	<b>60</b>
5. Have you ever been suspended at school?	26	<b>74</b>	<b>68</b>	32
6. Do you think you and your friends are treated differently at school than Caucasian girls?	<b>51</b>	49	20	<b>80</b>
7. Do you think adults in school perceive you to know about sex at your age than Caucasian girls?	<b>80</b>	20	<b>72</b>	28
8. Do you think adults in school see you as too loud or too aggressive than Caucasian girls?	<b>53</b>	47	44	<b>56</b>
9. Do you think adults in the school understand your culture and your neighborhood?	<b>64</b>	36	28	<b>72</b>
10. Do you think your neighborhood has more problems than a Caucasian neighborhood?	<b>87</b>	13	<b>76</b>	24
11. Do you trust the security or police in your school to treat you fairly?	<b>91</b>	9	<b>68</b>	32

12. When things go wrong in your life, can you talk to someone at school?	<b>58</b>	42	<b>56</b>	44
13. Do you think the school targets you for your hair or how you dress?	49	<b>51</b>	44	<b>56</b>

*Early College and Traditional HS Majority Responses*

	Early College	Traditional School
<b>Questions</b>		
1. Do you think adults treat you as if you are older than you are?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
2. Do you think adults in your school know you?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
3. Do you think teachers treat you unfairly because you are African American/Hispanic?	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>
4. Have you ever been disciplined at school?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
5. Have you ever been suspended at school?	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
6. Do you think you and your friends are treated differently at school than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
7. Do you think adults in school perceive you to know about sex at your age than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
8. Do you think adults in school see you as too loud or too aggressive than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
9. Do you think adults in the school understand your culture and your neighborhood?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
10. Do you think your neighborhood has more problems than a Caucasian neighborhood?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
11. Do you trust the security or police in your school to treat you fairly?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
12. When things go wrong in your life, can you talk to someone at school?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
13. Do you think the school targets you for your hair or how you dress?	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>

*Early College and Traditional High School  
(Agreed and Disagreed Questions)*

	Early College	Traditional School
<i>Questions (Agree)</i>		
1. Do you think adults treat you as if you are older than you are?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
2. Do you think adults in your school know you?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
3. Do you think teachers treat you unfairly because you are African American/Hispanic?	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>
7. Do you think adults in school perceive you to know about sex at your age than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
10. Do you think your neighborhood has more problems than a Caucasian neighborhood?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
11. Do you trust the security or police in your school to treat you fairly?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
12. When things go wrong in your life, can you talk to someone at school?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
13. Do you think the school targets you for your hair or how you dress?	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>
<i>Question (Disagree)</i>		
4. Have you ever been disciplined at school?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
5. Have you ever been suspended at school?	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
6. Do you think you and your friends are treated differently at school than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
8. Do you think adults in school see you as too loud or too aggressive than Caucasian girls?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
9. Do you think adults in the school understand your culture and your neighborhood?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>

*Early College and Traditional High School Results*

Based upon our results between two schools, the following was noted that the AAFS agreed with each other on the following thought:

1. That the adults (SP) treat you as if you are older than you are.
2. That the adults (SP) in your school know you.
3. That the teachers treat you fairly because you are AAFS.
7. That the adults (SP) in school perceive you to know about sex at your age than CFS?
10. That your neighborhood has more problems than a CFS neighborhood?
11. That your neighborhood has more problems than a CFS neighborhood?
12. That when things go wrong in your life, can you talk to someone at school?
13. That the school targets you for your hair or how you dress?

Based upon our results between two schools, the following was noted that the AAFS disagreed with each other on the following thoughts:

1. That you have been disciplined at school. (Early College: Yes; Traditional HS: No)
2. That you have been suspended at school. (Early College: No; Traditional HS: Yes)
3. That your friends are treated differently at school than CFS. (Early College: Yes; Traditional HS: No)
4. That the adults (SP) in school see you as too loud or too aggressive than CFS. (Early College: Yes; Traditional HS: No)
5. That adults (SP) in the school understand your culture and your neighborhood? (Early College: Yes; Traditional HS: No)

**Discussion:**

In many ways, this research study confirmed several basic concepts that had been supported in the literature. Several trends within our research are troubling. Most of our AAFS believed that they are treated as if they are older than their CFS. Faculty see them as more sexually aware and that their neighborhoods are more complicated than their CFS. Suspension rates among the Traditional High School students are especially problematic compared to their Early College students. Although the school district has begun a restorative justice program within all the schools in the district, it appears that suspension is widespread as a discipline response in the district. Unfortunately, this response is typical for many urban districts (Annarella et al., 2020).

In this traditional high school, most of the faculty are Caucasian in the district and it has a “three times you are out rule”. Most of the students in the traditional high school have been suspended at least once. Although the school

district has a restorative justice program, school suspension is seen as a widespread discipline response in the district. This behavior is not atypical for many urban school districts in the United States. Another issue for students is that they do not believe that teachers understand their local neighborhoods. Unfortunately, most of the district has Caucasian school teachers and the majority do not live within city school district boundaries. Therefore, it is not unusual that administrators or teachers may struggle to understand how AAFS spend their lives in a different culture and environment. Beyond reducing suspension and looking at other alternatives, it appears that it would be helpful to develop a curriculum related to race and culture and have regular discussions with students regarding these issues. AAFS are also expected to be more mature and responsible than CFS high school peers. In many school districts, the students are believed to be more sexually mature and adult like than their peers. This can be very problematic for AAFS. Often times, they are viewed as louder and aggressive than CFS. In a more inclusive environment, these issues should be discussed openly, and understood by teachers, peers and administrators.

There are a number of recommendations that the authors would see as valuable from this study. It is our view that African-American female students and their cultural history needs to be better understood by faculty and in particular, Caucasian faculty. We believe there needs to be training regarding excessive suspension and expulsion rates that are a national problem in the United States among African-American children. It appears that many restorative justice programs have been successful in urban schools and their needs to be more dialogue between administrators and African-American students in an effort to create more equity and equality. Lastly, most urban districts in the United States are vastly underfunded and finding African-American teachers is very difficult in most urban districts.

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