

NATIONAL PROBLEM, LOCAL SOLUTION

Addressing the School-To-Prison Pipeline with an Increase in Minority Teachers

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Abstract

Although Arkansas' official state nickname is the *Land of Opportunity*, its national education and incarceration rankings leave a lot to be desired. According to US News, Arkansas ranks forty in quality of K-12 education and fourth in incarceration. This, in part, is a result of the growing number of Black students who, since the 1970s, have received increasingly disproportionate numbers of suspensions and expulsions in schools. As a result, scholars have built an argument for this system known as the "school-to-prison pipeline".

Academically, Arkansas' widening gap between the performance of White students and their Black and Latino counterparts continues to grow. The Delta (Southeast) region, for example, is home to many of the state's Black families and majority minority school districts. Schools in this region consistently perform lower than their non-Delta counterparts throughout the state and tend to graduate fewer of students.

Black students in the Delta and throughout the rest of the state make up only 20% of the student population yet are a majority of the suspensions and expulsions. In fact, Black students in Arkansas are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than are their White and Latino counterparts. Black students also receive harsher punishments for the same infractions. National data show that students who are suspended, even once, are more likely to dropout, and that those who drop out are more likely to go to prison, indicating that the school-to-prison pipeline in Arkansas is a cause of the state's disproportionate incarceration numbers.

Similar trends can be found in the state's incarceration rates. Although Blacks make up a mere 15% of the state's population, they account for 42% of Arkansas' prison population. The Delta region also houses the largest number of Arkansas Department of Corrections facilities. And, given the Delta region is one of the poorest in the state and nation, it tends to have less access to the resources needed for its schools to be competitive academically.

With policy maker and school leader support, the school-to-prison pipeline in Arkansas can be mitigated by the following recommendations: aggressively recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers of color. It is important to note that, while studies show teachers of color are preferred by students of all backgrounds and serve as mentors and positive role models for students of color, only 7.1% of Arkansas teachers are Black compared to the 20.4% of the students who identify as Black. This research study will highlight the school-to-prison pipeline in Arkansas, national data around the need for more teachers of color, and, in the state of Arkansas, the role teachers of color can play in ending this national epidemic.

Overview of the Problem

Incarceration in Arkansas

Six of the ten lowest ranked states in education are located in the US Census' bureau's Southern region of the country. According to a Health and Wellness article published last year, 9 of the top 10 states with the highest number of people in jail are located in the Southern United States (Mullaney, 2018). Arkansas is no exception in the correlation between a high number of inmates and a low ranked education system. Arkansas is the 33rd most populous state yet ranks #6 in the nation for incarceration rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Arkansas stands out internationally for its high rates of prisoners surpassing such countries as the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Italy (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). A majority of Arkansas' top cities populated by Black residents are located in the Arkansas Delta region, the section of the state bordering the Mississippi River. The largest Arkansas Delta city, Pine Bluff, is nestled in Jefferson County and is home to the largest number of Black residents and the largest number of Arkansas Department of Corrections facilities and inmates. Although Black residents compose only 15% of the state's population, they are 42% of Arkansas' prison population. By contrast, white Arkansans make up 75% of the state's population yet are only 54% of the state's prison population (Arkansas Department of Corrections, 2016).

With regards to educational attainment, 85% of Arkansans hold a high school diploma, yet only 22% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and just 8% have earned a graduate or advanced degree (U.S. Census, 2017). This, coupled with the increasingly high growth of financial stability within the Northwest Arkansas region has left Southeast Arkansas and the Delta region struggling to close the growing regional achievement gap. This factor also impacts the long-term economic status of the Delta region. According to Pew (2012), 73% of Arkansans with below average incomes still held that financial status after 10 years. This stagnant financial

growth is even more present for low-income minorities in the state, many of whom reside in the Delta region. (Wheeler, 2014).

Youth School Punishment to Prison Pipeline

As seen in *Figure 1* below, the state of Arkansas has at least 26,000 people entangled in various types of prison facilities including 670 youth/juveniles, 55 of whom are serving life without parole sentences (Sentencing Project, 2016).

Total Corrections Population (2016, except a 2013)	
Total incarcerated, prison and jail	26,086
- Prison population	17,476
- Jail population	8,610 ^a
Prison incarceration rate (per 100,000)	583
Jail incarceration rate (per 100,000)	380 ^a
Probation population	29,003
Parole population	22,910
Life sentences (% of prison population)	1,415 (8.2) ^b
Life without parole (% of prison population)	637 (3.7) ^b
Juvenile life without parole	55 ^b
Private prison population	0

Figure 1. Arkansas' Total Corrections Population (US Bureau of Justice Statistics & The Sentencing Project, 2016).

A 1974 Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) survey of disciplinary actions highlighted that Black students nationally, who represented 27% of the nearly 24 million students of all races in the 2,908 schools systems, accounted for 42% of all suspensions and 37% of all expulsions (Wentworth, 1974, p. 1 via Jones 1979). Since the report's distribution in 1974, the number of Black students being punished in school systems has increased remarkably, leading many scholars to build an argument for the current system known as the "school-to-prison pipeline." (Wald and Losen, 2003). More specifically, the school-to-prison pipeline refers to "the trend of directly referring students to law enforcement for committing certain offenses at

school or creating conditions under which students are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system, such as excluding them from school” (Nance, 2015, pg. 313).

In a 2016 interview for *The Atlantic*, scholars Morris and Perry (2014) shared, “... for African American students in our data, the unequal suspension rate is one of the most important factors hindering academic progress and maintaining the racial gap in achievement”. They go on to add that these factors are essentially “hidden inequality embedded within routine educational practices” (Wong, 2016). During the 2011-12 school year, black students accounted for 16% of the U.S. student population but were 32% of the students suspended and 42% of those expelled, according to Education Department data (Green, 2015). Nationwide, Black students are suspended at roughly three times the rate as their white counterparts (Wong, 2016). National data also shows that when students are suspended, they are not in the classroom, and that the more often a student is suspended, the more likely they are to drop out of high school (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014). In their 2004 paper, Pettit and Western share the following on the direct correlation between dropping out of school and imprisonment,

“Incarceration rates are highly stratified by education and race. High school dropouts are 3 to 4 times more likely to be in prison than those with 12 years of schooling. Blacks, on average, are about 8 times more likely to be in state or federal prison than whites. By the end of the 1990s, 21% of young black poorly-educated men were in state or federal prison compared to an imprisonment rate of 2.9% for young white male dropouts.” (Pettit and Western 2004, pg. 160)

According to a 2015 report by Smith and Harper (2015) on disciplinary practices in Southern states, 18,185 Black students were suspended from Arkansas K-12 public schools in a single academic year. Though Black students make up only 21% of the public-school population,

they made up 50% of the suspensions and 33% of the expulsions administered that year (Smith & Harper, 2015). Additionally, in 2017, the University of Arkansas' Office for Education Policy (OEP) released a report focused solely on the administration of disciplinary consequences by Arkansas schools and found that Black students are disproportionately represented in both infractions and consequences and are more likely than their peers to receive exclusionary punishment (Ritter & McKenzie, 2017). The results worsen for students residing in the Southeast region of the state, home to the largest percentage of Black residents. According to the 2016 Arkansas Education Report Card published by the OEP, students in the Southeast region of the state are more likely to receive corporal punishment, out-of-school suspension, and in-school suspension than are students from other parts of the state (Office for Education Policy, 2016).

One cause of the suspensions in Arkansas is truancy. A recent two-part report covered by Arkansas' *KATV News* found that, of school records reviewed between 2015 and 2018, 76 locations in the state continued to give truant students out-of-school suspensions despite the passing of a 2013 law, Act 1329, which made it illegal to suspend students who were truant, or missing 15 days of school. The second story focused on the over-punishment of Black students and found that 117 disciplinary referrals were distributed for every 100 Black students compared to the 38 for every 100 white students (Anderson, 2018). According to Dr. Fitz Hill, a member of the Arkansas State Board of Education, "When we suspend our kids, often times, that's who is getting arrested..." (Lilly, 2019).

Aligned with Hill's sentiments, scholars have found that students who are disciplined are more likely to be intertwined with the juvenile justice system. For example, a study conducted in Texas found that 23% of students suspended in middle or high school found themselves in contact with a juvenile probation officer as opposed to the 2% of students who were not disciplined. The same scholars found that students who were suspended or expelled were three

times as likely to come in contact with a juvenile probation system the following school year (Fabelo et al., 2011). Given this information, the connection between Black students in Arkansas who are disproportionately suspended and/or expelled, and the juvenile justice system are much clearer.

The Cost of Incarceration in Arkansas

In order for any local or statewide policy change proposals to be reviewed, they must have the backing of local and state officials from both the education and the corrections industries. In order for the state of Arkansas to progress and thrive, local and state officials need to understand the true cost of incarceration.

The Arkansas Department of Corrections' (ADC) latest report shows that Black offenders and offenders aged 18-34 are the most likely to return to prison within three years of being released (Arkansas Department of Corrections, 2012). State Governor Asa Hutchinson has recently acknowledged publicly that returning citizens are less likely to find employment or reconnect with family, which often ends in a return to prison (Wright, 2017). These findings, along with data showing fewer educated Black residents, particularly males, attest that these individuals are more likely to find themselves in prison (Pettit and Western, 2004). Thus, there is great opportunity for more cost-effective efforts that focus on students within the K-12 education system. When comparing the state's per inmate costs to that of its per pupil spending, opportunities to re-allocate and refocus funding priorities abound. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below, in 2016, the state of Arkansas spent \$22,086 per inmate (Arkansas Department of Corrections, 2016), compared to the \$6,646 per student (Field, 2018).

Average Inmate Costs			
Year	Per Day	Per Year	Care & Custody
2005	48.24	17,607.60	215,042,365
2006	52.12	19,023.80	243,207,957
2007	54.82	20,009.30	253,342,707
2008	57.13	20,852.45	272,844,471
2009	60.19	21,969.35	280,135,153
2010	60.03	21,910.95	288,888,121
2011	59.7	21,790.50	303,606,007
2012	61.83	22,567.95	320,877,549
2013	62.93	22,969.45	320,227,065
2014	63.26	23,089.00	324,189,396
2015	62.90	22,959.00	336,640,020
2016	60.51	22,086.00	338,440,793
2017	60.56	22,104.00	346,548,778

Figure 2. Average Inmate Costs – Arkansas (Arkansas Department of Corrections, 2016)

Public school funding per pupil

Foundation funding is the primary source of money for public education in Arkansas. The funding is provided to schools at a per-student rate, and the bulk is comprised of local property taxes and state funding. The legislative Joint Committee on Education determines the per-student amount based on its estimate of how much it costs to operate a typical school with 500 students. This graphic shows the growth in per-pupil amounts, determined by lawmakers since 2013:

Year	Foundation funding	Total	Percent increase
2013-14	\$6,393	\$2,991,127,688	2.01%
2014-15	\$6,521	\$3,072,903,260	2.002
2015-16	\$6,584	\$3,110,129,510	0.966
2016-17	\$6,646	\$3,141,094,992	0.941
2017-18	\$6,713	\$3,187,356,298	1.008
2018-19	\$6,781	Unavailable	1.012
2019-20	\$6,883	Unavailable	1.5
2020-21	\$6,985	Unavailable	1.48

SOURCE: Bureau of Legislative Research Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

Figure 3. Per-Pupil Spending – Arkansas (Field, 2018)

The State of Education in Arkansas

As with most social and economic rankings in America, Southern states tend to fall behind their northern counterparts when it comes to the quality of K-12 education systems. According to a US Today ranking of education systems amongst the 50 states, Arkansas ranks 42nd (Stebbins & Frohlich, 2018). The impact hits Black students in the state particularly hard. As previously stated, the less education Black residents obtain, particularly males, the more likely they are to find themselves in prison (Petit and Western, 2004). Thus, it is vital to understand the vast education gap that exists between the majority Black region of the state and other regions to grasp the impact of school-to-prison pipeline on Black students.

As discussed earlier, most Black Arkansans reside in the Southeast region of the state. Schools located in this region are mostly majority-minority and have historically performed lower than the rest of the state on standardized exams. Additionally, Southeast Arkansas schools match or fall below a majority of the state in graduation rates (Office of Education Policy, 2016). As a result, a recent report focusing on Arkansas higher education enrollment found that Black students attend college at lower rates than do their Asian and White counterparts (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2017).

In April 2018, the Arkansas Department of Education released its annual report cards for each public school within the state. Of the 33 schools receiving an “F” grade, 51% were home to student population of which 100% of the students received free and/or reduced lunch and at least 22 (67%) of the schools were located in the Central and Southeast Arkansas, regions with much higher than average percentages of Black residents and students (Arkansas Department of Education, 2018). With such a large concentration of underperforming, over-disciplinarian schools located in Pulaski and Jefferson counties – the two with the largest number of prisons - the school-to-prison pipeline becomes more evident.

State capital Little Rock, housed in Pulaski County, was home to the lowest performing high school in the state; Hall High School. It opened its doors in the fall of 1956 for white students only. Carlotta Walls, one of the Little Rock Nine, wrote in her 2010 autobiography, *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School*, “I was in the seventh grade at Dunbar when the school district announced plans to build two new high schools, Horace Mann for black students and Hall High school for whites” (Walls-Lanier, 2009, p. 37). Today, Hall High is home to over 1,000 students, 95% of whom are minority and 75% of whom receive free or reduced lunch. The school’s 4-year graduation rate is a meager 68% (Office for

Education Policy, 2017). Hall High School suspended (out of school) all 64 of its truant students during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years in violation of Act 1329 (Anderson, 2018).

In the Arkansas Delta's Jefferson County, home of four school districts, most of the schools did not perform well according to the state's report card standards. Of the 1,066 schools that received a grade within the state of Arkansas, 33 received a grade of "F". Of those 33 schools, eight were located in Jefferson County (24%). Only one school in the county received an "A" -- White Hall Middle School, where 71% of its student body is white. Conversely, five miles down the street, Morehead Middle School received an "F" and is home to a 97% Black student body of which 100% of the students received free or reduced lunch.

Although Jefferson County's best performing high school, White Hall High School, received a grade of "C," (Pine Bluff Commercial, 2018), data showed that their Black students were nearly two times more likely to be suspended than were their White classmates. According to a report by Smith and Harper, Black students make up just 15% of the White Hall School District student population yet were 28% of the students suspended during the 2011-2012 school year (Smith and Harper, 2015).

The data and examples shared provide a vivid picture of how the journey for some Black students in Arkansas begins with school and ends on a path to prison. Although schooling's purpose is to prepare young people for professional and social life after secondary school, school punishments are a primary factor in the path to prison for some of the state's most vulnerable students. In order to halt or eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline altogether, adequate and equitable education coupled with the following recommendations must become priorities for local and state officials as well as community stakeholders and leaders.

A Plausible Solution: Hire More Minority Teachers

Minority Teacher Impact: What the Data Suggest

When investigating ways to end the school-to-prison pipeline, recent literature linked to minority teachers' performance in the classroom has been promising. Data supports the notion that teachers of color are preferred by all students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016) and for persistently low-income students of color, having at least one Black teacher in grades 3-5 will increase the likelihood – for both girls and boys – to attend four-year college (Gershenson, Hart, & Papageorge, 2017). Scholars also argue that teachers of color have higher expectations for their students, are culturally sensitive through their actions and teaching practices (Egalite & Kisida, 2016), and are less likely to suspend or expel their students of a shared race (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). This provides a foundation for national discussions around ways to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Should Arkansas Hire More Black Teachers?

As seen in Figure 3 below, only 7.1% of Arkansas teachers are Black compared to the 20.4% of the student population that identifies as Black (Office for Education Policy Blog, 2018).

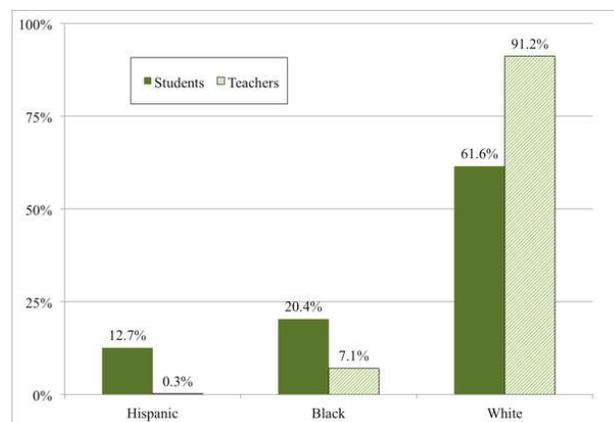


Figure 4. Teacher and Student Percentages by Race - Arkansas (Office for Education Policy Blog, 2018)

Silver Lining A: Arkansas' New Attempt at Increasing the Number of Minority Teachers

As shared earlier, Arkansas schools disproportionately punish Black students at higher rates than their white counterparts at every level of infraction. This data, coupled with national data that students of color are less likely to be suspended or expelled by teachers who share their racial background, is grounds for answering the national and statewide call for more minority teachers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Research argues that all students, including White students, benefit from having teachers of color because they bring distinctive knowledge, experiences, and role modeling to the entire student body (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

In fact, several communities and school districts within the state of Arkansas have begun vocalizing their needs for more minority teachers (Holtmeyer, 2018; Wright, 2018). Additionally, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has required school districts with more than 5% minority students (Black and other minorities) to submit an annual “Minority Teacher and Administrator Recruitment Plan” on how they plan to increase the number of minority teachers within their district (Arkansas Department of Education, 2018). Although this vital policy implementation may not move the needle as swiftly as is needed to make up for the vast disparities between minority teachers and the fast-growing percentage of the state’s minority student population, it is definitely a start.

Silver Lining B: Governor Hutchinson’s Attempt to Decrease Juvenile Recidivism

Although the number of commitments of juveniles has dropped nationally, research conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts showed that Arkansas ranked in the bottom 3 states for rates of juvenile commitment reduction from 2001 to 2012 with just an 11% reduction (Pew Research Center, 2015). On a positive note, Governor Asa Hutchinson, who was appointed in 2015, decided early on that reforming the juvenile justice system would be one of his top priorities. In August of 2015, he formed the Juvenile Justice Reform board with the mission of

“finding a better way to intervene in the lives of kids, who've made poor choices, before falling into a life of crime as adults” (Kuester, 2015). This policy, coupled with the Governor’s goal of decreasing the number of youth in juvenile detention centers, has paved a way for redirecting students away from the school-to-prison pipeline.

Last year, Governor Hutchinson created the School Safety Commission which recently passed Senate Bill 199, the School Counseling Improvement Act, to “provide for better assessment of our troubled youth in detention and providing sentencing guidelines that are more appropriate to each person” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2019). In the Governor’s opinion, this practice will reduce the risk of teenagers recidivating into the juvenile justice system and thus decrease the likelihood that they will land in the adult prison system.

Potential Research, Policy or Practical Implications

Although schooling’s purpose is to prepare young people for career and or college, unjust school punishments are often a primary factor in a student’s derailment. In order for the state of Arkansas and its policy and educational leaders to turn the page on this pressing issue, several steps must be taken immediately.

First, policy makers must continue to present and pass legislation that will hold school districts accountable for creating and implementing equitable school punishment plans. While this may initially lie on legislators and appointed or elected officials convening in Little Rock, it is vital for school board members to be at the forefront of seeing these policies through on the local level. Second, as it relates to practice, school district leaders, including Superintendents, must support teachers in this effort by providing resources such as culturally relevant professional development and on-going in-classroom punishment training that has proven to be successful. Third, in order for this research to continue, the state of Arkansas must ensure data is

collected frequently and strategically to guarantee necessary changes are recommended, presented and implemented, in a timely manner.

Fortunately, all of these recommendations can be implemented immediately and simultaneously in order to have maximum impact over the next few years. If done successfully, the state of Arkansas can celebrate substantial growth as it relates both to suppressing the school-to-prison pipeline and to increasing the academic performance of its most vulnerable students.

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