



Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

Minority Disproportionality in Special Education and the Achievement Gap—Common Issues, Shared Solutions

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presented by:

Anthony Sims
Senior Associate
Institute for Educational Leadership

Ms. Johnson: Hello, everyone, I'm Donna Johnson with the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition and co-facilitator of the OSEP Exiting TA Community of Practice. Welcome to our second of three teleconferences on the topic of disproportionality, entitled ¹ "Minority Disproportionality in Special Education and the Achievement Gap—Common Issues, Shared Solutions," presented by Dr. Anthony Sims, Senior Associate with the Institute for Educational Leadership.

Dr. Sims provides policy advice to staff of the federal Office of Disability Employment Policy and other federal agencies as appropriate. Dr. Sims also engages in outreach activities to a wide array of national and state organizations concerned with improving employment opportunities for youth with disabilities and their transition from secondary education to the adult world.

Formerly, Dr. Sims served as Manager of Specialized Support Services and State Director of Special Education for the Illinois State Board of Education. Prior to that appointment, Dr. Sims served as Public Health Advisor with the Child, Adolescent, and Family Branch of the Center for Mental Health Services, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Prior to this appointment with the federal government, Dr. Sims served as a Senior Research Analyst with the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC. His responsibilities included coordinating national technical assistance to local school districts on special education issues and facilitating and expanding sustainable federal, national, and local interagency collaborations to improve outcomes for children and youth placed at risk of poor academic and social outcomes.

Dr. Sims' work in education and children's mental health has focused on cultural competence

as an integral component of systemic reform to enhance social and educational opportunities for culturally diverse children and their families. He served as Principal Investigator for a research project funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services on the topic of representation of minority students classified as seriously emotionally disturbed and learning disabled. As PI, Dr. Sims was responsible for designing and coordinating a comprehensive investigation of individual, institutional, family, and process characteristics contributing to minority disproportionality for a large metropolitan school district.

Today's teleconference is going to be a little bit longer than usual. We have an hour and 15 minutes for presentation and then 15 minutes for questions and answers. We ask that you hold your questions until after the presentation is completed.

Dr. Sims: Thank you so much, Donna. Hello everyone. By way of introduction of the topic, I'd just like to share that the topic grew out of earlier work with minority disproportionality in special education. One of my concerns is that much of the focus on minority disproportionality in special education has centered around students once they were identified. So this issue tends to be linked all too often with special education processes. My concern was, working in the field, special educators are sort of at the end of that process loop, if you will. They do provide services once students have been identified and then serve in many ways as gatekeepers once students exit services. But the real process begins in general education.

I was also concerned that for a very long time, we've been grappling with improving the achievement, particularly of minority students, in general education, and that there definitely was a nexus

Superscript numbers refer to refer to the slide of the accompanying PowerPoint being discussed.

between this issue of the achievement gap for minority students and this disproportionate representation of students in special education. And while in many areas we don't talk about students being tracked into specialized programs that provide diminished educational opportunities, we don't talk about tracking as much. In certain disability categories, we find a pronounced and consistent pattern of students of color or students from a minority background participating or being disproportionately represented in programs for students with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems and, also, significant cognitive impairments.

So I begin...as many districts worked with me to come out and talk with them about ways to address disproportionality, I've started speaking to them more about the broader framework in those districts, many of whom had discrepancies in minority achievement, about how to think about this problem of disproportionality in special education as an extension of some of the issues that they are faced with around the minority achievement gap. And that, in fact, some of the strategies that they needed to identify to address that issue have some applicability to the issue of disproportionality in special education.

For many districts, they would use this term "overrepresentation" and "disproportionate representation" interchangeably, and I choose to use the term "disproportionality", because in many places people have argued that you don't have an overrepresentation of minority students in particular special education categories—you have the representation that were found eligible to be in those programs. So one of the reasons that I use "disproportionality" is that you move beyond this question of whether there's an overrepresentation, but we certainly can find that relative to their representation within the school district, the students are disproportionately represented in certain disability categories.

² The first slide that you see discusses expanding the context, and it really provides an overview of what I hope to be able to talk with you about and I apologize if it seems as if I'm moving too quickly. We've tried to modify this for the phone conference, but it is modified from a larger presentation. The first point is to examine some of the connections between achievement and disproportionate representation

of culturally and linguistically diverse children, and then explore some of the alternate paths to meaningful data concerning the interaction between school factors and students placed at risk of school failure.

I use this term "students placed at risk," and I'll come back to it later in the discussion, because I contend that we have to recognize that when we say "at-risk students," we sometimes miss an important distinction around the fact that certain groups of students are placed at greater risk for educational failure because of some of the social variables that we cannot control but also because of a myriad of educational institutional variables that place those students at risk for school failure.

And then, finally, to provide some recommendations, principally around staff development activities, aimed at building consensus, capacity, and shared accountability. I mention that because this presentation was really modeled to help some of those folks who are on the ground. Clearly, policymakers and people at the district administration level can acquire some important information for addressing this issue. But as school buildings, local districts, and then folks in regions try to address this issue, one of the major gaps is, what does it mean to talk about disproportionality? What does it mean in terms of the way we look at the data? What are the data elements that we need to look at? And so I've tried to cluster these slides in the presentation in a way that would help local buildings and districts, if they want to extrapolate from this, to find a path. We're looking at data to better understand their data and then to understand the hot spots that would lead them to developing effective strategies to address disproportionality.

³ The next slide, common issues, really focuses on what I like to think of as some of the common issues in this arena of the achievement gap, and then for minority students, in general education, and then minority disproportionality in special education. When we look at some of the important factors and the achievement gap and disproportionality, we must consider the historical context of the two areas. We must consider and look at the longitudinal data and outcome data and the issue of minority disproportionality itself. At this point of poverty and socioeconomic status, especially at a time when you hear people saying this isn't really

an issue as much of practices in the schools that disproportionately place kids of color at risk for school failure or disproportionate representation in special education, we're hearing more and more the concern is that this is an issue of poor students or socioeconomic status (SES). I've added that because I think it's important that we look carefully at what we're calling an issue of SES within the context of some things we know about our educational system.

⁴ The next slide, educational impact, covers this issue of historical context—brings together some of the areas related to minority disproportionality and socioeconomic status and its impact in schools. The first thing I'd like to start with is the social and legislative factors that are paramount in education, and sometimes people have likened it to a dirty linen that we don't like to talk about in education, but many times is the elephant in the living room—a legacy of institutionalized racism in schools. Very often we like to think that because education has become a much more sophisticated enterprise with lots of meaningful and important research agendas, we've moved beyond some of the significant impact that institutionalized racism has played in education. I think that when we do that, especially when we start to talk about the achievement gap or minority disproportionality, when we don't give the appropriate credence to the impact of institutionalized racism and segregation in schools, we do a disservice to discussing the enduring impact of segregation in schools. In some districts you have educators that were still a part of segregated schools, and what that means in terms of the attitudinal changes that must evolve in those school districts so that they begin to see students who at one time were not being [appropriate] for the same type of access to enriched education opportunities in those districts, and now they are, we know that it's very difficult.

Some people argue that it's impossible to legislate social and attitudinal change. What we do know is that in places where you do have legislation, especially around social change, that behavior doesn't immediately follow from that legislation. We have to recognize that just because schools were desegregated and students were allowed to participate in more enriched and diverse educational opportunities, doesn't mean educators and communities were receiving

those students prepared or were invested in the success of those students. We still see remnants of that today. I think for many educators, it's important that they look at, in those early times of desegregation, the road that students had to travel in educational settings and what it does to the emotional psyche and what it says about where we were in education and how we viewed access to education.

It also is important to recognize where the impetus for desegregating schools came from, and the fact that it didn't come from within school institutions but was external to school institutions. And so it says something, even, about the path that educators need to take in recognizing deep and entrenched biases around who educators felt should be a part of the educational environment.

Educational access is a direct link to what I just discussed, because what it meant is that not all students, particularly students of color, had access to enriched educational opportunities. I think we like to think that in an era of desegregated schools and in a multi-pluralistic society, that educational access isn't as much of an issue, but if you look in urban districts, rural districts, or affluent districts, you'll find that access to enriched education, even in the same district, varies by the community in which you live. It has a direct relationship between the educational resources in one community. If you are not as clear on that, you look at some of the data in your more affluent districts, how different the resources are in one pocket of the community versus another pocket in the same district, what that means in terms of the educational progress, when you start to disaggregate data on educational progress with students in one part of the county and another part of the county.

The educational impact, one part of educational impact that I mention here is pedagogy of diversity. I think it is important to recognize that the social and legislative factors in school had a direct link to how we prepared educators in terms of the types of tests, curricula, or the focus of where we thought we should prioritize the teaching strategies and the paradigms for what good educators should take to the classroom.

In some places you still find only a chapter in graduate courses or a few books on issues around diversity, even at a time when we know that our

schools and communities are much more diverse. We don't have a robust agenda for teaching people about important aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity. We've done a little bit better in terms of linguistic diversity and recognizing distinctions between teaching children based on where their linguistic competencies are and at times helping them to acquire second language skills and not linking that solely with their intellectual capacities. We do a better job in that way, but for kids who demonstrate cultural differences, it's much harder for us. The research base is much more limited in that way. Also, I've spoken to the issue around teacher preparation and the pedagogy of diversity—that while we are also fairly limited in how we focus our attention to the pedagogy of diversity, what we feel we need to understand, what teachers need to understand in terms of diversity, how it plays itself out in the classroom, and how you can utilize it to help all students learn to high standards, we also have to look at how not having that type of robust preparation may ill-prepare our teachers that move into classrooms that are very diverse. It also, by not doing that, allows teachers to rely more on socially construed and preconceived notions around academic competence that may place certain groups of students at further risk for not achieving at their highest level.

⁵ I point to a report by the National Research Council, and this is one of the early reports by Heller et al. in 1982. And I think that the importance of this particular study is listed in the three bullets I have here. At that time they were concerned about the number of minority children who were placed in programs that were perceived as some of the most diminished in terms of educational opportunities, or the most marginalized programs, and those are programs for students with mental retardation. The concern was the number of children that were inappropriately placed in special education programs for MR. Another concern was if those placements result from receiving poor quality regular education, and then the academic relevance and special educational instructional quality, and then that study by the National Research Council, they said that minority disproportionality is a problem when these thresholds are met. The importance here is that many people argue that minority disproportionality isn't

a problem. They took this on more than 20 years ago to say this isn't an issue of whether or not it's a problem. Let's say it's a problem when these conditions are met: when we have too many students in marginalized special education programs that are placed there inappropriately, when we have too many students that are placed in special education programs and receive poor quality education, and when the academic relevance and the instructional quality impedes their educational progress and their ultimate return to regular education.

I'd like to draw people back to that piece of research for that reason, because it gives you important conditions on when disproportionality may be considered a problem, but it's also significant in that while the National Research Council in early 2000 commissioned another study, it's important to look at where we are on this issue. It took more than 20 years for serious attention to be given to this issue of minority disproportionality. While I do think it's important that we look at that and some of the language that was written into IDEA, it does say something about how we move in recognition of this as a significant problem, that it took more than 20 years to get back to this issue. In many ways it wasn't at the forefront like local newspapers keep the issue of the minority achievement gap at the forefront, and so it says that not only have we been somewhat hesitant to look at the problem, but also, we haven't devoted the necessary research attention to it.

⁶ I list some of the potential causes that study identifies like legal and administrative requirements, student characteristics, and instructional quality. There was a great deal of attention around possible biases in assessment, home and educational characteristics, and I've already talked with you about some of the broader historical and cultural contexts that face minority students.

⁷ I'd like to turn your attention to something that I call a revolving door when I provide this presentation to school districts. It really captures the educational process that starts in the classroom teacher phase, moves through the initial referral, which is generally still in the general education phase, moves on to disability identification, and then to special education services once students have been identified. I indicate stage 5, because what we

want are students to return to general education, and for many students that might involve mainstreaming or some type of gradual reintegration.

⁸ The next slide points to factors that occur at each of those stages that may, in fact, be directly related to racial disproportionality in special education. And while we don't have time to dissect each of those bullets, I'll just mention them so that you have a sense of why they're there.

- At the classroom teacher level, we have the potential around the types of interventions that teachers use. We have teachers' perceptions of students and their ability, and then we have the competencies that teachers bring to the classroom relative to their ability to understand, integrate, and utilize knowledge of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- At stage two, which is still usually a clustering of the initial referral—in one school district I worked in they called it the Educational Management Team—that's when general educators come together and try to problem-solve for students before deciding that the student may have a disability. In that instance we have groups of teachers bringing their own knowledge of interventions, perceptions, and cultural competencies, but we also have the learning paradigms the school or the departments embrace. Another important element that we sometimes underestimate is the role of tolerance and how that school, educational team, and grade level team views or experiences tolerance for students who learn differently, behave differently, and interface the classroom differently. That may all directly impinge on how quickly students move to the evaluation/assessment phase.
- At that phase, despite the fact that we have improved a great deal in terms of tests and test bias, we still have significant issues around cultural competencies both in terms of examiners and in terms of the cultural paradigms that are used in the development of the tests that we say assess intellectual capacity. We also have issues of assessment practices in general. I will

say at this stage that what research finds is that irrespective of race, students seem to be identified at the same rate—African American, Hispanic students, and white students are typically identified at the same rate once they reach stage three, which suggests that the issue doesn't just rest in stage three. What we may have is more students being referred for assessment, but the rate of identification across non-minority and minority groups appears to be the same.

- In stage four we have students in the receipt of special education services. And here I've identified the issue of service efficacy and progress criteria. Service efficacy because I think it's incumbent upon special educators to look at if we're providing these very expensive and rigorous individualized special education services, we have to look at the efficacy of the services that we're providing if large numbers of students of color are not moving back into general education. What is it about the efficacy of those services? We know enough to say that special education has been put under a microscope around efficacy of services in general, and there's been a constant effort to improve the quality of service in special education, if only from a fiscal standpoint, that it's better for us to spend the dollars moving students to regular education and bringing the kinds of support for students who can be educated in regular education back, than thinking about keeping them in more segregated programs. Also progress criteria, what does it say about the criteria we're using to move students back into general education? I identified this because as local school districts look at this issue of minority disproportionality, it's important for them to recognize that most of the data that they use to identify disproportionality are the data at stage four. They look at how many minority students we have in a certain disability category compared to how many white students we have in that disability category and that's where they decide they have disproportionality.

Then the issue is, how do you work back from that? If you say, "We must reduce our overall

numbers,” you may not know you have this overall number, because you have fewer students of color who are exiting. The issue isn’t what’s happening in special education or if you have more students of color being referred to special education services and moving into special education services or if it’s a combination of both. If you think about the revolving door, do you have more going in and fewer coming out, or do you have more going in and still fewer coming out? It helps to understand when you work back to think about where you’d like to target your interventions, where in many places they’re targeting early interventions at the classroom teacher phase, but you still may not see a change in terms of your overall numbers if you’re just looking at the number of students that are classified in special education services until those students exit special education programs through attritional graduation. While you may be making a significant impact in what’s happening between stage one and stage two, you may not see it because of where you’re measuring disproportionality in your district or in your school. I say “in your district” because what happens is when school districts have a process occurring that mirrors disproportionate representation, but when they look at the individual school level, even sometimes at a regional level, the numbers aren’t large enough to reveal the process. They only see it when they look at the district, but that district is really comprised of processes that are occurring in local schools across the district. It’s important to look at the process and how it may occur in schools even when the numbers are very small.

⁹ The next slide talks about some of the LEA profile questions that districts may want to consider as they conceptualize what it means to look at the disproportionality in their district. That is, how do student educational and service profile characteristics differ? How do precipitating educational events differ? And then what are the similarities and differences in educational profiles? ¹⁰ If you are concerned about SES, between low SES and high SES students, one of the things that I think is important for local education agencies to look at is this issue of suspension and expulsion, which is a general education issue, but it has implications for school culture, school climate, and tolerance in schools, both in terms of formal

disciplinary actions and also informal disciplinary actions, which tends to be even higher than the formal disciplinary action. Very often in schools where there are significant achievement gaps and significant minority disproportionality issues, they also find significant discrepancies in how students from culturally diverse groups experience disciplinary actions as well.

¹¹ I’ll move on to this issue around group profile differences, because what I found is that these are some of the important elements that school districts may want to consider as they look at the profiles. Look at the changes in service intensity for groups of students. Do students in certain groups move to more intensive special education services more rapidly than other student groups? Look at free and reduced lunch as an indicator of SES and grade-level differences. You find in some districts that there’s a great deal of tolerance for students when they’re younger, we call this sort of compassionate coding, schools become very concerned with students that are moving to middle school levels that they won’t receive the kind of support they received in general education, so we better move them to special education. As difficult as it sounds, we find a disproportionate representation of African-American boys. Also, maybe linked to developmental changes for these boys is concern that in some places these boys are perceived as more threatening, and so we need to move them into more specialized supportive programs whereas in elementary school they weren’t in specialized programs.

Intensity of service I’ve mentioned to you. You want to look at whether students are classified for special education services earlier. One of the things that we find is that many students, especially those identified with learning, emotional and behavioral difficulties were identified with speech and language services. In many districts there’s a disproportionate number of students of color who receive speech and language services, but that doesn’t draw the attention in those districts as much as students who are placed in programs for mental retardation or cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and emotional and behavioral problems. This is largely because very often with students who are placed in those programs they tend to be some of the more marginalized and intensive programs that remove students

from general education programs.

¹² I've listed here some of the untapped data sources that have actually gone into districts to use. It can be very time intensive to do record reviews, but if you just look at select cohorts of students in terms of record reviews, it can reveal important data about the kinds of strategies your general education management teams are recommending for students which can allow you to see the patterns of informal and formal disciplinary actions. It can also allow you to look at a lot of the anecdotal information that we typically are very busy in schools and don't have an opportunity to go back to that really drives white students, certain students with certain characteristics, to move through the special education cycle so easily and also why some of those students don't move back into general education. So these are some examples of typically untapped data sources.

¹³ I've pointed out some of the data collection elements and I indicated interventions. Very often when you go back to look at the interventions that are occurring in your schools, it's important not only to look at the kinds of instructional intervention, such as the changes in method and context of programs, but also look at the kinds of behavioral strategies that are used and then look at the administrative strategies. I grouped them that way, because if you go back to the student record, you can pretty much cluster the kinds of interventions based on whether they were instructional in nature, behavioral in nature, or administrative in nature. You go back and look at student records and see how often students who represented challenges were referred to administrators as opposed to people really doing some of the deep thinking around the kinds of instructional strategies that educators can come back to in the classroom—the kinds of interventions that they may need to come back to in the classroom to address educational challenges and keep kids on task.

¹⁴ One example of how you can further disaggregate this issue of instructional strategy cluster is to look at the kinds of interventions that were used for instructional strategy. I've given you some examples of that: assignment monitoring sheet, adapted resource room service curricula, varied instructional groups in the classrooms. ¹⁵ I've also given you some examples of how, in the behavioral cluster, whether

they're instituting behavior management, student-teacher contracts in the administrative cluster. Do you find [life] of student conferences and referrals to counselors, and so forth?

¹⁶ I've given you an example in a district where I've gone back to look at their initial referral practice to see if that gives any clues to disproportionate referral patterns. I looked at the overall number of the general Educational Management Team meetings for both African-American and white students and found in that district that they were extremely low. What I said to the district, the implication for that was that there was a pervasive void of documentation that allowed the district to see that their team planning process, irrespective of race, wasn't doing a good job in identifying comprehensive interventions for students.

What I also found in looking at those districts that I didn't include here is that I was able to go back to collect data around the types of interventions, to talk to that district about the quality of the interventions and the types of interventions that were recommended for students, for African-American students versus white students, to give them a sense of when they did recommend interventions, what those interventions looked like.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ I won't spend more time on time interval and the intervention process, because you can read that. Other examples of how going back to look at some of this record review and anecdotal qualitative data for districts: I was able to look at the time intervals for the time period between referring students for brainstorming around some of those challenges. That means if we take a longer period of time to come together to look at challenges that students are presenting in the classroom, does it mean that we also are spending more and more time allowing those students to fail in the classroom? So the time intervals play an important part. ¹⁹⁻²¹ And I give you some other examples of group profile differences and differential special education experiences.

²² I'd like to move to some of the program implications. I've said that when you go back and review your data, you have an opportunity to look at systemic monitoring of your multidisciplinary intervention processes. It allows you to gather important evaluative information for schools to direct your

school development processes. Do you find that your school district has on its staff development calendar something that talks about cultural sensitivity or cultural awareness, and that you really haven't talked about the kinds of competencies that educators need to integrate in their work with students? You're sort of using this one-size-fits-all for a very diverse group of students, and the only time your district begins to think about culturally relevant competencies for educators is really in the realm of linguistic competencies and integrating students with language differences? And do you only see those language differences in students who speak foreign languages, or are you looking at linguistic patterns and language differences that may emanate from African-American students as issues around language patterns and not necessarily linked with those students' intellectual capacities?

When you look at your staff development processes, have you looked at how you're preparing both general and special education in terms of looking at the appropriateness of special education referral, the efficacy of the interventions that people are using in those buildings, before referring students for special education screening? And have you taken a good hard look at whether those kinds of interventions, when the problem is with a diminished menu of services and intervention strategies that teachers can draw on? Maybe you need to go back to the drawing board to look at that before deciding that the problem rests with the student and then referring the student on for special education service.

I don't mean to infer that students with significant disabilities or students with disabilities don't benefit from special education services or shouldn't be referred for special education services or at least evaluated for screening, but what I will say to you is that there's too much information to suggest that schools have been failing students from diverse backgrounds for a long time. There are institutional reasons to understand why schools fail students and don't meet students where they are. We need to take a good hard look at what we know about those elements before deciding that this disproportionate representation of students with disabilities, especially in certain disability categories, adequately reflects a disproportionate incidence of learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral problems for

students of color.

²³ I'd like to make mention of this issue of poverty and minority achievement. Some of the facts around poverty are, we know that poverty's a persistent variable. We know that there's a higher incidence in urban than rural settings. We know that poverty exacerbates other risk factors and we know that it correlates with low academic achievement. My main concern in this growing movement around the role of poverty and minority educational achievement is that somehow we've moved from correlation to that really the issue is that these are poor students. That poverty is the main reason that we have students who do so poorly in schools. That poverty is the reason, that because we have more poor students or lower SES students in special education, it must be that poverty is the predominant factor in those students coming more ill-prepared for school and ending up in special education.

What's missing from that discussion are two things. One is the notion of what do you do with that? Students don't choose to be poor. It's not enough to say that students are poor and that's really the overriding factor. It's not race or some practice that's occurring in the institution of schools that may play a big role in why so many minority students fare so poorly in school and are moving into special education at disproportionate rates. I think that such an argument really ignores what we know about institutionalized racism in school, and it ignores issues of bias that persist in schools, and it still sort of places the blame back with students.

²⁴ What it also doesn't do is give us a roadmap to address issues around poverty, and I'd like to mention one sidebar that I share with groups, and that is that the history, particularly for African-American students, is that they came from under-resourced communities. They came from a legacy of segregated schools that had fewer resources, and they still were able, in very segregated and racist communities, to educate students who went on, once they were allowed to gain access, to higher education enterprises. They were allowed to educate students that went on to succeed at high levels, so it's not enough to say that simply because students come from poor communities with parents who don't have high educational levels and who are

under-resourced in their communities, that that is enough of an explanation for why those students do poorly in schools, because it negates the ability and the resilience of those communities for a long, long time to disprove that people who are under-resourced, without significant advantages, couldn't still achieve in academic settings at high levels.

I'd like for people when they talk about poverty and minority achievement to think about school implications. It means that if we have under-resourced schools and high mobility in those schools and teacher program quality issues because we know that the teachers in those schools also are very mobile and that the readiness issues in those schools are very different than in some of our more advantaged communities, then we begin to target our interventions to those school implications and not stop with "We have poor students." We also know that in those communities, there tends to be a lower level of parental and educational attainment. Those parents tend to have had marginalized school experiences, and their family and social structures are great in those communities. What are we doing in terms of how the school networks with the communities and recognize where parents and guardians are in terms of their readiness, in terms of their marginalized school issues, in terms of their trust of educational environments, and then work from there.

²⁵ Some of the challenges that I've identified are that we know that educators have a full plate. We know that incorporating new knowledge and strategies and the whole change process takes a lot of time and hard work. We know that building competencies and changing educational practices requires a lot of deep thinking, hard work, and that it doesn't happen so quickly. We know that there are organizational challenges and personnel preparation challenges.

²⁶ I think that school districts need to think about an area that we don't often talk about—minority achievement, and that is nurturing achievement and creating access and opportunity. That professional development experiences to enhance educators need to focus on developing academic skills, but they also need to foster academic esteem. Sometimes it's very hard for people to understand the entrenched nature of demoralized feelings around students from diverse backgrounds

and their educational experiences when they see students who don't look like them as a group of students who are considered the high achievers.

We also need to look at issues around developing talent as opposed to thinking that students are born with talent only. We need to think about enhancing social skills as opposed to thinking about we need to teach social skills. It ignores the fact that students come to school sometimes with social skills that they choose not to use because they experience schools as very adverse conditions. We also need to think about nurturing academic motivation.

One of the examples that I use, it's unfortunate for me, but probably one of the best examples, we can go to schools, some of your lowest achieving schools and some of your highest achieving schools, and we can look at basketball teams and football teams, and we can see a level of sport and athletic motivation that is unparalleled. We need to think about developing the same type of unparalleled academic esteem in students and it takes work in thinking. Also, often in education we believe that students simply have to come with that. That it's not our job to nurture that and work with parents who cultivate that.

²⁷ I've listed here some of the shared strategies. One of the most important ones is that we need to develop an effective research-based agenda, methods, and strategies. Part of that, and I'd like to segue a little bit, we're doing a little bit better in special education. There's a phenomenal resource out there, the National Center on Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (<http://www.nccrest.org/>), a relatively young center, but really on the mark with regard to the kind of research that we need to generate around culturally responsive educational practice. I use them because it's one of the examples of a federal investment in building the research base around how we incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in teaching and learning. Typically our research dollars tend to guide the kinds of practices, so it makes sense to me that because we haven't devoted enough time, probably because in all fairness, people haven't been as concerned about the achievement gap as others have been. It certainly hasn't been given the type of importance from a national perspective that it should be, but this is an example from a national perspec-

tive of how federal dollars are focused on addressing the importance of integrating culturally responsive educational practice and doing good research to integrate those practices so that people can stop thinking about cultural competency as something soft. They can even begin to think about cultural competencies and move away from this notion of just being culturally aware and culturally sensitive is enough.

I also talk about the importance of comprehensive design with aligned components. These shared solutions are from the work on comprehensive school reform. It's also important to identify measurable goals and benchmarks, supports within the schools that this really is the roadmap as you go about addressing comprehensive school reform, that the reform process needs to be informed by culturally responsive pedagogy to meet the needs of diverse students. It also must be responsive to disaggregating the data on what we know about where those students are not achieving. What we know about the competencies and practices that educators are using in the classroom so that we can address our change strategies and innovations to the folks who are creating the kinds of classroom ecology and school climate that create opportunities for minority students to gain access and opportunity for learning.

²⁸ I talked about shared solutions around building capacity that we must focus on professional development. People want to find the one thing that will fix minority achievement, and I think we've grappled with this long enough to recognize it's not just a good reading intervention, it's not just a good math intervention. While we do see some good outcomes for that, this issue around minority disproportionality and minority disproportionality in special education and the minority achievement gap really is an issue that relates to the infrastructure of schooling for minority students in this country and that we won't see significant changes until we begin to apply attention to developing the kinds of research agenda around looking at how minority students perform and achieve in schools and looking at what happens in classrooms in creating ecologies for success for those students.

I wanted to point to some of the work of two other important resources.

1. One is the Center for the Research on Students Placed At Risk. There are two units of CRESPAR that was funded out of the Educational Research and Improvement Office. Their mission was to develop, evaluate, and disseminate school and community practices, but the nice thing about CRESPAR, the important thing about them, is that they work from a philosophy that the students were not inherently placed at risk, but rather were placed at educational failure by the many adverse practices in situations. Johns Hopkins (<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/>) and Howard University (<http://crespar.law.howard.edu/>) did a lot of this work and Howard focused on this notion, as did Hopkins, of developing talent, looking at demanding school curricula and high expectations and how you integrate that, how you look at improving the quality in school buildings of the educational experience.
2. I'd also wanted to mention the important work that Ed Gordon of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Columbia (<http://iume.tc.columbia.edu/>), which has a long history of looking at education as an anti-poverty strategy, looking at issues of educational equality and opportunity, equity issues, diversity and multiculturalism,

as examples of places where folks are really focused on some of the work that I think speaks directly to addressing this issue of disproportionality and the achievement gap. And with that I'm done, Donna.

Ms. Johnson: Thank you, Anthony. So with that, I'd like to invite the audience to ask Anthony any questions. If you have a question, please state your name and the state from which you are calling. So anybody have any questions?

Anthony, I have a question. One of the things that you had talked about was the importance of parental and community involvement. Can you give any examples of promising practices or best practices that you found around parental and community involvement?

Dr. Sims: Sure. I'll use the example related to what I think is an implication of this notion of poverty of folks in communities where educational lev-

els are fairly low or under-resourced communities. And some of those communities—I'll talk, actually, about some of the work that CRESPAR did, recognizing that in order for students to succeed, there are certain kinds of reinforcements that they need at home. And, for example, we say that students need in-school work and out-of-school work, and that parents need to support out-of-school work. Support for out-of-school work comes in a couple of different forms.

One form is a parent who's able to support their child around the homework they bring home and the kinds of educational activities that occur in the classroom. Many parents, even parents who are well-educated, either don't have the time always or some of the things are very challenging for them that their students are bringing home, but we know for parents who have had very marginalized educational experiences, they may not be equipped right away to provide the direct support. In those communities people have built more in local schools, they've brought the resources to schools. These are communities that don't have the Sylvan Learning Centers and if they did the parents didn't have resources to pay for the Sylvan Learning Center for their student.

Communities recognize that if they brought tutors to the community, to the churches—you see this very often in communities where the faith community has really mobilized to bring resources to that community—they recognize that while parents may not be able to provide the direct support, that they can help their kids get to those direct supports when they're located in their communities and for those communities that have opened the schools so that you think about school community, and those schools are open not only for after-school social and recreational opportunities that help parents to engage and have a presence in school as well, but they provide support to students directly, and in some instances have provided some literacy support to parents so that they can engage.

Another example is in those communities where parents have been found to not be a part of the special education process, that they have a hard time engaging those parents. For many of them, like for many of us, special education processes were difficult to understand. Bringing advocates to

those communities to help parents understand the process, understand the power, in the entitlement provided them in the law and bringing it to where parents are. Bringing that to some of those churches that will have a seminar on special education so that parents can better understand special education and understand those things.

Other examples are very often for parents, and I can speak about this personally, I did a lot of parent involvement work for students who were in very intensive special education programs for kids with emotional-behavioral problems. For those parents, they were pretty disengaged from school, because they had been in schools largely around problems that the kids experienced, they felt that their kids were really at the end of the public education rope, and parents had very negative feelings often. It's hard to engage them positively and one of the things that I did is start a parent support group and found that parents really liked the opportunity to come and share both some of the difficulties around the challenges that they faced as a parent, but they also found it a bridge to the school for someone that could help them understand the implications for some of the behavioral challenges of their kids exhibited in schools, but also explain to them the culture of schools and why and how they can best utilize the resources in the school.

Those are some examples of building in the community partnership and it's important to remember, when you talk about minority communities, that there is an element of legitimate mistrust in some minority communities around the educational process. All too often we discount that, because it's too convenient for us to forget about some of those negative experiences in schools that institutionalize discrimination.

Mr. Kroll: My name is Mike Kroll, and I work for the Department of Education in Arkansas. I'm enjoying your presentation. I have a question, which is kind of esoteric, because when we mentioned all of the factors that you were referring to, we're in concurrence that these are all factors that need to be addressed, and we can't simply focus in on the number issue, or what have you. You mentioned socioeconomic and culture deprivations being one of the reasons that we have this issue brought up

consistently throughout the districts, particularly in some of our geographic areas, but realistically, if we were to look at that, how would you deal with the question, while we say they're socioeconomically and culturally deprived, those are not referring characteristics under the IDEA. So how would that factor in?

Dr. Sims: Mike, I guess I have to ask, because I didn't use the term "culturally deprived." Tell me, you said they're not referring characteristics under IDEA. No, they're not. Typically, kids are referred because of educational difficulties that they're experiencing. So help me to understand your question.

Mr. Kroll: Well, I'm not sure I'm articulating it well, and I probably am not. But we get a lot of response saying, well, because of the demographics, because of the population and the geographics of the population, these children have not had the exposure to cultural events and so on and so on. It's not a reason to refer them.

Dr. Sims: Right. No, it's not a reason to refer them, but I'll tell you, Mike, I found that some very well-meaning people, and you found this often in the early discussions around test and test bias, that many tests that people were using were biased in terms of not presenting experiences in the test that were relevant to the cultural experiences and life experiences of people with other backgrounds. You found that in language, and some people found it as simple as something like in some communities in certain parts of the country, people say sofa and some places they say couch. If you tried to ask a student if they recognize sofa and they usually refer to it as couch, was that student penalized? Well, in many ways, the language bias, if you will, and the preference for a certain kind of language, has really been improved upon so that tests don't inappropriately identify students as deficient simply because they use different language patterns or vocabulary or structure. But sometimes people on both sides of the coin say that the student isn't functioning as well or isn't achieving to high levels, because they haven't been exposed to the same kinds of cultural experiences. Like you said, sometimes people aren't referred based on what they were exposed to in terms of cultural experiences.

I'm more concerned, Mike, if we know that students come from communities where they don't have lots of museums or that community is not tak-

ing advantage of some of the other things that are often reinforced and referenced in our classrooms, how do schools use that knowledge to bring that information to the classroom so that those students who may or may not make one of those pilgrimages here to Washington to see the new Native American Museum, but adults know about the Native American Museum and can present that information to students so that they have the requisite knowledge whether they ever made it to the Native American Museum. How have we taken what we know about the impoverished opportunities of a student that may directly impact their fund of knowledge? And how have recreated the classroom structures so that we bring that knowledge from the community into the classroom and that we begin to reinforce for those students the broader horizon of knowledge base. That's my concern when you hear people talk about the issue that they haven't been exposed to that. That is an important factor, but then it's probably a bigger consideration, a more important consideration, for schools to look at how they may then, in turn, use that to say that a student is or is not as capable as another student, but also how they can begin to think about, what does it say about what we need to do in these schools. I may not have addressed enough of your points, so I'll be happy off line, since we have limited amount of time, to have continued discussion around that.

Mr. Kroll: Appreciate your time, sir. Thank you.

Dr. Sims: Thank you.

Ms. Cook: I have a question. My name is Rosemary Cook, and I'm from Omaha Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska. I'm calling because I have an adult that has transitioned out of the public school system, and I'm finding very limited resources for socialization for him out in the community, in the community that he is growing up in and that he is thriving in. Now there are other sections of the city that have established programs, but transportation is an issue. I'm looking at trying to initiate something here in the urban area to address this situation. And I am having difficulty breaking through certain barriers in order to bring attention to this, and I think it would be one way to integrate the transitioned student into the community and maintain socialization that is very well needed. My

son happens to be severe-profound developmentally disabled. Do you have any suggestions as to where would a person that is going solo would try and begin to get some attention to this situation?

Dr. Sims: Well, the first thing I'll tell you, Rosemary, is that you're on the right conference call with regard to transition issues, and so there may be some at least direction to information and supports that we can provide to you through NCSET and then begin to think about maybe some of the regional information that NCSET may have about resources in your region. But just generally, Rosemary, I would say that one of the things that would be an important starting point for you, because that's a very real issue. Some communities have great transition support services, and others it's not really on the map. And then what do you do when you're reintegrating someone in the community and they don't have some of the important transitional resources there? The important thing is to find who the few champions and partners and stakeholders that you will have in your community that would be interested in this. They may not recognize it as transition. They may not use the language of transition. They may be in the workforce development world and recognize they're working on the issue from the perspective of how do we integrate adults with disabilities into our workforce. They may have some initiatives in our world that's a part of good transition planning, in their world they may not use. So, perhaps, Rosemary, the folks at NCSET and I certainly would be happy to have continued conversation with you, to begin to think about who some of the potential partners are that you can talk to in the community that you may not think of as conventional partners, and they may not think of themselves as transition partners, but they're doing the same kind of work that we know transition partners do.

Ms. Moreland: This is Sherndina Moreland. Rosemary, if you could give me a contact number for you, I am a technical assistant at NYSA for the Parent Training Information Centers.

Ms. Cook: And I happen to be on the Board for the local one here, so...

Ms. Moreland: I'm one with that area.

Ms. Johnson: Well, with that I'd like to thank Anthony for sharing his time and expertise with us,

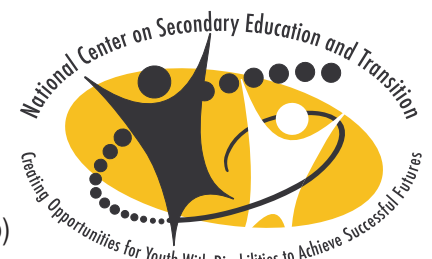
and our next NCSET Exiting Community teleconference is scheduled for Thursday, April 14, at 2:00 Central Time, and we'll have a panel of presenters from the Duval County, Florida Schools present "Reducing Disproportionality in Special Education—the 100 Black Men of Jacksonville in collaboration with Duval County Public Schools, Jacksonville, Florida." And this will be our final teleconference of the series on disproportionality, and I would just like to invite you to e-mail me at johns042@umn.edu if you have any ideas for further teleconference topics that would cover school completion and exiting from secondary to postsecondary. It's a broad topic, but I think the series had a lot of interest, and so we'd like your input if you would like any future series. Thanks a lot, everybody. Thanks a lot, Anthony.

Dr. Sims: Thank you, everyone.

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Contact us at:

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
 Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD)
 6 Pattee Hall
 150 Pillsbury Drive SE
 Minneapolis MN 55455
 (612) 624-2097 (phone)
 (612) 624-9344 (fax)
ncset@umn.edu (E-mail)
<http://www.ncset.org> (Web)



**Minority Disproportionality
in Special Education
and the Achievement Gap:
*Common Issues, Shared Solutions***

**Anthony E. Sims, Ph.D.
Institute for Educational
Leadership**

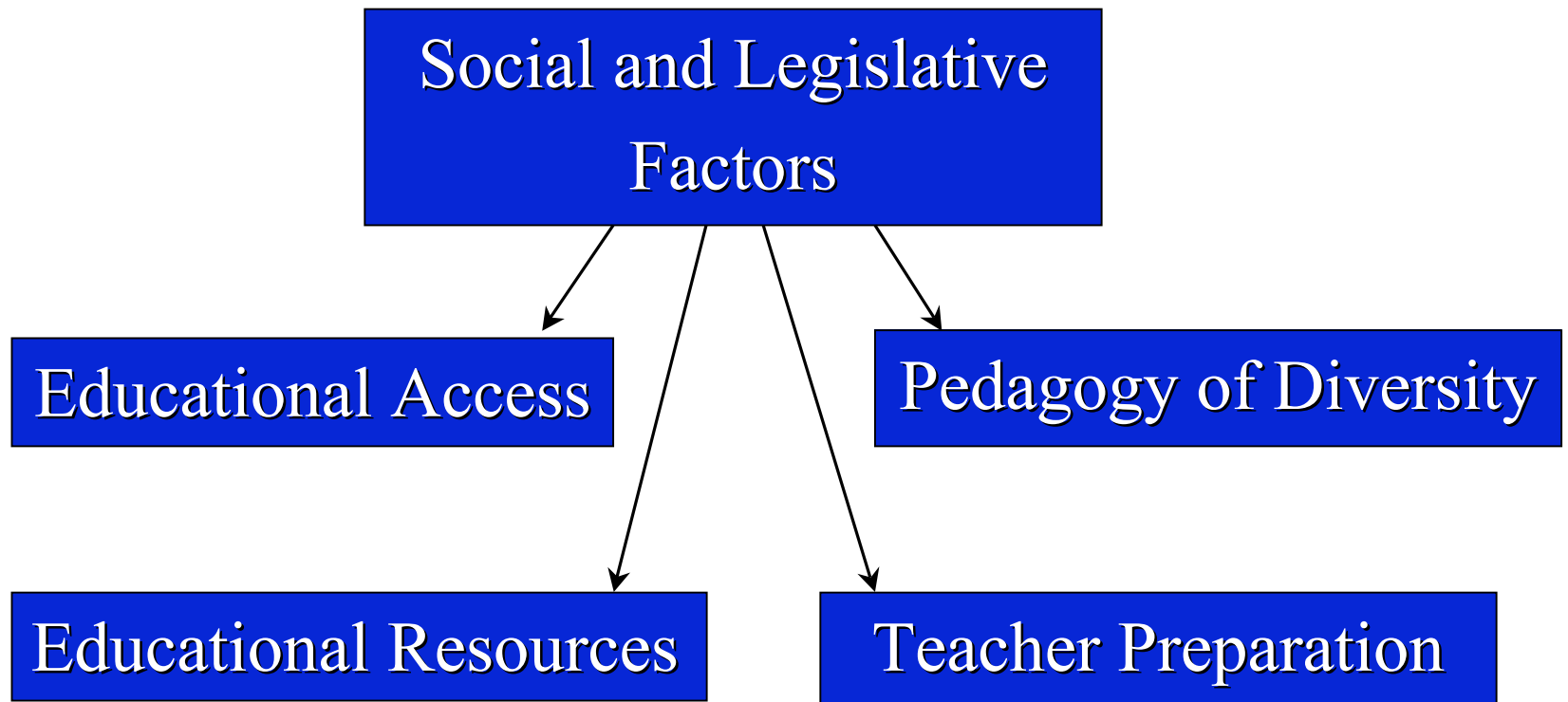
Expanding the Context

- Examine connections between achievement and disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse children
- Explore alternate paths to meaningful data concerning the interaction between school factors and students placed at risk for school failure
- Provide recommendations for staff development activities aimed at building consensus, capacity and shared accountability

Common Issues

- Historical Contexts
- Longitudinal Outcome Data
- Minority Disproportionality
- Poverty/ Social Economic Status

Educational Impact



Report to the National Research Council

Minority Disproportionality is a Problem when:

- Children are inappropriately placed in special programs for MR students.
- Placement results from receiving poor quality regular education services.
- Academic relevance and the special education instructional quality impede educational progress or the return to the regular classrooms.

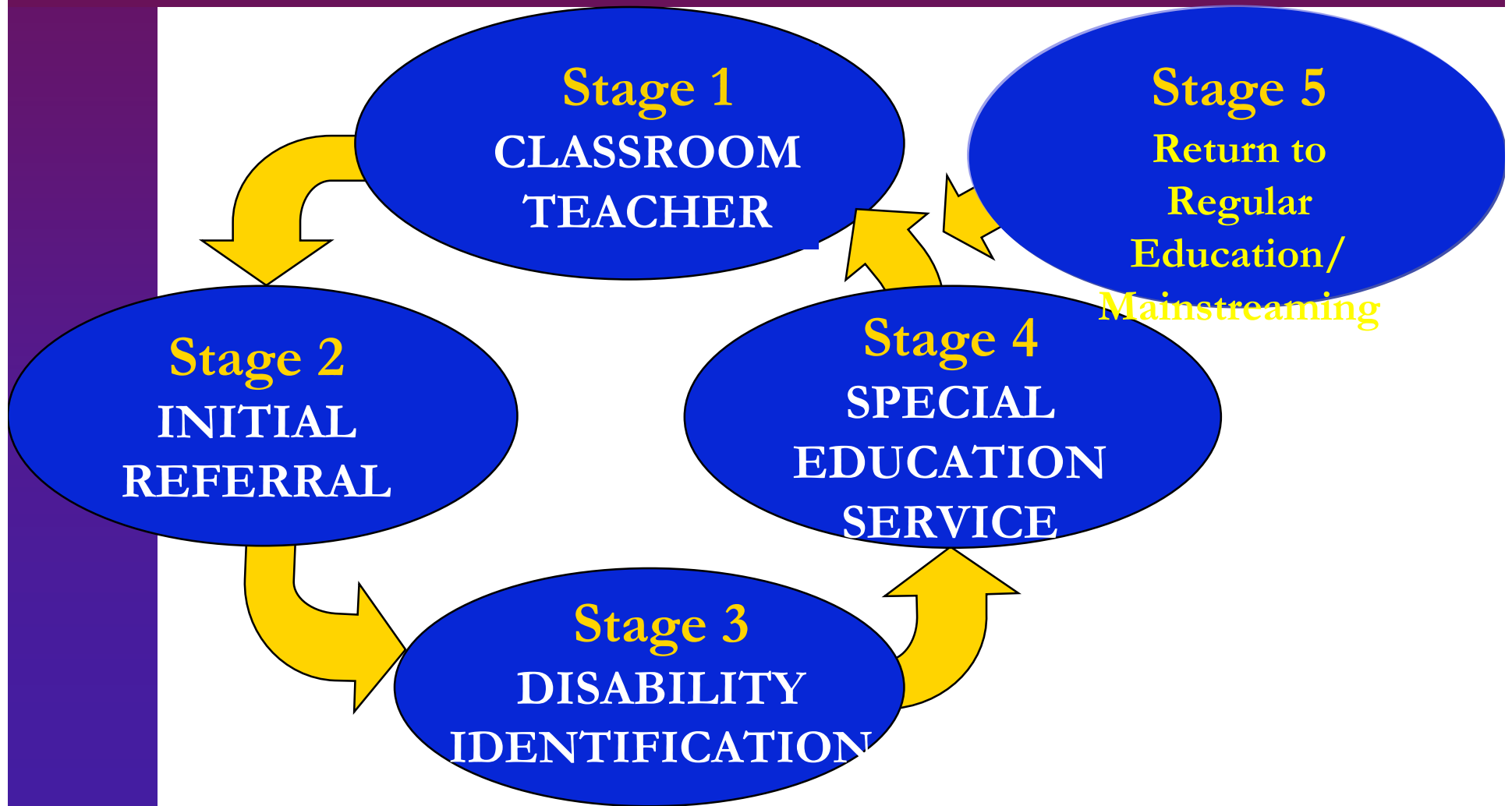
National Academy of Sciences. (Heller et al., 1982)

Six Potential Causes of Disproportion in EMR Programs

1. Legal and Administrative Requirements
2. Student Characteristics
3. Instructional Quality
4. Possible Assessment Process Biases
5. Home and Family Characteristics
6. Broader Historical and Cultural Contexts

National Academy of Sciences. (Heller et al., 1982)

Stages of the General-to-Special Education Continuum of Service



Possible Factors Related to Racial Disproportionality

Stage 1

TEACHER/CLASSROOM

- Interventions
- Teacher Perceptions
- Cultural Competencies

Stage 2

REFERRAL

- Learning Paradigms
- Tolerance

Stage 4

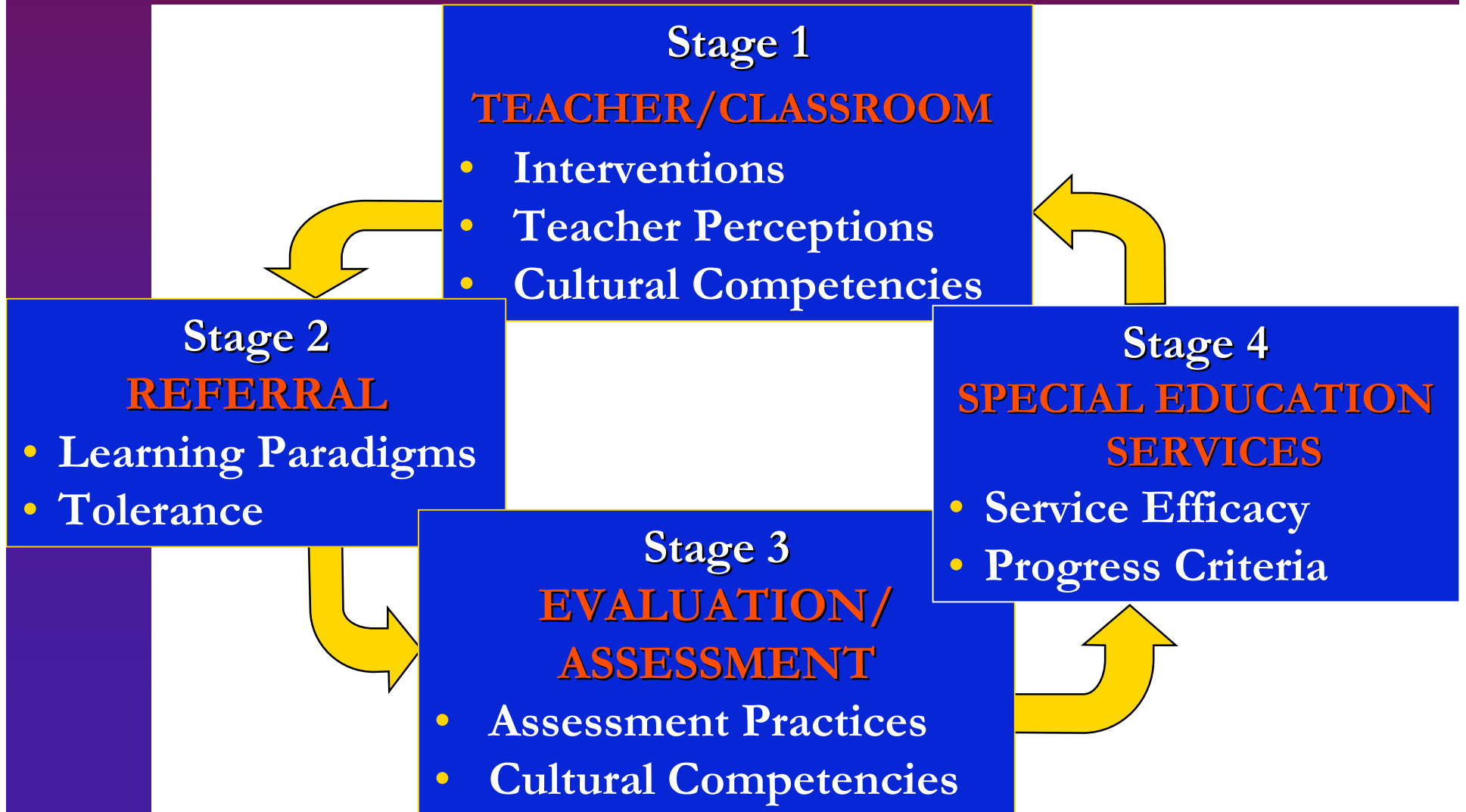
SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

- Service Efficacy
- Progress Criteria

Stage 3

EVALUATION/ ASSESSMENT

- Assessment Practices
- Cultural Competencies



LEA Profile Questions

Student, School, and Procedural

- How do student and educational service profile characteristics differ?
- How do precipitating educational events differ?
- What are the similarities and differences in the educational profiles of low versus medium to high-SES students classified as

_____?

LEA Profile Questions

Student, School, and Procedural

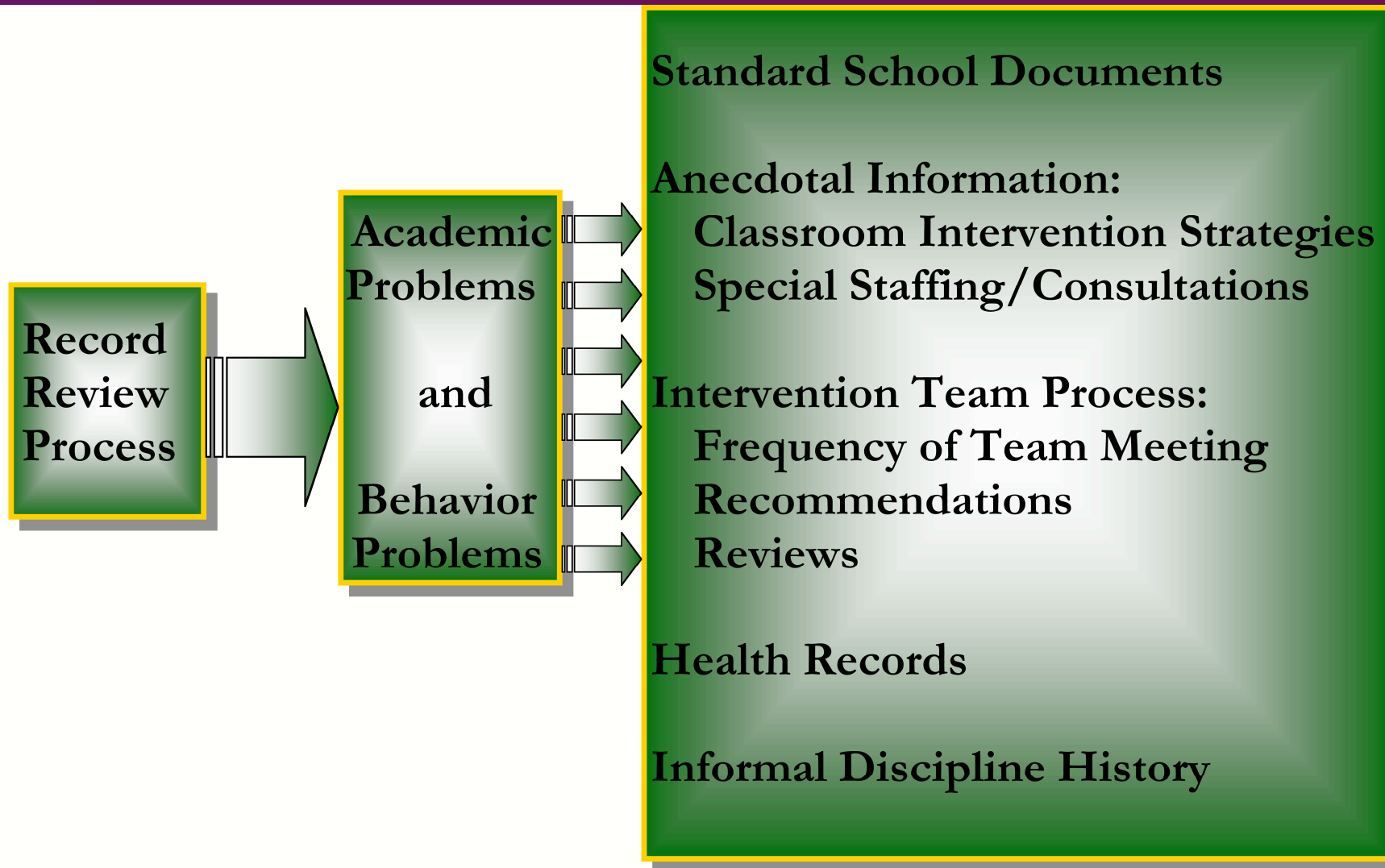
- Do schools with disproportionate suspension rates for African American students have similarly high rates for African American students receiving special education services for learning and behavior problems?

Group Profile Differences: Classification & Movement

General student profile characteristics and their interactions with race group membership:

- Changes in Service Intensity
- Free and Reduced Meals
- Grade Levels
- Intensity of Service
- Previously Classified
- Years Receiving _____ Services.
- Years in Special Education

Using “Untapped” Data



Data Collection - Interventions

Instructional strategies - Changes to the method, context, or program made in response to a specific academic need evidenced by the student.

Behavioral strategies - Behavioral accommodations implemented or initiated by the classroom teacher to address behavioral difficulties.

Administrative strategies - Accommodations provided to the student by an administrator (i.e., principal or assistant principal) outside of the classroom setting.

Intervention Clusters

Instructional Strategy Cluster

- Assignment monitoring sheet
- Adapted resource room service curricula
- Adapted non-disabled materials
- Varied instructional groups
- Individual instruction

Intervention Clusters

Behavioral Strategy Cluster

- Behavior management
- Student-teacher contract
- Classroom/teacher change

Administrative Strategy Cluster

- Student conference
- Refer student to counselor
- Refer student to school psychologist
- Refer student/family to outside (external) agency

Initial Referral Process Characteristics

Finding

- Overall number of EMT meetings engaged for both African American and White students in the study district was extremely *low*.

Implication

- Pervasive void of documentation or the use of team planning processes to develop comprehensive interventions for students experiencing behavioral difficulties, *irrespective of race*.

Time Interval for Team Intervention Processes

Finding

- African American students experienced *substantially longer* periods of time between EMT interventions than White students, with the exception of those recommended prior to referral for special education (SED) screening.

Implication

- Relatively *rapid* transition to decisions to formally refer African Americans for SED services, whereas the process is *delayed* for White students.

Time Interval for Team Intervention Processes

Implication

- Results in fewer opportunities extended for comprehensive intervention for students thus, teachers are *less likely to observe positive changes* in problem behaviors.

Group Profile Differences

Finding

- African American students are *newly* classified at almost twice rate of their White peers and roughly twice the rate of newly classified SED students in the school system overall.
- Race, SES status and grade level uniquely influence the length of time students receive SED

African American high school students received longer periods of SED service than poor White students, while the length of service rates in elementary and middle school are more similar among poor and non-poor students.

Differential Special Education Experiences

Finding

- African Americans were classified at *higher intensities* of SED services
- If regular education represents the point of origin of the special education continuum, then African American students classified farther along the continuum than White students will need longer periods of time to make the transition back to regular education programs.

Differential Special Education experiences

Implication

African American students placed in more intensive special education settings are subject to *diminished opportunities* for mainstream educational experiences

Program Implications

Systematic monitoring of multidisciplinary intervention processes

- Provides important evaluative information to schools to inform staff development needs
- Provides information on the efficacy of intervention practices within **general** education prior to determining the appropriateness of special education referral

Poverty and Minority Achievement

Facts:

Persistent Variable

Higher incidence in urban and rural settings

Exacerbates other risk factors

Correlates with low academic achievement

Poverty and Minority Achievement

School Implications

Under-resourced schools

High mobility

Teacher/program quality issues

School readiness skill needs

Parental and Community Implications

Lower levels of parental educational attainment

Marginalized school experiences

Family & social stressors

Challenges

- "A Full Plate"
- Incorporating new Knowledge/Strategies
 - The Change Process
- Organizational Challenges
- Personnel Preparation

Nurturing Achievement:

Create Access & Opportunity

Professional development experiences which enhance educator's abilities to promote achievement through:

- **Developing Academic Skills**
- **Fostering Academic Esteem**
- **Developing Talent**
- **Enhancing Social Skills**
- **Nurturing Academic Motivation**

Shared Solutions: Comprehensive School Reform

- Effective research-based methods and strategies
- Comprehensive design with aligned components
- Professional development
- Measurable goals and benchmarks
- Supports within the schools
- Parental and community involvement
- External technical supports and assistance
- Evaluation strategies
- Coordination of resources

Shared Solutions: Building Capacity

- Focus professional development (sustained and supportive) to produce instructional problem-solvers and shared accountability for student success;
- Implement intensive two-tiered educational interventions to improve foundation and analytic skills;
- Invest in parent training to develop “educational liaisons”; and
- Facilitate community partnerships to reinforce high achievement

