A STATE PROFILE OF EFFORTS TO CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

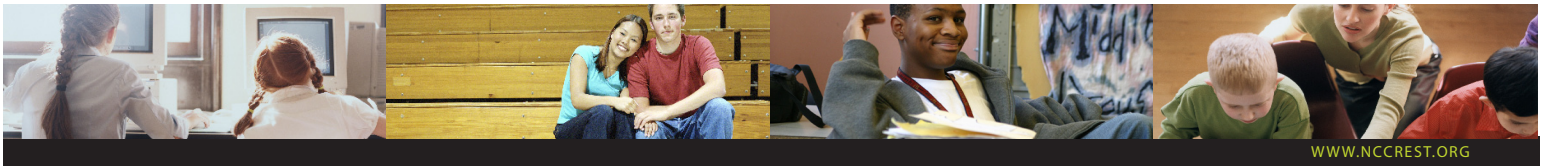## NORTH CAROLINA

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) is a technical assistance and dissemination project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSEP). The mission of NCCRESt is to support state and local school systems to assure a quality, culturally responsive education for all students. NCCRESt provides technical assistance and professional development to close the achievement gap between students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their peers, and to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. NCCRESt is designed to coalesce students, families, practitioners, policy makers and researchers around interventions and strategic improvements in practice and policy that are culturally responsive. Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors if their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development and if they are provided with access to high quality teachers, programs, curricula, and resources. The outcomes of NCCRESt's work are intended to (a) increase the use of prevention and early intervention strategies, (b) improve the contexts for educational systems improvement, and (c) enhance the teaching and learning of practitioners and students alike. This initiative was designed to support and extend the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which emphasizes stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work.

Established in November of 2002, the Center has been effective in accomplishing its goals, establishing itself as a source of technical assistance and dissemination for issues related to disproportionality in special education. NCCRESt's conceptual framework has provided a scaffold for developing our technical assistance and dissemination strategies. The framework directs attention not only to processes within special education but to a broader view of the kinds of classroom environments and instructional approaches that are necessary to educate culturally and linguistically diverse students. It has created links with other initiatives focused on disproportionality in special education, specifically the Civil Rights Project, the Monarch Center, and Project LASER. NCCRESt has worked with educators in all fifty states and six territories. An analysis of the most recent annual reports of progress by states to OSEP confirms that NCCRESt has been a resource to states as they improve their ability to educate students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.
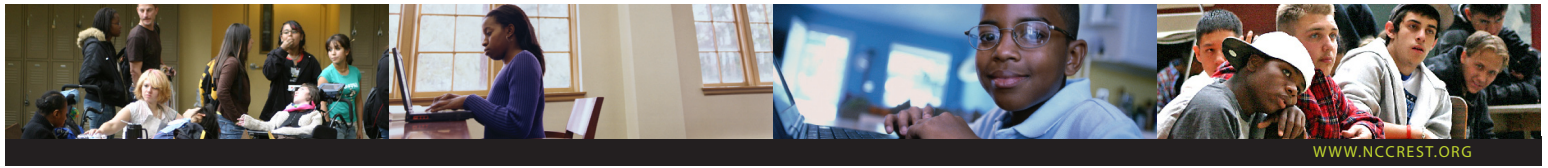
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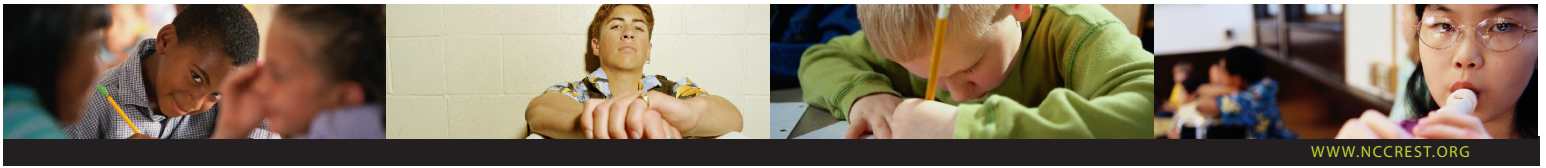
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A STATE PROFILE OF EFFORTS TO CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

NORTH CAROLINA

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Purpose. This report provides a snapshot of North Carolina's efforts to address the disproportionate representation of students identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) in special education. We use NCCRESt's conceptual framework for culturally responsive educational systems, which focuses on the connections between people, policies, and practices, to provide an evidence-based schema for analyzing the relationships among federal, state, and local policy implementation in special education, and emphasize how these relationships impact opportunities to learn, equity, and educational outcomes for students who are CLD, as well as how they affect practitioners employed within systems.

Questions. In preparing this report, we explored the various factors related to the development of culturally responsive systems. In doing so, we asked a number of questions: What is the current context of education in the state? How has the socio-political history of the state shaped the current political, social, and educational landscapes? How are the data from the various domains related? What do they tell us about issues of race and equity? What efforts are being made to create more equitable systems? How are these efforts being reflected in the data? What more needs to be done to create culturally responsive systems?

The Importance of Context. The development of culturally responsive systems must be understood within the socio-historical context of the nation and the individual state. The disproportionate representation of students identified as CLD in special education, inequitable opportunities to learn, and disparity in educational outcomes are manifestations of the inequity of the system as a whole and are related to disparities in other systems (e.g. socioeconomics, health care, etc.). In attempting to understand educational inequity, we also explore the cultural history of the state because it is critical in shaping the continued marginalization of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in today's educational systems.

Located along the eastern seaboard, North Carolina is home to over nine million people, 70% of whom are identified as White. The state also has one of the largest American Indian populations in the eastern half of the country. Nearly a quarter of residents are identified as Black and this group is particularly likely to live in the eastern and central parts of the state, patterns grounded in population distribution of the antebellum days. There are many predominantly Black communities in rural areas as well as Black neighborhoods in each of the state's major cities. In addition, the Hispanic population has increased substantially in the last twenty years, and now stands at approximately 6.7% of the total population.

Traditionally a rural state, with more than half of residents living in rural communities, NC is now one of the fastest growing states with a 12% increase in population since 2000, particularly in the state's urban areas of Charlotte and Raleigh, where there are growing finance and technology industries. While urban areas have generally experienced growth, rural counties have seen job loss and subsequent population decline as factories are closed in favor of outsourcing to Latin America and Asia. As is common throughout the country, there is marked racial disparity in socioeconomics, with individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds evidencing lower median family incomes, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of poverty, lower rates of health coverage, and poorer health outcomes.

People. The student population of North Carolina is diverse, with 44% coming from racial minority backgrounds. There is a consistent and troubling pattern of disparity observed across educational outcomes, including achievement, opportunities to learn, and discipline. There is also marked disproportionality in special education identification and placement, with Black and American Indian students overrepresented in special education and the high-incidence categories. For instance, both of these groups are nearly four times more likely to be identified as intellectually disabled as their White peers and they are less likely to be placed in the least restrictive environment. The state's data are reflective of similar patterns throughout the nation and underscore the need for policies and practices that contribute to improved outcomes for all students.

Policy. North Carolina's State Board of Education and Superintendent have identified goals that focus on preparing students for the challenges of 21st century society. The ABCs of Public Education provides the framework for the state's accountability system and includes models for progress and performance composites across grade levels and subject areas. The state is one of only two in the nation that includes growth models in AYP determinations. Incentives are provided to teachers and staff for achieving growth standards, and assistance is provided to struggling schools. The state is challenged to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Issues of segregation, equitable school funding and opportunities to learn abound, despite litigation and policy efforts, and students identified as culturally and linguistically diverse are often the ones most negatively affected as they continue to be more likely to attend under-funded schools and be taught by inexperienced and/or poorly qualified teachers.

Practice. There are a number of encouraging practices in place. The state is increasingly moving towards models of school safety and discipline that are geared toward improving school climate and promoting best practices in behavior support, even through corporal punishment continues to be used in many schools throughout the state. The state works to build leadership capacity to address achievement disparities though the Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Section of NC Department of Public Instruction and through collaborative projects with local universities. School readiness and early childhood education are emphasized in various initiatives. Like many states, NC has faced challenges
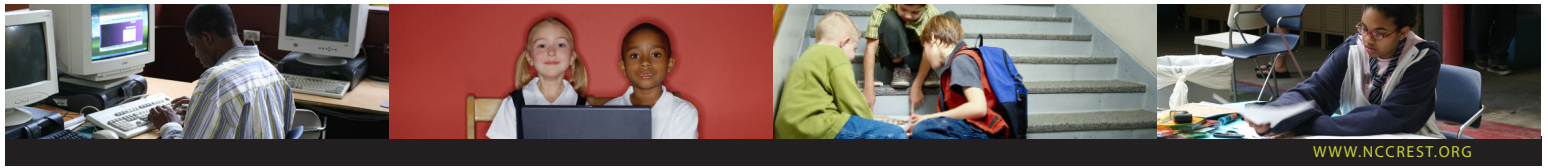
in addressing disproportionality, and like many states, there continues to be a lack of clarity about the relationship of disproportionality to education policies, practices, and procedures that create the context within general education for a pipeline to special education that results in over- and under-identification.
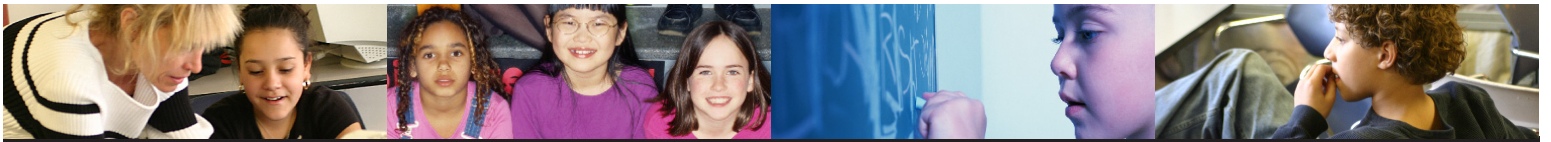
Recommendations. We recommend some specific areas of improvement in moving towards the development of culturally responsive educational systems:

• The disproportionate representation of students identified as CLD in special education is not just a special education issue. It must be understood as a product of education as a cultural practice and inequity in the system at large, not only as an issue of special education identification. All LEA improvement plans submitted to the state should be inclusive of their work to address disproportionality. Systems must be designed to critically evaluate educational policy and practice as they relate to equity issues in general and special education.

• The state must have a long-term plan for redressing continued disproportionality in special education. Necessary changes to policy and practice must be explored. What's more, state definitions of significant disproportionality must be reexamined as these guide much of the disproportionality work. While the state context is complex, setting transparent goals for the future is an important aspect of transforming current realities We suggest that the state develop and publish a long-term plan for addressing continued disproportionality. What's more, state definitions of disproportionality must be tightened as LEAs engage these issues with greater levels of understanding and improvement in strategies for eliminating disproportionality. The state should engage in continuous and iterative improvements in its policies, procedures and practices in order to eliminate disproportionality.

• The state must examine inequity in other systems as they relate and contribute to inequitable educational outcomes, including disproportionality in special education. Because educational systems exist within a broader context, it is unlikely that true parity can be achieved in education if the disparities in other institutions go unaddressed. Comprehensive systemic change will require coordinated efforts between multiple systems, including health care, social services, mental health, education, and other branches of government.

• Professional learning must continue to include content around cultural responsiveness. State and local professional learning initiatives must engage practitioners in job embedded opportunities to examine the degree to which core content curricula and pedagogy is calibrated to address multicultural needs of their students. As the state works on a comprehensive redesign of teacher education, it is critical that multicultural approaches to learning are embedded in core content

and pedagogy standards and performance based assessments. Teacher education programs must demonstrate the degree to which their graduates are able to achieve successful academic and social outcomes with culturally and linguistically diverse students with and without dis/abilities.

• The state should examine how powerful universal access to early intervening services can be provided for all students. Such efforts are necessary for ensuring all children have high quality opportunities to learn in order to address the gaps in educational outcomes.

Creating equitable, culturally responsive systems is a high-stakes task. If done well, the state will increase it intellectual capital, create the possibility of expanding its economic base, and increase the quality of life for its citizens. North Carolina has initiatives in place that can be built upon to promote such systems. Raising awareness, addressing difficult issues, and engaging in ongoing reflection and evaluation of policy and practice are critical. Policy and professional learning must be translated into practice in ways that lead to systemic change at all levels of the educational system. Only through persistent, coordinated effort can systemic change that supports the learning of all students be achieved.

# INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

This report provides a snapshot of North Carolina's efforts to provide for the education of students identified as having disabilities and students identified as CLD.[1] We use NCCRESt's conceptual framework for culturally responsive educational systems, which focuses on the connections between people, policies, and practices, to provide a schema for analyzing the relationships between federal, state, LEA, and school policies. As Klingner and colleagues (2005) state:

> Policies include those guidelines enacted at federal, state, LEA, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, and other key aspects of schooling. We use the notion of practice in two ways, in the instrumental sense of daily practices that all cultural beings engage in to navigate and survive their worlds, and also in a technical sense to describe the procedures and strategies devised for the purpose of maximizing students' learning outcomes. People include all those in the broad educational system: administrators, teacher educators, teachers, community members, families, and the children whose opportunities we wish to improve (p. 2).

This report is organized by the NCCRESt framework to understand how the relationships between these domains impact opportunities to learn, equity, and educational outcomes for students and their families as well as the ways in which they affect the practitioners employed within the system.[i] Our conceptual framework conveys the interrelatedness of these three domains—that is, that each domain affects and is affected by the others (see Figures 1). This dynamic creates complex interplay that must be examined to understand the current context of inequity in education and culturally responsive educational systems.

In preparing this report, we explore the various factors related to the development of culturally responsive systems. In doing so, we asked a number of questions: What is the current context of education in the state? How has the socio-political history of the state shaped the current political, social, and educational landscapes? How are the data from the various domains related? What do they tell us about issues of race and equity? What efforts are being made to create more equitable systems? How are these efforts being reflected in the data? What more needs to be done to create culturally responsive systems?

## Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Equity in Schools
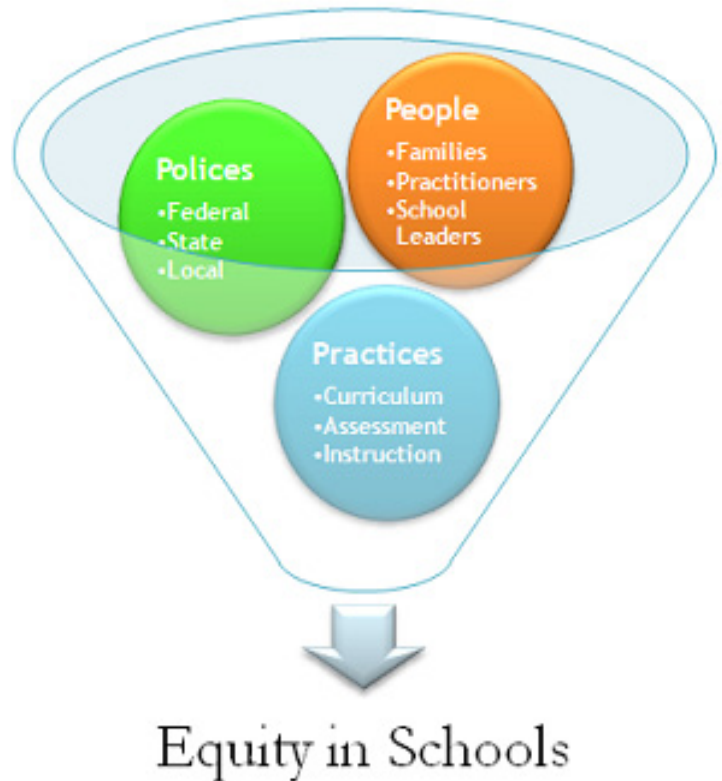
Data for this report were compiled from a variety of sources including state department websites, government documents, and reports. Specific references are provided at the end of the document. The report relies heavily on data from the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and draws from a variety of other sources including the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, North Carolina newspapers, and scholarly publications.

CREATING CONTEXT

Efforts to create culturally responsive educational systems must be understood within the socio-historical context of the individual state and of the nation. The disproportionate representation of students identified as CLD in our nation's schools, inequity in opportunities to learn, and the disparity in educational outcomes are manifestations of the inequity of the system as a whole and are related to disparity in other domains (e.g. socioeconomics, health care, etc.). The marginalization of individuals from CLD backgrounds is not isolated to the educational system. In attempting to understand educational inequity, we explore the national and state context as a critical factor in the continued marginalization of students identified as CLD in today's educational systems.

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[1] This report uses the five federal racial categories (White, Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islander) as general terms that include people from a variety of cultural, national, linguistic, and racial backgrounds because these are the labels used by the state and because this is a federally funded project. However, we recognize the inherent limitations of this terminology in reflecting the racial origin or complexity of people who are culturally and linguistically diverse. We acknowledge that these terms may not be preferred by the groups themselves, and may even be offensive to many, as they reflect generalities made by dominant society. We use these census department categories in spite of the notion that race is an old fashioned construct – we both use it to understand what is going on and want to deconstruct it so that racial boundaries that are so much of the US cultural history are rendered useless to define who any one person is or to portray any one person or group as being or having static membership and histories.
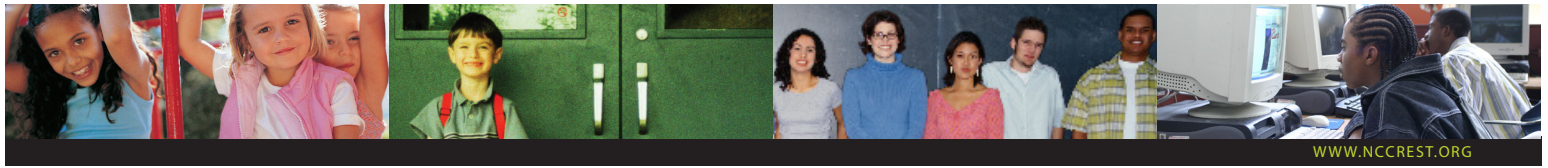
NATIONAL CONTEXT

In examining the contextual factors that impact North Carolina's educational system, we must acknowledge that there is a national context that affects what goes on at the state level. Throughout the nation, the proportion of students identified as CLD is rapidly increasing. One issue that resonates nationwide is the disparity between the qualifications and experiences of teachers in affluent communities and those in high-poverty, urban areas, in addition to the decreasing diversity of the teaching and professional force.[ii] Much of the field is unprepared to provide appropriate, powerful opportunities to learn to students from diverse backgrounds.

In the four decades since Dunn[iii] first called attention to the overrepresentation of students from CLD backgrounds in classes for the intellectually disabled[2] (i.e., mentally retarded), these students have consistently been found to be disproportionately represented in special education. In general, the risk of special education identification has increased for students of all ethnic backgrounds since the passage of IDEA, but the increases have been greatest for students who are CLD.

States' educational systems are also heavily impacted by federal policy. Two federal policies of particular interest to this report at the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Act, which are discussed below. This powerful legislation affects policies and practices at every level of educational systems—state, local education agency (LEA), school, classroom, and individual.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is a comprehensive reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB redefines the federal role in K-12 education with the goals of improving student achievement and reducing the gap between the achievement of students identified as CLD and their White peers. The legislation is based on four arenas: (1) accountability for results, (2) emphasis on scientifically-based practice, (3) parental options, and (4) local control and flexibility. States must measure students' progress in math, reading, and science through assessments aligned with state academic content and standards, provide student data to parents, and offer detailed report cards about schools and LEAs, breaking down the achievement data by race/ethnicity, language, SES, and disability status. NCLB requires states to identify schools that are not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP), apply a set of interventions and sanctions, and allow students in low-performing schools to transfer to higher-performing schools or receive supplemental educational services. Even though NCLB increased federal influence in education, states have autonomy when defining their criteria for academic success.

While NCLB has focused public and professional attention on educational outcomes through annual measurement of student progress, a focus on AYP and the disaggregation of test scores, special education services remain much as they were in the eighties and early nineties, with the system experiencing a troublesome and persistent overrepresentation of students identified as CLD, particularly in urban areas (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Further, students identified as Black or Hispanic are more likely than students identified as White and Asian/Pacific Islander to be assigned to more segregated placements. In some parts of the United States, the disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds in special education also includes those identified as American Indian.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally passed in 1975 as the Education for All Children Handicapped Act (P.L. 94-142) and most recently amended in 2004, guarantees a "free and appropriate" public education for all children with disabilities. Under the newest regulations, states must also have policies and procedures in place to prevent the inappropriate disproportionate representation of students identified as CLD in special education. States are required to collect and examine data to determine if significant disproportionality exists in identification, placement, or discipline. When significant disproportionality is found, states must review and revise policies, procedures, and practices related to identification and placement to ensure compliance with IDEA. Any local education agency identified as having significant disproportionality must also reserve 15% of funds for comprehensive early intervening services.

Understanding and addressing disproportionality and inclusive practices goes beyond merely looking at special education data. Rather, it includes examining what is happening in general education classrooms and exploring the operating assumptions upon which educational practices and policies are formed. There are inherent tensions and contradictions that must be addressed; understanding disproportionality requires shifts in perceptions and practices for educating all students. States can improve learning opportunities for students by establishing culturally responsive schools and educational systems. Efforts to create culturally responsive schools involves an intricate weave of widely varying beliefs, policies, and practices at all levels—family and community, classroom, school, LEA, state and federal government, and society at large. Effective solutions to disproportionality are grounded in an understanding of the intersection of culture, learning, and disability; the sustained use of research knowledge in professional practice; the means to support teacher learning and enhance students' opportunities to learn; and improved general education instruction in classrooms and through alternative programs (e.g., Title I).

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[2] While recognizing that most states use the term "mental retardation," we use "intellectual disability" because this is term preferred by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

STATE CONTEXT

Educational systems do not exist in isolation; that is, they are part of the broader social and societal context. In this section, we present data on the demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural-historical milieu of North Carolina in order to contextualize the information on the educational system that will be provided later. We seek to understand the context in which North Carolina schools are embedded, with particular attention to resources, access, and outcomes that may influence the experiences of students, families, and educators in schools.

One of the original thirteen colonies, North Carolina is located along the Eastern seaboard and is currently home to over nine million people, 70% of whom are identified as White.[iv] The state also has one of the largest American Indian populations in the eastern half of the country, with eight recognized nations and more than 146,000 residents, despite the forced removal to Oklahoma in the 1830s that shrunk NC's American Indian population to less than 1,000.[v]

Nearly a quarter of residents are identified as Black, and this group is particularly likely to live in the eastern and central parts of the state, patterns grounded in population distribution from as far back as the antebellum days. There are many predominantly Black communities in rural areas as well as Black neighborhoods in each of the state's major cities. Very few Blacks live in the western portions of the state.

Figure 3. Map of North Carolina

In the early 1900s the state was characterized by legal and political efforts to disenfranchise Blacks and poor Whites, and was part of the "Solid Democratic South." Following the civil rights movement, Republicans came to dominate, led by Senator Jesse Helms, although most Black voters were Democratic because at the national level the party supported civil rights. There is now a distinct rural-urban split in NC politics between Republican and Democratic voters. Segregation is still present throughout much of the South, North Carolina included, particularly in housing, annexation, and city planning in the state's smaller towns, which can result in the re-segregation of schools and political exclusion as Black communities are kept outside of small towns' boundaries and are therefore receive less access to certain services and have little voice in local decision-making.[vi]

The Hispanic population has increased substantially in the last twenty years, and now stands at approximately 6.7% of the total population. In the 1990s NC had the fastest growing Hispanic population in the nation, with a nearly 500% increase from 1990 to 2002. Approximately two-thirds are estimated to be undocumented workers from Mexico who take jobs in the agricultural, textile, manufacturing, construction, and service industries, throughout both rural and urban communities. The state ranks 8th in the nation for largest undocumented populations.[viii] The influx has spurred political tensions, including a failed state senate bill to deny this group state services, arrests of undocumented workers, arguments that they leech state resources, and support for tightening US-Mexico border security, while others emphasize the importance of this group to the state's agricultural industry.[vii] Although the school-aged Hispanic population remains small relative to the total student population, it is growing rapidly, and many school systems do not have appropriate policies and programs in place to meet the needs of this emerging population.[viii]

Although the state had a history of out-migration throughout the 1800s and most of the 1900s, since 1980 there has been a trend of increased migration into the state fueled by increasing jobs in the cities.[ix] Those immigrating and migrating into the state include Hispanics, Asian immigrants, and many Blacks who left the state prior to the civil rights movement. Traditionally a rural state, with more than half of residents living in rural communities,[x] NC is now one of the fastest growing states with a 12% increase in population since 2000, particularly in the state's urban areas of Charlotte and Raleigh, where there are growing finance and technology industries. While urban areas have generally experienced growth, rural counties have seen job loss and subsequent population decline as factories are closed in favor of outsourcing to Latin America and Asia. Nevertheless, the state is the nation's leading textile and tobacco producer and is the lead state for manufacturing.[x]
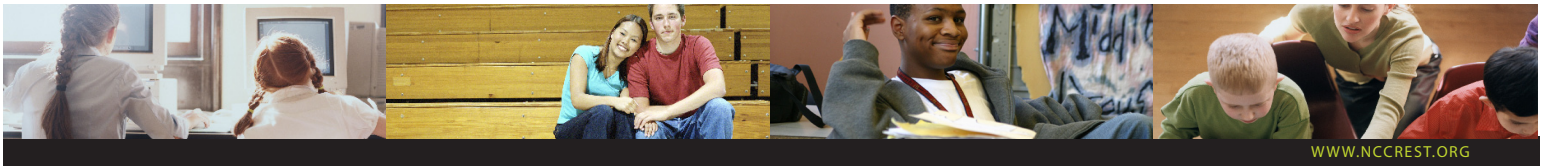
The median family income is over $47,000, although for Whites it is over $51,000 while for Black, Hispanics, and American Indians it is only between $30,000-$34,000.[xi] The statewide unemployment rate is 6.6%.[iv] While approximately 10% of Whites are classified as living below the poverty level, at least one quarter of Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are.[iv] Hispanics are increasingly likely to live in poverty.[viii] More than 21% of children live in poverty, including nearly 40% of minority children,[xi] and 44% are classified as belonging to low-income families.[xii] This is of particular concern given the health and educational outcomes associated with poverty. Blacks are 1.5 times more likely than Whites not to have health insurance, while Hispanics are 4.2 times more likely to lack coverage.[xi] Blacks are more likely to die from a variety of diseases, and are 2 to 16 times more likely to suffer a variety of communicable diseases, including HIV, from which Black are nearly 14 times more likely to die than their White counterparts.[xi]

SUMMARY

As we move into our examination of North Carolina's educational system, it is important to establish the broader context in which this system exists. We emphasize that inequities in education do not occur in isolation; they mirror disparity in the system as a whole. Information on North Carolina's context underscore the continued marginalization of individuals from CLD backgrounds that characterizes most systems—illustrated by the disproportionality in socioeconomics and health. Segregation and exclusion continue to be common throughout the state. As we examine the domains of the educational system (i.e. people, policies, and practice), this context must be recognized as it influences the educational systems we will describe.

PEOPLE

PEOPLE

Within our framework, "people" includes all those in the broader education system, including students, educators, administrators, families, and community members whose opportunities culturally responsive systems endeavor to improve. This section describes trends in North Carolina's student and teacher demographics, and explores a number of educational outcomes relevant to culturally responsive systems, including disproportionality in special education identification and placement, gaps in achievement and educational progress, and opportunities to learn. This section is important in understanding the people who are affected by educational systems and helps describe the current context of the education in the state.

STUDENTS

During the 2006-2007 academic year, there were approximately 1,405,455 students enrolled in North Carolina's public schools, as well as an additional 29,170 in charter schools.[xiii] As Figure X shows, while almost 56% of students were White, nearly a third were Black and more than 9% were Hispanic. As Figure 4 shows, total enrollment has generally increased since 2001.[xiv] While the proportion of Black students has remained relatively constant for the past 20 years, the proportion of Latino students has steadily increased while the proportion of White students has slowly decreased.

SPECIAL EDUCATION IDENTIFICATION

Approximately 13% of all students, or 188,338 children and youth, receive special education and related services. Of these, the majority are served under the categories of learning disabilities (32.7%), speech-language impairment (20.8%), other health impairment (14.2%), and educable mental retardation (10.6%).[xiv]

Disproportionality has been a persistent concern in special education. The relative risk ratio provides a groups' risk of being identified in a particular category relative to White students.[3] A relative risk ratio of 1.0 indicates that the groups are equally likely to be identified. A value less than 1.0 indicates that the target group is less likely to be identified while a value greater than 1.0 indicates that the target group is more likely to be identified than the comparison group (i.e., White students).

Special education risk varied considerably from group to group (see Figure 5), producing risk ratios between 0.54 and 1.55 across the various ethnic groups (see Figure 6).[xv] American Indian students are 43% more likely to be identified for special education compared to White students across all categories and Black students are 55% more likely to be identified while Asian and Hispanic students are much less likely to be identified.

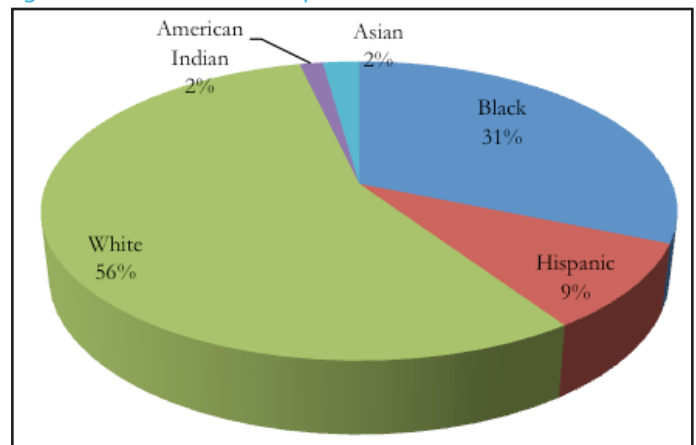Figure 3. Racial/ethnic composition of NC schools
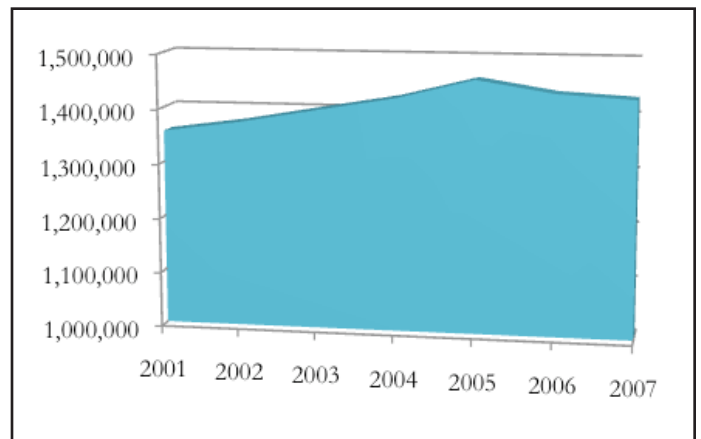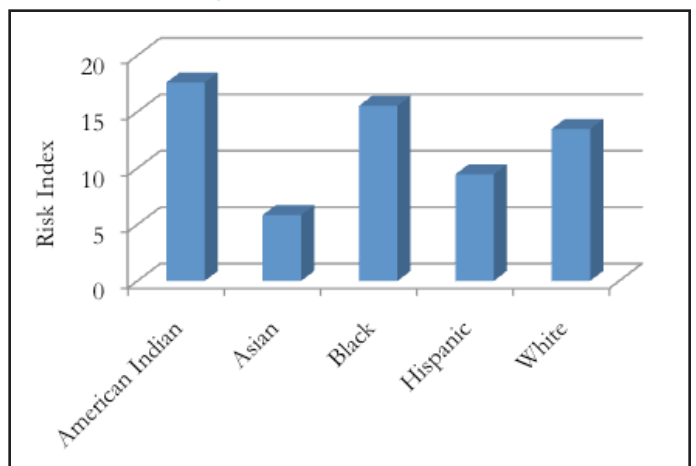

Figure 4. NC Total Enrollment 2001-2006

Figure 5. Relative Risk of Special Education Identification by Racial/Ethnic Group

[3] Artiles and colleagues (2005) assert that White students should be used as the comparison group when examining the representation of CLD students, and provide the following rationale: "(a) White students have been traditionally used as a comparison group in equity analyses because they are the dominant group in society who have not had systematic problems with access and opportunity issues, (b) White students have been used historically as a contrast group in this literature that facilitates trend analyses, and (c) White students can be used as a stable contrast group because various cultural and linguistic groups are compared to the same group" (p. 289). White students were also used as the comparison group in analysis by the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002)

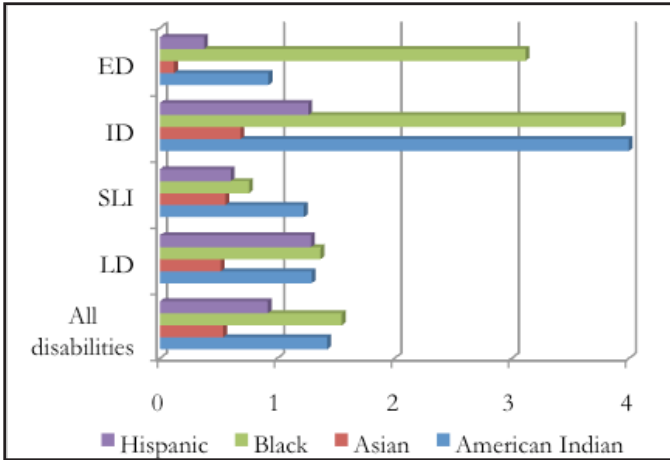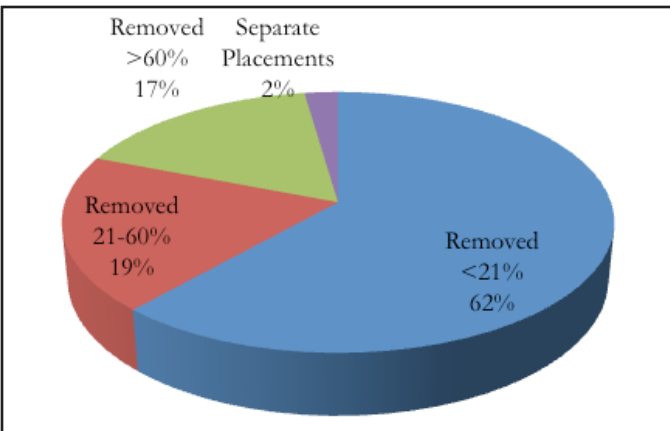Figure 6. Disproportionality in the Special Education Categories

Figure 7. Percentage of Students Served by Environment (Proportion of Time in General Education)

Disparities were also apparent in each of the high incidence categories. Underrepresentation was common in the category of speech-language impairments (SLI). In learning disabilities (LD), Asian students were underrepresented while other minority groups were overrepresented. In the category of emotional disabilities (ED), Black students were more than three times as likely to be identified as their White peers. Disproportionality was most substantial in the category of intellectual difficulties (ID) where both American Indian and Black student were nearly 4 times more likely to be identified.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT

Most students receiving special education services spend the majority of their time in general education settings (see Figure 7).[xvi] However, as Figure 8 shows,

all racial minority groups were less likely to spend 80% or more of their time in general education settings. With the exception of Asian students, students from minority groups were more likely to spend less of their time in general education setting, with Black students approximately 2.75 times more likely to be removed more than 60% of the day and 1.63 times more likely to be placed in separate settings.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES
Statewide Assessment
While approximately 60% of all NC students pass the state's assessment in both reading and math, the performance of certain subgroups falls considerably below, particularly Black students, students identified with disabilities, and student identified as English language learners (see Figure 9). All groups perform better in math than reading (see Figures 10 and 11). One potential problem noted in a report by Education Week is the wide discrepancy between the proportion of students scoring as Proficient on the state exams (82-92%) compared to the percentage scoring proficient on the NAEP (27-40%) in grades four and eight in reading and math.[xvii]

High School Completion
North Carolina's graduation rate was 64.3% in 2005. DPI reports that during the 2005-2006 school year, 1 in 20 students dropped out of school. As Figure 12 shows, for all minority groups, the proportion of graduates is less that the groups' proportion of enrollment, while white students represent a larger proportion of graduates than expected given their proportion of enrollment.

Scholastic Aptitude Test
Despite increasing for 10 consecutive years, NC SAT scores now show a downward trend and are just below the national average.[xviii] Males tend to outscore females by approximately 33 points, a gap that has remained stable for more than 10 years. There are marked gaps in the performance of the various race/ethnic groups, with Black students scoring an average of 204 points below White students. The gap between White and Hispanics is 87 points, while the gap for American Indian students is 124 points. Asian students tend to score just above White students. Although scores increase as family income increases, even at the lowest income levels, White and Asian students score above Black students at the highest income levels. In general, students who do not do well on the SAT do not go on to the state's post secondary institutions.
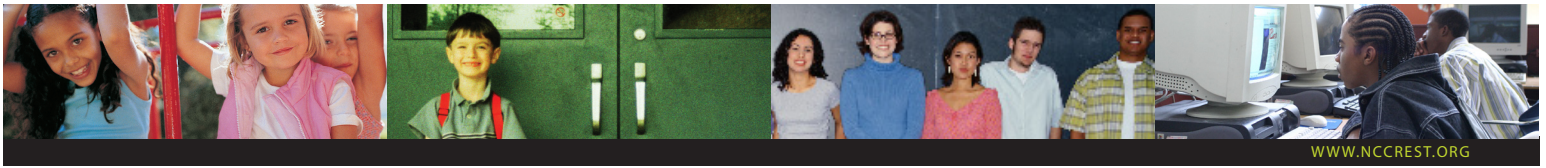
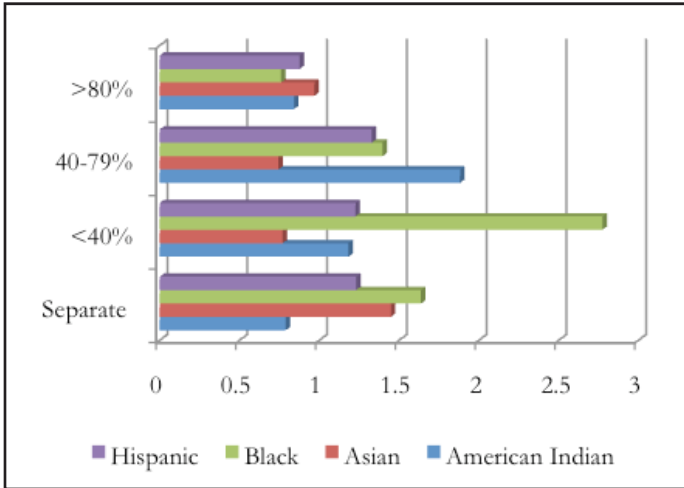Figure 8. Relative Risk of Placement (Proportion of Time in General Education)

Figure 9. Percentage of Students Passing in Both Reading and Math by Subgroup
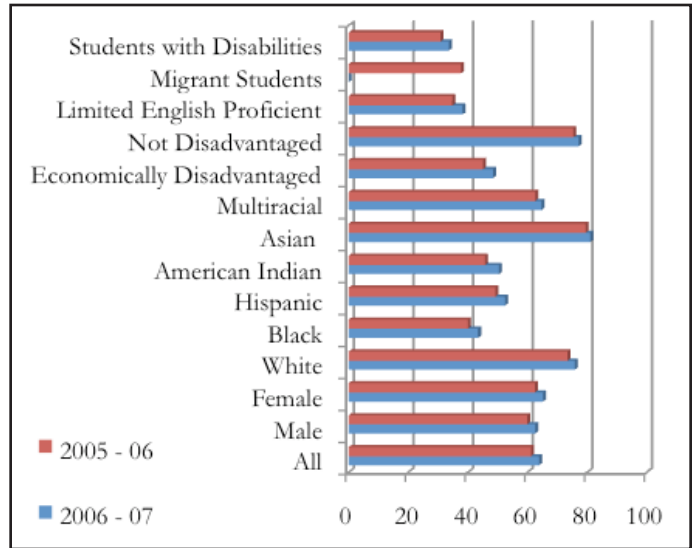

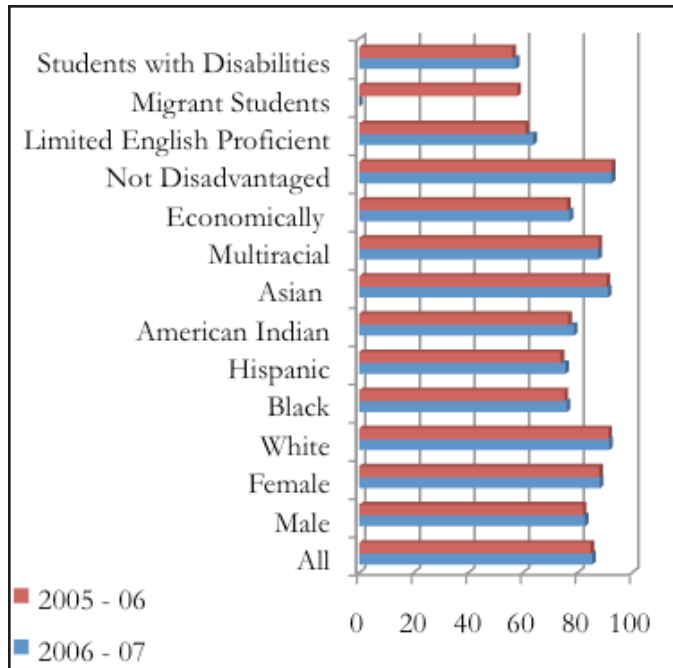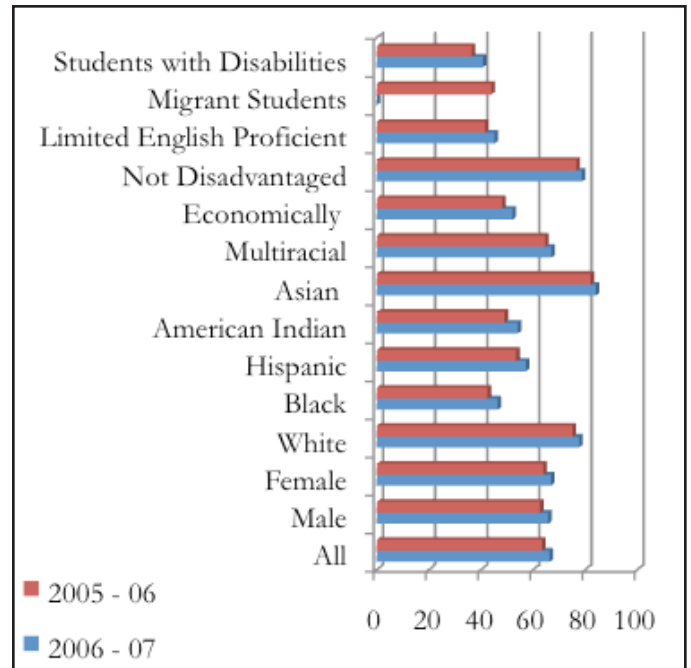Figure 10. Percentage of Students Passing Math by Subgroup

Figure 11. Percentage of Students Passing Reading by Subgroup

DSICIPLINE

Every year, 10% of NC students are suspended from school, which substantially exceeds the national average.[xix] At the state level, there are 216 suspensions for every 1,000 students (with many students suspended multiple times), although in some districts it is as high as 600 in 1,000. Most suspensions occur in 6th through 11th grades. Students who are Black and Native American are disproportionately affected, and districts in the eastern part of the state and those with high poverty rates are more likely to suspend students. For instance, in 2004, Black students were three times more likely than their White peers to be suspended and American Indians students were more than twice as likely. Whereas Black students represent 31% of total enrollment, they constitute 60% of all students suspended.[xx] Black students are also more likely to be expelled. Students with disabilities are also overrepresented among the suspended, representing 21.8% of suspensions. Among students with disabilities, Black students represent 65% of those suspended. Such disparity is concerning given that suspension is associated with poor academic performance, mental health issues, and dropout.

EDUCATORS

There are nearly 184,000 full-time teaching personnel in the state. Of these, 62.5% hold a bachelor's degree while more than 34% have a master's degree or higher.[xiii] As Figure 13 shows, individuals identified as White are overrepresented among educators while racial minorities are underrepresented compared to the student population.

SUMMARY

The student population of North Carolina is racially diverse, with 44% coming from racially diverse backgrounds. There is a consistent and troubling pattern of disparity observed across educational outcomes, including achievement, opportunities to learn, and discipline. There is marked disproportionality in special education identification and placement, with Black and American Indian students overrepresented in special education and the high-incidence categories. The state's data is reflective of similar patterns throughout the nation and underscores the need for policies and practices that contribute to improved outcomes for all students.

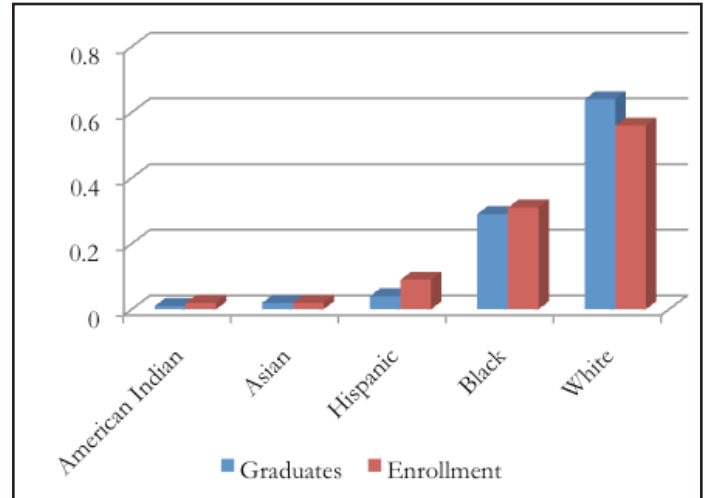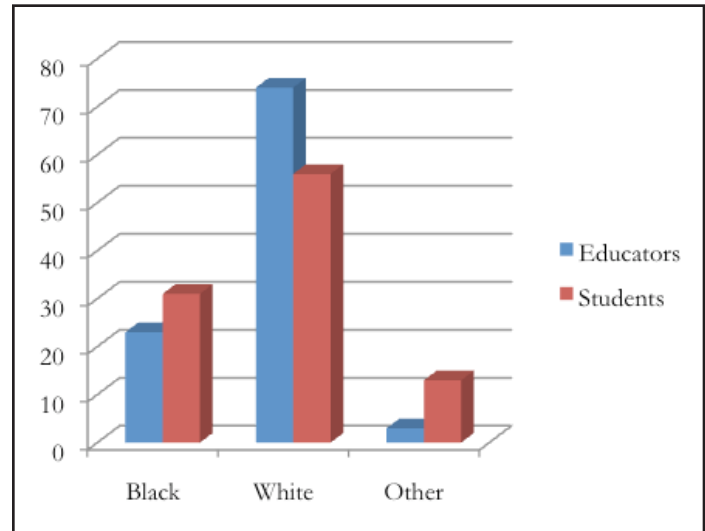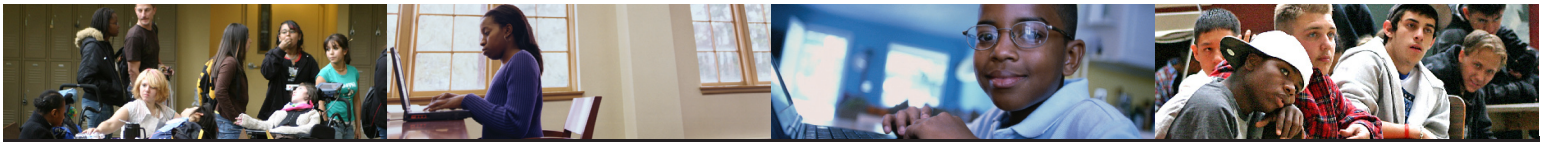Figure 12. Percentage of Students Graduating High School by Race Compared to Enrollment

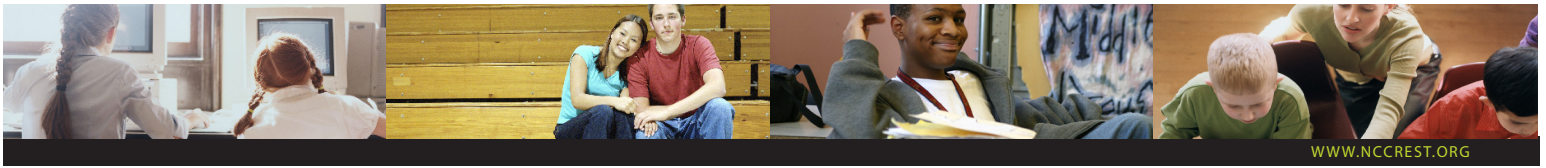Figure 13. Percentage of Graduates by Race Compared to Enrollment

POLICY

POLICY

Policies include guidelines enacted at federal, state, LEA, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, curriculum, instruction, and other key aspects of schooling. This section explores North Carolina's educational policies, with particular attention to the implication such policies have for students identified as CLD and/or disabled.

GOVERNANCE

Legislative authority lies with the State Board of Education (SBE), while public LEAs and schools are overseen by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). DPI develops the NC Standard Course of Study, which describes the course content to be taught in the state's schools, along with accompanying assessments instruments. The Board of Education has adopted five goals for public education, which include the following:

- Public schools will produce globally competitive students
- Public schools will be led by 21st century professionals
- Public school students will be healthy and responsible
- Leadership will guide innovation in the public schools, and
- Public schools will be governed and supported by 21st century systems.

School administrators are strongly encouraged to align school improvement plans with these goals.

DPI is led by Superintendent June Atkinson, who has identified four priorities:

- Every child is a high school graduate prepared for work, further education, and citizenship.
- Every child is an excellent reader.
- Every child has access to engaging technology.
- Every child has a teacher who is appreciated and paid well.[xxo]

The state superintendent is an elected position. In addition, each of the state's public LEAs in overseen by a local school board. There are nearly 2,400 schools in the state, divided among 100 county LEAs and 15 city LEAs.

ASSESSMENT

The SBE establishes assessment policies and guidelines, including those regarding accommodations and alternative assessments for students with disabilities, while the superintendent is responsible for overseeing the statewide administration of testing and local boards of education are charged with implementing those policies.[xxii] Annual testing is conducted for grades three through 12, and includes all students with disabilities and ELLs. Under the state's Student Accountability Standards, students must meet local standards and demonstrate grade-level proficiency in order to be considered for promotion in grades 3, 5, and 8.[xxiii] In addition, secondary students must meet state standards, the gateways, in order to receive a diploma.

The ABCs of Public Education provides the framework for the state's accountability system and includes models for progress and performance composites across grade levels and subject areas.[xxiv] This framework focuses on accountability, basic skills, and local control. Implementation began in 1996 after piloting in 10 LEAs. The framework includes incentives for teachers and staff ranging from $375 to $1,500 for achieving growth standards, school recognition, and assistance for low-performing schools. In particular, high schools with consistently low composite scores can become part of the High School Turnaround program in which professional development and leadership assistance, as well as being required to change to one of three evidence-based models for improving performance.[xxv] At the high school level, both testing results and dropout rates are taken into consideration.

Adequate Yearly Progress

As part of a US DOE pilot project, NC is one of two states that includes growth models in determination of AYP. A school' status is determined by change in the percentage of students meeting their individual growth targets and the percentage of students scoring at or above a designated achievement level. In 2006, 72% of schools were reported to have met or exceeded their expected growth, although only 44.8% met AYP under NCLB.[xxvi] Subgroup size for determining AYP is set at 40 students and students must attend a school for atleast 140 days prior to the first day of spring testing to be included in a school's AYP.[xxvii] Scores are calculated with a 95% confidence interval, and students who are on a trajectory to achieve proficiency within four years are counted as proficient towards AYP. Students are expected to perform as well or better than their average performance for the previous two years. Performance scores are based on a standardized scale model, similar to z-scores, in addition to change scores.[xxviii] EVAAS software (Education Value-added Assessment System) is used to predict student progress based on up to five years of individual data for a student, in addition to creating value-added models to understand the effects of particular variables. Results for the 2006 academic year showed that nearly 72% of school made at least the expected growth.
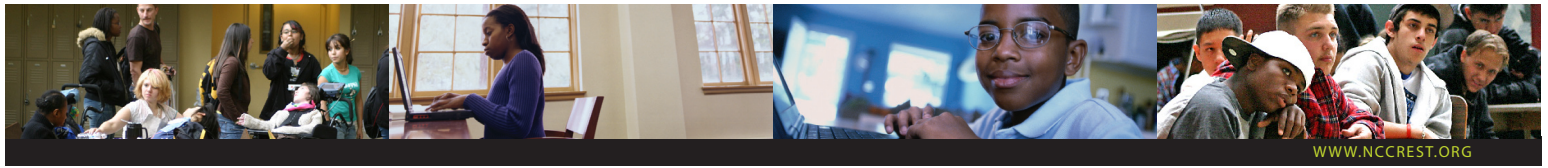
Title I schools, which constitute approximately half of the schools in the state, that do not make AYP are required to offer transfer options in the second year of non-AYP and tutoring services in the third year.[xxix] Year three brings technical assistance, year four corrective action, and year five a plan for restructuring. Districts participating in federal pilot programs must offer tutoring in the second year and transfer options in the third. All other schools are only required to revise their school improvement plans. Because all of the districts in the state are Title I, all are eligible for sanctions.

DISCIPLINE

North Carolina is one of 21 states that allows corporal punishment in school and grants immunity to school personnel who deliver such punishment, but the SBE does not monitor LEA policies or the frequency of such practices in schools.[xxx] State statute requires that punishment only be administered by a teacher or administrator, that another such individual be present, that no other students be present, and that parent be informed afterwards. Only 50 districts explicitly ban the use of corporal punishment while five other districts "discourage" it. Of the 60 districts that allow it, only 23 have policies in place requiring that school administrators report incidents to the district, none have reported any policies regarding training for administering such punishment, and only seven require parent permission to hit a child..

LEANDRO DECISIONS

In 1994, families and educators from low-income counties filed a lawsuit against the state alleging failure to provide adequate or fair school funding. The state Supreme Court ruled in 1997 and again in 2004 that every child has a constitutional right to basic education, which was defined as one that provided ability to read, write, speak English; knowledge of math and science sufficiently to functioning in society; sufficient knowledge of geography, history, economics, and politics necessary to make informed choices; and sufficient academic and vocational skills to engage in post-secondary education or vocational training and to compete with others in formal education or employment.[xxxi] The Court established that, at a minimum, this required highly qualified teachers for all students, competent administrators for all schools, and resource to provide all students with equal opportunity, and that students will demonstrate that they have received a sound basic education if they perform at or above proficiency on end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments.

Throughout the state, minority students, particularly those identified as Black, are more likely to be taught by novice teachers or those who are not highly qualified. After showing persistently low performance, the judge presiding over the case threatened to close 19 high schools in which the majority of students were minorities, most qualified for free or reduced lunch, and there were few highly qualified teachers. Throughout the state, it appears that per pupil spending continues to be much higher in wealthy LEAs, as noted in a report by the Education Week.[xvii]

PERSONAL EDUCATION PLANS

State statute requires that any students performing below grade level expectations be provided with a Personal Education Plan (PEP) describing strategies for bringing the student to grade-level. While such a requirement seems promising, 30-40% of students continue to fall below grade level and some suggest that many students fail to receive the required services.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Throughout NC, racial segregation is common, from the school to the classroom levels.[xxxii] Many districts have operated under busing plans or other desegregation plans under the US DOE Office of Civil Rights. Although school choice programs are intended to reduce schools segregation, recent analysis for one urban LEA showed that it actually increased class-based and race-based segregation.[xxxiii] Others have also found that choice programs fail to reduce racial isolation in schools.[xxxii]

In addition, separate research also determined that the state's charter schools also contribute to segregation and the achievement gap between White and Black students because the typical Black student attends a charter school that is more than 70% Black while White students tend to enroll in charters with lower percentages of minority students than their home schools.[xxxiv] Furthermore, black students in these schools make smaller achievement gains than their traditional public school counterparts.

SUMMARY

North Carolina's State Board and Superintendent have identified goals that focus on preparing students for the challenges of 21st century society. The ABCs of Public Education provides the framework for the state's accountability system and includes models for progress and performance composites across grade levels and subject areas. The state is one of only two in the nation that includes growth models in AYP determinations. Incentives are provided to teachers and staff for achieving growth standards, and assistance is provided to struggling schools. The requirement that all students receive quality education is underscored by the Leandro decisions, yet disparities in opportunities to learn and school funding continue to be pervasive. What is more, the state continues to struggle with school segregation. And, in spite of its leadership in the use of metrics to track improvement in student performance, students in NC still fall in the bottom half of the national standings as measured by NAEP, and below the national average for graduation rates. What's more, Black students are severely overrepresented among students identified with cognitive disabilities. This suggests that a systemic focus on metrics is not sufficient to change system trajectories.
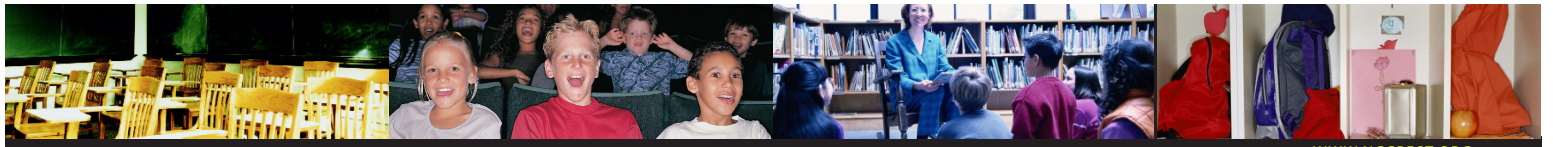
PRACTICES
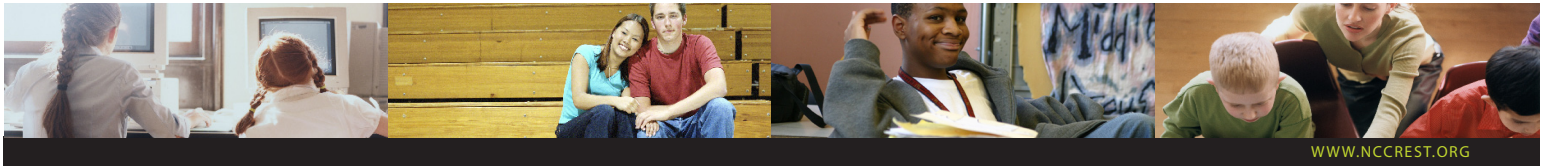
PRACTICES

Within this report, "practice" is used to refer to the procedures, models and strategies utilized by educators to foster positive educational outcomes. Here, we explore state-level general and special education practices.

STATE IMPROVEMENT PROJECT II

Funded by OSEP, the North Carolina State Improvement Project (NC SIP II) is a program led by the Exceptional Children Division to improve the quality and effectiveness of programming and instruction for children with disabilities though professional learning and support services.[xxxv] A major emphasis of the initiative is on providing appropriate, research-based techniques to support acquisition of basic academic skills for students with disabilities, improving academic performance, increasing graduation rates, improving parent satisfaction, and increasing access to qualified teachers. The SIP network features district based centers and sites including:

- 6 reading/writing regional demonstration centers,
- 6 regional literacy consultants,
- 68 research-based reading and writing instruction sites,
- 3 Early Literacy Demonstration Centers,
- 4 math instruction demonstration centers,
- 30 research-based math instruction sites, and
- 500 schools implementing positive behavior supports.

NC SIP II efforts include statewide trainings on response to intervention and positive behavioral supports, as well as instructional consultation. The project's website includes professional learning materials on evidence-based practices in a variety of domains, including early literacy, instruction in reading, writing, math, positive behavior supports, strategies to support learning, and instructional leadership. The site also includes resources to support sustained professional learning, with materials on strategies for follow through, coaching, developmental reviews, and inclusive practices.

NC SIP II also addresses the need for collaboration with teacher preparation programs. The University of North Carolina Technical Assistance and Resource System (UNC TARS) provides systematic technical assistance to teacher education programs for future special educators. This component of SIP works to strengthen teacher education in special education by assessing the status of the current teacher education programs, aligning programming with state licensure standards, improving recruitment and retention of new teachers, and establishing partnerships between districts and community colleges.

IMPROVING TEACHER QUALITY

The NC Model Teacher Education Consortium (NCMTEC) was established by the state general assembly in 1989 to address the teacher shortage and increase the number of highly qualified teachers in the state. The consortium provides professional development and financial aid to teachers seeking licensure.[xxxvi]

RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING GAPS

The Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Section of DPI works to provide leadership in efforts to improve academic achievement and educational outcomes for all NC students. Activities include workshops on cultural responsiveness and family participation. The Section has also published reports detailing successful schools approaches in reducing achievement gaps between students and provides grants to support innovations in dropout prevention. This year, efforts also include training in Ruby Payne's framework on poverty.

A major emphasis of the initiative has been the annual Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Conference. Now in its 13th year, the conference supports preparing globally competitive students, improving the academic growth of highly performing students, supporting professionals' continuous improvement, developing citizenship, and improving AYP for subgroups.

DPI collaborates with Duke University to implement Project Bright IDEA, a K-2 program for minority children who are considered to be at-risk where teachers are trained to identify students for participation in gifted programming in order to increase minority representation in such programs. The first cycle of the project showed high literacy scores for participants and significant gains in student achievement.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Beginning in 1985, state legislation required that a kindergarten health assessment be completed for every child entering public kindergarten to assess school readiness through a series of health and developmental indicators. In 2006, the state received a grant to create the Ready Schools Initiative, which addresses the individual needs of students and the capacity of schools to serve all children, led by a task-force co-convened by the DPI, NC Office of School Readiness, and Smart Start.[xxxvii] The Initiative has defined a "ready school" as:

> A ready elementary school provides an inviting atmosphere, values and respects all children and their families, and is a place where children succeed. It is committed to high quality in all domains of learning and teaching and has deep connections with parents and its community. It prepares children for success in work and life in the 21st century. (p. 6)
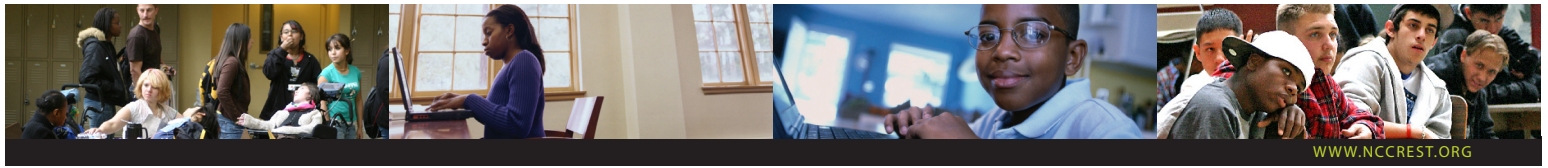
The definition has been endorsed by the DPI, and the pathways to readiness described by the Initiative have lead to SBE recommendations that all elementary schools conduct self-assessments around the definition and address a Ready Schools action plan as part of school improvement planning. Such actions are based in pilot projects in nine counties in 2004. In 2007, more than 100 LEAs participated in the Initiative through regional meetings in which LEA planning teams in which teams used the assessment tool to address community and school strengths and needs. In addition, eight counties received grants in 2008. The initiative and the assessment process can guide planning and prevention efforts and direct teacher and parent training work. Participating school systems are also engaged in work to increase family-school collaboration, prevent school dropout, and build community connections.

The NC Office of School Readiness also works to support early childhood education through a number of programs including Even Start Family Literacy, Head Start State Collaboration, More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program, Preschool Exceptional Children, and Title I Preschool. The Office provides funding, policy and planning, professional development, technical assistance, monitoring, and evaluation.

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORTS

Through an IDEA grant, DPI provides school-wide positive behavior supports (PBS) training to LEAs. Participating schools work to integrate their Safe Schools Plans and Character Education programs. By 2007, 66 LEAs including 296 schools had participated in the training to implement PBS.[xx] Many of the implementing LEAs have shown decreases in suspensions, increases in instructional time, and improvement in test scores. ,

NINTH GRADE ACADEMICS

Ninth Grade Academies provide wraparound services to incoming high school students in order to ease the transition to secondary school and improve outcomes. Groups of teachers are monitored by a core group of teachers who set goals and provide activities to develop tools for effective decision-making, develop interventions, and track progress.[xx]

21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS

The state's 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant provides funding to LEAs and community organizations to provide academic enrichment opportunities for students in Title I schools, including before- or after-school programs, and weekend and summer services.[xx] Services are targeted towards students who perform below grade level or who are otherwise considered at-risk for dropout.

ASSISTANCE REDESIGN PROJECT

This project is an effort to build DPI capacity to support LEA and school needs and to develop a comprehensive statewide assistance model to streamline assistance efforts, leverage best practices and customize assistance. The project was undertaken in response to increased demand for diverse types of support, growing numbers of schools classified as needing improvement, and a mandate from the General Assembly to create a framework for comprehensive support. To date, the project has engaged in a number of activities including consulting with stakeholders throughout the state; reviewed DPI's past efforts; researched best practices; redesigned their framework for assistance; developed screening, self-assessment, and feedback processes for LEAs and schools requesting assistance; and created a system for providing coordinated and customized services.

DISCIPLINE

Since 2001, the SBE has required LEAs to implement character education with community input, modeled after the National Schools of Character, under the Student Citizen Act.[xxxviii] Each LEA has a coordinator who oversees the efforts, guided by the DPI handbook on support and implementation. The state has also set forth the mission of implementing positive behavior support (PBS) in all schools.[xxxix] The NC PBS Initiative is funded through IDEA to support professional development and systems change by working to integrate discipline efforts, Safe School Plans, and Character Education. By June 2007, more than 81 LEAs with 258 schools were participating in the initiative.

DROPOUT PREVENTION

In recognition of the state's high dropout rate (approximately 5% per year), the General Assembly passed legislation in 2005 requiring SBE to identify research-based dropout prevention methods and ways to reduce suspension, particularly for students identified as low income.[xi]

DISPROPORTIONALITY

In 2004, the DPI partnered with NCCREST to address the state's problems with disproportionality. An NC State Liaison was selected to lead to NC Disproportionality Task Force. The Task Force advised DPI on the usage of NCCRESt professional learning modules in order to build educator capacity to prevent disproportionality. The Task Force also provided guidance on numerous topic areas related to data management, inclusive practice, curriculum and instruction, and culturally responsive practice.[xli]
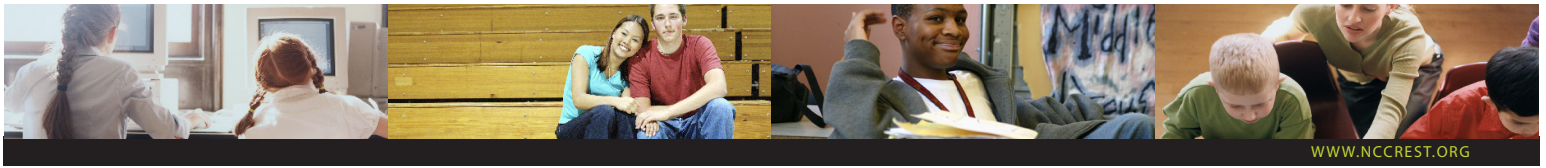
DPI's Disproportionality Report[xlii] states that overrepresentation of Black students in ED and ID are areas of concern. The state has defined significant disproportionality as weighted risk ratios above 3 for overrepresentation or under 0.03 for underrepresentation, which triggers the requirement to use a state-developed self-assessment do determine whether disproportionate representation is the result of inappropriate identification as required in OSEP's Annual Performance Report.[xliii] In 2008, the state reported that no districts had disproportionality that was the result of inappropriate identification in special education generally, while 24 districts had disproportionate representation in specific disability categories. The state is working to provide clear guidance to districts about how disproportionate representation is related to inappropriate identification, and is using the results of the districts' self-assessments to determine effective improvement activities and to revise policies, procedures, and practices.

SUMMARY

There are a number of encouraging practices in place. NC SIP II encompasses a variety of promising efforts designed to improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities. Supporting professional learning for pre-service and in-service teachers is among the projects priorities, with partnerships developed with the state's institutes of higher education. The state is increasingly moving towards models of school safety and discipline that are geared toward improving school climate and promoting best practices in behavior support. The state works to build leadership capacity to address achievement disparities though the Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Section of DPI and in collaborative projects with local institutions of higher education. School readiness and early childhood education are emphasized in various initiatives.

Creating culturally responsive systems requires challenging deficit thinking about individuals and groups and moving beyond those frames of analysis to consider how resources for informal and formal education in schools and communities can provide the platform to educational engagement and achievement. School systems must work to promote research-based, culturally-responsive practice and systemic change, recognizing schooling as cultural practice where students and teachers bring a variety of sociocultural perspectives and ways of knowing with them, interacting in ways that creates new, hybridized cultures within schools.

The state has established much more stringent criteria for determining the presence of disproportionality in special education based on feedback and directives from OSEP. The risk ratio cut offs of 3 and 0.03 results in high levels of disproportionality in many LEAs. Setting the cutoff at 3 or higher is prevalent across states, and raises concern about the degree to which LEAs are being pressured to explore and address disproportionality when they fall below the state cutoff.

There continues to be a lack of clarity across states about the relationship of disproportionality to education policies, practices, and procedures that create the context within general education for a pipeline to special education that results in over- and under-identification as well as in the placements in the LRE and in discipline.[xliv] States need to be concerned about asking LEAs to look at setting and the precipitating policies and practices that result in under- and overrepresentation and that create challenges for multidisciplinary teams making special education decisions at the local building level. Disproportionality cannot be adequately addressed by only altering a specific process that determines who is eligible to enter special education. A variety of studies have demonstrated that students are often referred to special education for reasons that have to do with teacher quality, curricular adequacy, opportunities to learn, and the social and cultural expectations of buildings (see Klingner et al., 2005 for discussion). LEAs will continue to focus their attention for improving disproportionality on the identification process and thereby avoid the issues in general education that are significant contributors to this longstanding issue.
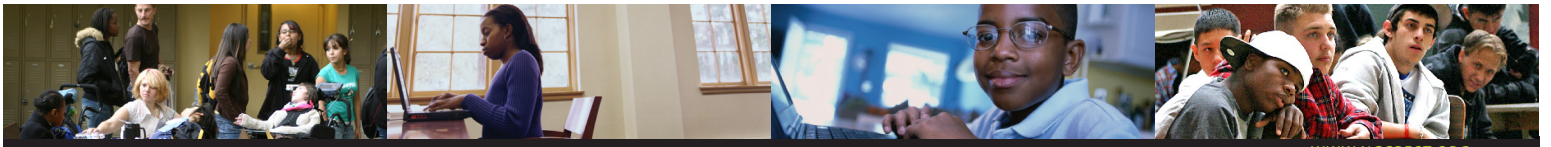
SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding disproportionality requires examining the intersections of culture, learning, disability, and socio-historical context in education. Disproportionality is not only an issue of the special education system, but of the educational system at large. NCCRESt holds that improving instruction and supports within general education can reduce the number of students who are identified as CLD and as having disabilities. The aim is not to "fix" the supposed deficits of students who are identified CLD, but rather to create an educational system that is responsive to cultural diversity and provides all children with high quality opportunities to learn.

Culturally responsive education systems are grounded in the belief that students identified as CLD can excel in academic endeavors if their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development and if they are provided with access to high quality teachers, programs, curricula, and resources. Educators must evaluate their assumptions, practices, and relationships within school systems and the community in working towards systemic reform.i

One important aspect of understanding educational systems is viewing them as embedded within a broader social context. In examining education in North Carolina, we first sought to understand the demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural-historical milieu of the state.

Located along the eastern seaboard, North Carolina is home to over nine million people, 70% of whom are identified as White. As is common throughout the country, there is marked racial disparity in socioeconomics, with individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds evidencing lower median family incomes, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of poverty, lower rates of health coverage, and poorer health outcomes.
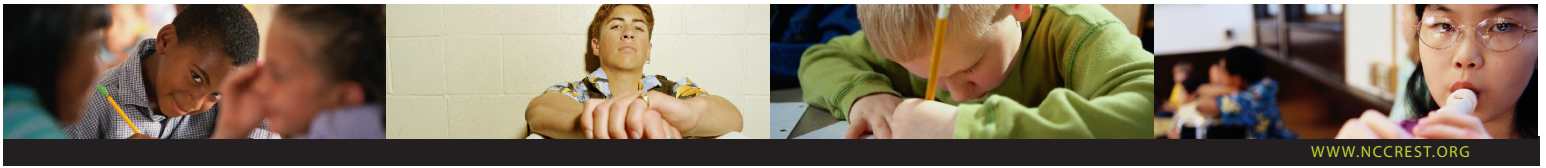
Given pervasive inequity in the domains outside of education, it is important for educators to consider how systems conceptualize responsibility to children and families disadvantaged by institutional and systemic factors outside of school. Moreover, attention must be given to how coordinated partnerships between multiple systems (e.g. education, mental health, social services, economic, etc.) can contribute to comprehensive systemic change.

The student population of North Carolina is diverse, with 44% coming from racially minority backgrounds. There is a consistent and troubling pattern of disparity observed across educational outcomes, including achievement, opportunities to learn, and discipline. There is marked disproportionality in special education identification and placement, with Black and American Indian students overrepresented in special education and the high-incidence categories. The state's data are reflective of similar patterns throughout the nation and underscores the need for policies and practices that contribute to improved outcomes for all students.

North Carolina's State Board of Education and Superintendent have identified goals that focus on preparing students for the challenges of 21st century society. The ABCs of Public Education provides the framework for the state's accountability system and includes models for progress and performance composites across grade levels and subject areas. The state is one of only two in the nation that includes growth models in AYP determinations. Incentives are provided to teachers and staff for achieving growth standards, and assistance is provided to struggling schools. The state is challenged to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Issues of segregation, equitable school funding and opportunities to learn abound, despite litigation and policy efforts, and students identified as culturally and linguistically diverse are often the ones most negatively affected as they continue to be more likely to attend under-funded schools and be taught by inexperienced and/or poorly qualified teachers.

There are a number of encouraging practices in place. The state is increasingly moving towards models of school safety and discipline that are geared toward improving school climate and promoting best practices in behavior support. The state works to build leadership capacity to address achievement disparities though the Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Section of DPI and in collaborative projects with local institutions of higher education. School readiness and early childhood education are emphasized in various initiatives. Like many states, NC has faced challenges in addressing disproportionality, and like many states, there continues to be a lack of clarity about the relationship of disproportionality to education policies, practices, and procedures that create the context within general education for a pipeline to special education that results in over- and under-identification. While there are many positive initiatives in place, there is still work to be done to achieve equity and promote cultural responsiveness. Educators must consider how such efforts can be restructured so that they truly benefit all students. Policymakers and educators should consider the following questions as they continue their work:

- How do states, LEAs, and schools learn about the changing needs of the students and families they serve?
- To what extent are systems designed to critically evaluate educational policy and practice?
- How can current initiatives and other efforts be expanded to help ensure universal access to early intervening services?

Recommendations

We recommend some specific areas of improvement in moving towards the development of culturally responsive educational systems:

1. Addressing Disproportionality – All LEA improvement plans submitted to the state should be inclusive of their work to address disproportionality. The disproportionate representation of students identified as CLD in special education is not just a special education issue. It must be understood as a product of education as a cultural practice and inequity in the system at large, not only as an issue of special education identification.

2. Strategic Planning – The state must have a long-term plan for redressing continued disproportionality in special education. Necessary changes to policy and practice must be explored. What's more, state definitions of significant disproportionality must be reexamined as these guide much of the disproportionality work. While the state context is complex, setting transparent goals for the future is an important aspect of transforming current realities We suggest that the state develop and publish a long-term plan for addressing continued disproportionality. What's more, state definitions of disproportionality must be tightened as LEAs engage these issues with greater levels of understanding and improvement in strategies for eliminating disproportionality. The state should engage in continuous and iterative improvements in its policies, procedures and practices in order to eliminate disproportionality. It is critical to laud the state for its progress in addressing disproportionality but state level planning is needed to sustain efforts and bring them to scale throughout the state.

3. Comprehensive Change – The state must examine inequity in other systems as they relate and contribute to inequitable educational outcomes and disproportionality in special education. Because educational systems exist within a broader context, it is unlikely that true parity can be achieved in education if the disparities in other institutions go unaddressed. Comprehensive systemic change will require coordinated efforts between multiple systems, including health care, social services, mental health, education, and other branches of government.

4. Professional Learning – Professional learning must include content around cultural responsiveness. How is professional learning promoting education for all through evidence-based instruction, curriculum, and intervention? There must also be a thoughtful discourse around teacher preparation and licensure programs regarding the knowledge, skills, and capacities of educators to ensure that practitioners are equipped to produce positive results for students identified as CLD.

5. Universal Prevention – The state should examine how powerful universal access to early intervening services can be provided for all students. Such efforts are necessary for ensuring all children have high quality opportunities to learn in order to address the gaps in educational outcomes.

Creating equitable, culturally responsive systems is a high-stakes task. If done well, the state will increase it intellectual capital, create the possibility of expanding its economic base, and increase the quality of life for its citizens. North Carolina has initiatives in place that can be built upon to promote such systems. Raising awareness, addressing difficult issues, and engaging in ongoing reflection and evaluation of policy and practice are critical. Policy and professional learning must be translated into practice in ways that lead to systemic change at all levels of the educational system. Only through persistent, coordinated effort can systemic change that supports the learning of all students be achieved.

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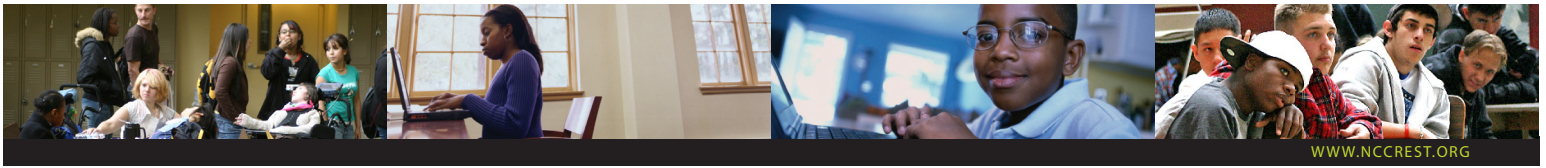
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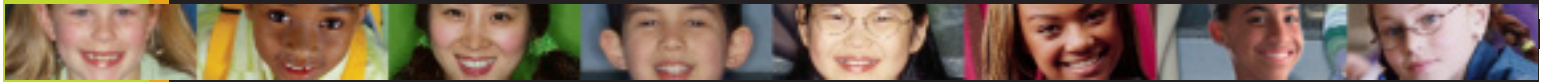
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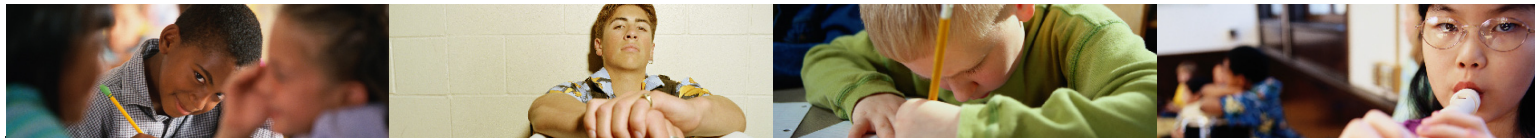
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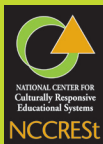
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