



LOCAL NEWS

San Bernardino County educators work to help African-American students succeed



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African-American students make up only 9.1 percent of all the students in San Bernardino County, but they get double that many suspensions for defiance, [according to the California Department of Education](#).

They're also more likely to drop out, less likely to pass the California High School Exit Exam the first year they take it, have the lowest graduation rate of any ethnic group in many school districts and are less likely to have met the requirements to attend the University of California or California State University if they do graduate.

"We need to do everything we can to abandon the systemic belief that these kids can't achieve," said Don Jaramillo, principal of Etiwanda High in the Chaffey Joint Union High School District. "I don't care what color they are: they can achieve. Somewhere along the line, we pay the price in a global sense that we're going to have to retrain those who don't come out with a diploma. ... It's the line I use with the kids: pay now or pay later."

[Data released earlier this year by the California Department of Education](#) showed that in the 2012-13 school year (the most recent school year for which data is available) African-American students receive 22.42 percent of all the suspensions in the county, almost two and a half times the expected rate.

A total of 36,128 African-American students graduated with the class of 2013, out of 398,442 students statewide, according to the department of education. But that works out to 68.1 percent of African-American members of the class graduating this year, 12.1 percent below the average of 80.4 percent. Of those that did graduate, 21.3 percent had completed the courses required for admission to a UC or CSU school, compared to 27.6 percent of all county graduates.

Educators around San Bernardino County are trying to change figures like that.

“These exact conversations are going on statewide,” said Hardy Brown II, one of the members of the San Bernardino County Board of Education. “This is not something going on at one school, one district, one county.”

The data was presented to the San Bernardino County Board of Education at their February meeting, and was compiled by a group of researchers, including April Clay, a visiting professor at the University of Redlands. She observed classrooms where African-American students had basically checked out of their education, but since they weren’t causing problems, their teachers never stepped in to get them reengaged.

“As long as they weren’t disrupting the class, (it) was fine. It was like a totally different classroom,” she said.

But efforts to improve the education for African-American students will help all students — and society as a whole, once those students leave school.

“If we can move this group at the bottom up, everyone benefits,” Clay said.

Districts are trying.

In Rialto Unified, concern over the achievement gap for African-American students — African-American students are almost 5 percent less likely to graduate high school there (75.8 versus 80 percent) and receive almost twice as many suspensions as expected — has led to a college-preparatory program normally used at the middle school and high school level being incorporated into all aspects of one elementary school. Preston Elementary School will be incorporating the [AVID](#) (Advancement Via Individual Determination) college readiness program — especially the academic skills training and group collaboration components — into the curriculum, starting in the 2015-16 school year. Some of the components also match teaching methods used under the new Common Core State Standards, which the district is in the process of implementing.

“A lot of these things, we’re already doing,” said Preston Elementary Principal Robin McMillon. “We align them and make sure we streamline that.”

She pitched the new plan to the Rialto Unified School Board at their Feb. 11 meeting, specifically highlighting how the plan would help African-American students. The different outcomes they were having, even as early as elementary school, jumped out at her when McMillon first took over as principal at Preston in the 2012-13 school year.

“For me, it wasn’t just looking at African-American students, it was looking across the (test scores) chart — you could see the difference,” she said.

And for all of her students, of every ethnicity, leaving Preston unprepared will set them up for future academic failure, McMillon said. Those students will be stuck taking remedial courses in high school, rather than having the room on their schedule to take the Advanced Placement classes their peers are taking in preparation for college.

“When I look at AVID, it will benefit all those subgroups,” she said.

In Redlands Unified, African-American students graduate a bit above the district’s 91.2 percent graduation rate. But they received 18.4 percent of the suspensions, almost triple the expected percentage.

The district’s working to improve the environment for all students, according to Brad Mason, assistant superintendent of Business Services for the district, and its de facto spokesman.

Redlands Unified is expanding the AVID program at all four of the district high schools, bolstering career and technical education programs and increasing the amount of technology available to all students, including the purchase of 13,000 laptops over the last three years.

“The Redlands Unified School District has an ongoing commitment to ... expenditures that invest in students and programs that ensure our students continue to excel,” Mason wrote in an email.

African-American students in Redlands Unified have beaten the graduation rates for their peers across both the county and state for the past three years for which data is available, he noted.

In the Chaffey Joint Union High School District, African-American students beat their district’s 86.2 percent graduation rate by 3.3 percent. But they received 8.4 percent of the suspensions for defiance in the district, more than double the expected rate.

“We track how students from all subgroups are performing and provide additional intervention support in a variety of ways at our different sites,” Superintendent Mat Holton wrote in an email.

Among the steps taken by the district are targeted counseling programs to help students stay on track for graduation; committee meetings that discuss struggling students and which design individual support plans; tutoring programs available before and after school and on weekends and at summer school; parent training; AVID at every school; site-specific groups and organizations, including Leaders Making Leaders, the African American Mentoring Program, Student Union Culture Club and Youth Mentoring Network.

“It could be that it’s systemic,” Jaramillo said. He’s the principal of Etiwanda High, which has the highest percentage of African-American students in the Chaffey district, at 17 percent of the student population.

“The grandparents didn’t graduate (high school), parents didn’t graduate, and now the kids are living that, and they don’t know what’s next and what to do.”

The answer at Etiwanda, he said, is similar to what the AVID program offers at the middle school and high school level: a support system to help families with no history of going to college with the knowledge and support of how to prepare for and succeed in education.

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re white, Hispanic, I think the upbringing of the family may contribute it,” Jaramillo said. “Many times, parents don’t know how to navigate the educational realm.”

The Chaffey district has eliminated the achievement gap in African-American graduation rates, and he’s optimistic that the other achievement gaps will fall in time. The district’s efforts include the expansion of AVID programs on all district campuses and parenting centers at each campus to help fill the knowledge gaps for parents who may not have graduated high school themselves.

The report presented to the San Bernardino County Board of Education was just the start of the process, Brown hopes.

“There’s great people who are doing a great job in the county right now, so let’s just duplicate that and take it to scale,” he said.

Clay said she and her colleagues have already begun interviewing African-American students about what works — and what doesn’t, and intend to do the same with educators as well.

Part of changing things will be for educators and the community to expect more from African-American students, Brown said.

“I was not the student who did what people told me to do. I graduated (San Bernardino) High School with a low GPA,” he said. “When I got to college, I had a professor who came up to me and said ‘you could be sharp, if you just put some meat with those potatoes.’ He just held me to high expectations.”

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Beau Yarbrough | Reporter

Beau Yarbrough wrote his first newspaper article taking on an authority figure (his middle school principal) when he was in 7th grade. He’s been a professional journalist since 1992, working in Virginia, Egypt and California. In that time, he’s covered community news, features, politics, local government, education, the comic book industry and more. He’s covered the war in Bosnia, interviewed presidential candidates, written theatrical reviews, attended a seance, ridden in a

blimp and interviewed both Batman and Wonder Woman (Adam West and Lynda Carter). He also cooks a mean pot of chili.

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