

Ryan Atkinson

Professor Niksch

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Final Policy Proposal

A Summary of Proposals to Improve Outcomes for Black and Low-Income Students

Oak Park District 97,

I write to you today to implore you to recognize and consider a dimension not considered within your SY20 District Goals and Equity Implementation/Action Plan: low-income students. There is no mention of income, low-income students, or socioeconomic status throughout the implementation plan that you have outlined, and I believe that is a mistake.

To amend this, I recommend modifying Goal 2 to explicitly include low-income students. Point 2 of Goal 2 states that an important measure of student success is to “reduce the percentage of students who are chronically absent from school,” of which low-income students are a large proportion (21).

Moreover, I recommend a modification to Goal 3, point 4, which states the goal is to “increase the percentage of Grade 3 students reading at or above great level – as measured by NWEA/MAP” (28). I would recommend modifying this to include mathematics, and I will recommend an action plan for the district to accomplish this goal.

In brief, the goal of these amendments will be to actively work to close the achievement gap between non-low income and white students relative to low-income and black students. In order to accomplish this, I will briefly relay district and school-specific data on ELA and mathematics outcomes, as well as currently available data on discipline and absenteeism. By focusing on both racial and economic factors in the district (Section 1), as well as the discipline practices and its relationship to chronic absenteeism (Section 2), we can understand the disparities in outcomes that black and low-income students face. Section 3 will briefly outline potential solutions that can close these racial and socioeconomic gaps. Section 4 will outline methods to keep open lines of communication with stakeholders and allow versatile adaptation as problems arise.

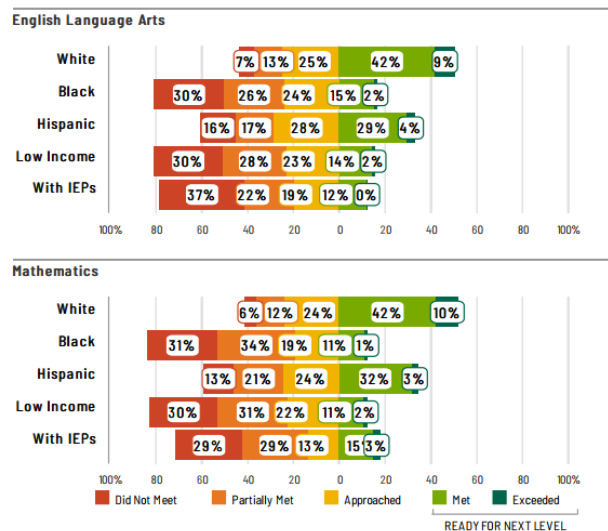
Section 1: District Data and Trends

To begin to understand the best targets that can help close the achievement gap in ELA and mathematics, it is important to review the macro data of the district as a whole. As the chart below reveals, the two largest groups within the district that either did not meet, partially met, or approached the level of proficiency tested for both ELA and mathematics are both black and low-income students.

District wide results for ELA and Mathematics Proficiency

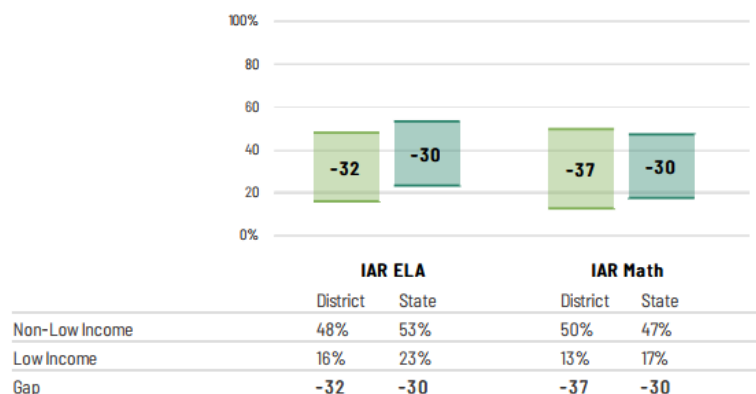
Success by Student Group

This display shows IAR ELA & Math performance levels for each student group. No data is shown for groups with fewer than 10 students.



If we dig further into the data for low-income students, we can see that the gap within the district is unacceptably high and that the low-income students in this district perform worse than the state averages in both ELA and Mathematics.

Non-Low Income and Low Income Students' ELA and Math Proficiency



Below shows each elementary school in the district and how its white and non-low-income students perform on the left, and how its black and low-income students perform on the right. The measure is English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency. The point to consider is not the numbers, but the magnitude of the colors. There is not a single school¹ that has either black or low-income students that have met or exceed proficiency in reading when compared to their white or non-low-income counterparts. Moreover, many black or low-income students in these schools do not include a single student that has exceeded, or even met, the proficiency standards.



If we continue to Mathematics proficiency between white and non-low-income students relative to black and low-income students, the same overall pattern is revealed: white and non-low-income students have a smaller proportion of students that did not meet, partially met, or approached proficiency when compared to black and low-income students, and a similarly greater proportion that met or exceeded expectations when compared to the other subgroups.

¹ Horace Mann Elementary School comes closest in both reading and mathematics outcomes for its black and low-income students when compared to their white and non-low-income counterparts. However, it should be noted that it also has the lowest percentage of low-income students at 5.7%, with the next closest school (William Hatch) having 13.7% of its student body being low-income. It's similarly on the lower side of percentage of students with IEPs at 13.3%, with the range of students with IEPs in the district ranging from 9.5 to 25.9%.

White and Non-Low-Income Math

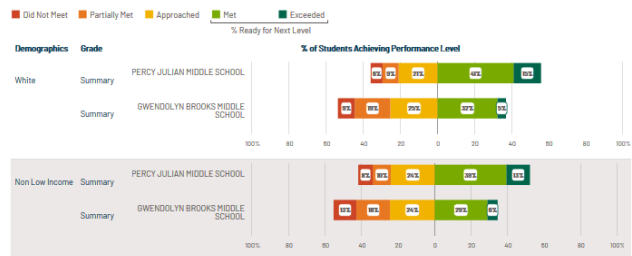


Black and Low-Income Math

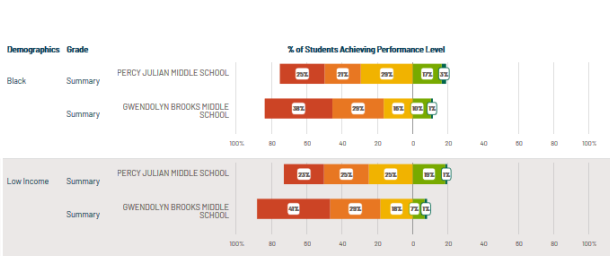


If we look at the same data metrics for the Academic Progress in ELA and Mathematics for both District Middle Schools, the same pattern reveals itself. However, it is important to note that white and non-low-income students, and that Percy Julian Middle School performs better for each subgroup on both reading and mathematics measures.

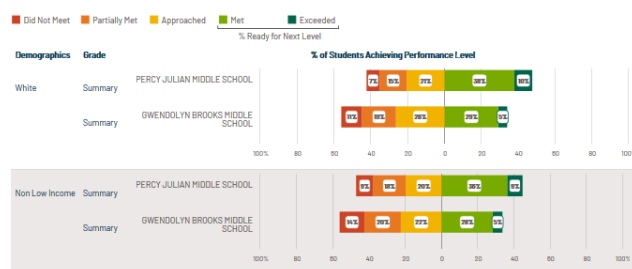
White and Non-Low-Income Reading



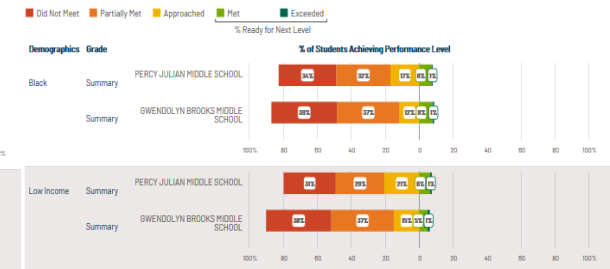
Black and Low-Income Reading



White and Non-Low-Income Math

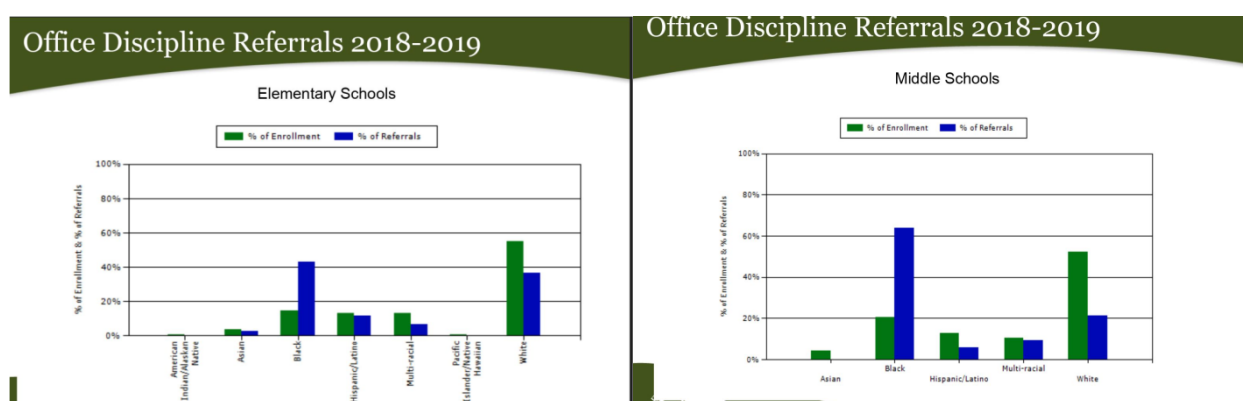


Black and Low-Income Math



Section 2: Discipline and Disengagement

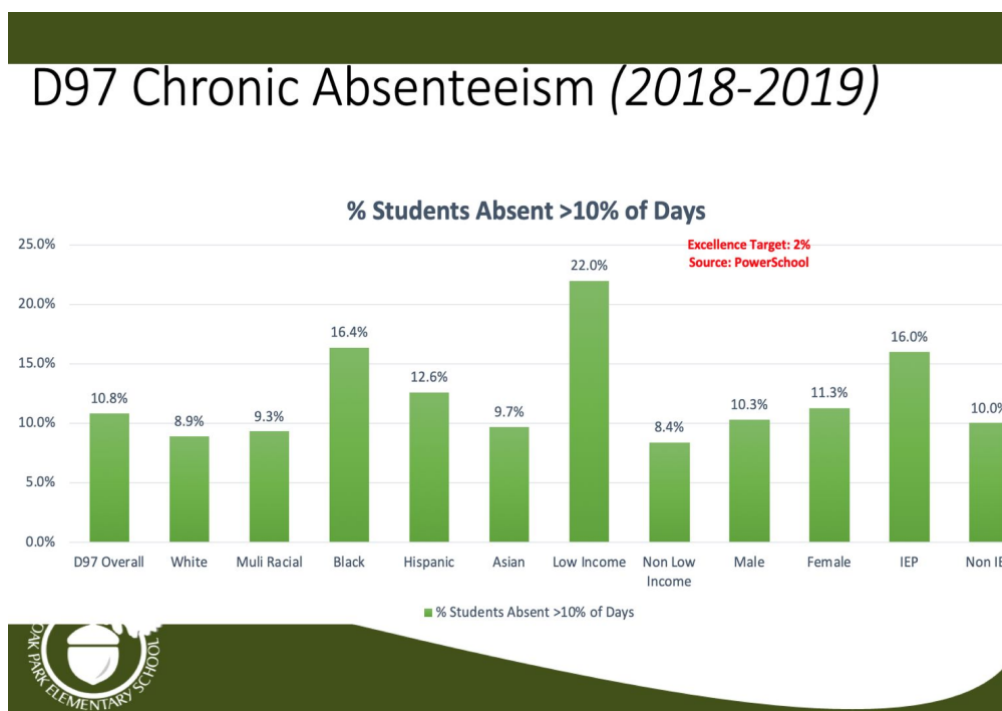
In the previous section, I briefly reviewed the gap that exists in both ELA and Mathematics proficiency ranks for white and non-low-income students relative to black and low-income students, and how this gap persists into middle school. The point I want to highlight now is the vicious cycle that I will call *mediated disengagement*. Mediated disengagement occurs by the positive feedback cycle of discipline and chronic absenteeism, which culminates in lack of growth in ELA and Mathematics metrics. Note the graphs below, which show elementary school and middle school discipline referrals by racial subgroups, respectively.



It should be noted that black and white students as a percentage of enrollment remains relatively consistent between elementary school and middle school. However, office discipline referrals increase by approximately 50% for black students and decrease by approximately 15% for white students during middle school within the district.

Mediated disengagement requires not only the targeting of specific subgroups for discipline, which in this case is black students, but also the agreement to disengage from school by the student. Below is a graph that shows chronic absenteeism by subgroup; most notable is that both black and low-income students have the highest incidents of chronic absenteeism, which is defined as the percentage of students absent more than 10% of the school days.

Chronic Absenteeism in the Oak Park District



Now, if we look at both Percy Julian and Gwendolyn Brooks Middle Schools for their percentage of chronic absenteeism and IAR ELA and Math Growth percentage, we can see how chronic absenteeism for each subgroup relates to student development goals. This mediated disengagement is realized by lagging ELA and Math growth for low-income and black students.

Percy Julian Middle School

Subgroup Name	Chronic Absenteeism (%)	IAR ELA Growth (%)	IAR Math Growth (%)
All	9.5	44.4	45.4
Low Income	25.5	41.9	36.9
White	5.3	45.8	47.4
Black	21.1	43.8	39.3
Hispanic	11.1	42.8	46.2

Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School

Subgroup Name	Chronic Absenteeism (%)	IAR ELA Growth (%)	IAR Math Growth (%)
All	10.7	36.9	41
Low Income	22.2	31.9	39.1
White	8.7	36.9	39.3
Black	15.5	34.8	40.5
Hispanic	16.2	36.9	41.7

Section 3: Working Solutions

There are two points to address mediated disengagement and improve low income and black ELA and Math growth, which are to reduce chronic absenteeism and to address the disproportionate discipline referrals for black students and/or low-income students. The first solution that will be necessary is to collect more data on the intersection between race and income; **it is likely that there is an overlap between the two groups of focus**, but the extent of that overlap is unknown with the current data. The two previous sections showed that both of these groups are vulnerable to lagging in both ELA and mathematics proficiency when compared to other racial/socioeconomic counterparts; to truly address the inequities in development, both racial and economic circumstances, and those interactions, have to be considered and understood. To truly understand these dynamics of race and socioeconomic circumstances, the district needs to commit itself to collecting data for low-income students by race.

Next, I would recommend that data for low-income students and office discipline referrals is collected. The overarching trends show that both black and low-income students are similar in ELA and Mathematics outcomes in elementary and middle school, have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, and have the weakest growth in ELA and mathematics. One metric that is missing, however, is office discipline referrals for low-income and non-low-income students; one's intuition is that low-income students are disciplined at comparable rates to black students, but one cannot be certain without having the data that shows whether that is or is not the case.

The next recommendation is intended to address Goal 3, point 4. As noted in the executive summary, point 4 of Goal 3 is to “increase the percentage of Grade 3 students reading at or above grade level -- as measured by NWEA/MAP” (28). I had recommended to include mathematics in this goal, and this is for two reasons. First, there needs to be high expectations on both the faculty and the students to strive for excellence, and **proficiency in mathematics can induce a multiplayer effect in the acquisition, retention, and expression of language arts**. Second, points 5 and 6 of Goal 3 state the need to “increase the percentage of Tier 2 and Tier 3 students who achieve accelerated growth of at least 1.5 years (per year)” in both reading and math “as measured by NWEA/MAP” (28). According to the NWEA website, “Response to Intervention (RTI) is designed to provide screening and instruction to students with learning and behavioral

needs” and is divided into three tiers; tier 2 is designed to provide “supplemental instruction and targeted intervention for struggling students,” while tier 3 is designed for “intensive interventions and evaluations.” As the data in section 2 shows, the groups consistently fall into these tier 2 and tier 3 categories are easily identifiable along both racial and socioeconomic dimensions.

Moreover, this was a concern noted by teachers in the Stakeholder/Community Research on BOE Equity Policy, **who** suggested that the district need to get “better student data tracking systems to assist them in knowing who needs what supports” (6). If the schools are able to identify vulnerable students on the broader dimensions that effect academic performance as listed in section 2, this would help the teachers better understand which students will need the most targeted and continuous support.

As mentioned earlier, it will be necessary to include low-income students in Goal 2, points 2 and 3. To briefly recap, point 2 has the goal of reducing the disproportionality of black students receiving office discipline referrals and point 3 has the goal of reducing the percentage of students who are chronically absent from school. Moreover, not only will it be necessary to include low-income students explicitly in this goal, but it will be necessary to keep data on both subgroups for both points *and* to keep data on which teachers are giving office discipline referrals. The reason for this is two-fold: one, the district needs to ensure that misuse or excessive use of office discipline referrals is minimized and not targeted towards individual students; and two, the district needs to know if there are any underlying patterns for how the teachers are using the office discipline referrals. For instance, if a particular student or subgroup is receiving a disproportionate number of office discipline referrals from a teacher relative to the school or district average, then some sort of **mediation process with the teacher must take place**.

Point 3 of Goal 2, reducing the percentage of students who are chronically absent from school, will require a consistent and persistent effort from administration, parents, teachers, and support staff to form the necessary bonds of engagement and trust with the students. Again, the pattern shown in Section 2 reveals that black and/or low-income students have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. While striving towards proportionality in discipline, it will be important to study and report on the potential relationship between these two metrics. However, until we have that data, it will be necessary to set the foundation for these vulnerable students to succeed and want to come to school. There are several immediate recommendations that can be made to

help realize this. One, parents and teachers must update – either by phone or in person – the contact information for themselves and their child; this must happen once in the beginning of the year and once after winter break. Two, parents must provide contact information so that the school is able to contact the parent when their child is absent. Three, students must be given the ability to discuss their opinions and reasons for their absences without fear of reprisal or judgment. Four, staff must report any clear emotional, mental, or physical concerns of their student. Fifth, a mentor system for success should be established. To truly build a community and make children feel welcome (Goal 1), and to build a culture of accountability, all school staff and students must share the responsibility of each other's well-being, worth, and potential. I recommend a chain of assigning a mentor-mentee relationship, with staff being responsible for mentoring the highest grade (whether elementary or middle school), with students in those highest grade mentoring the students in the grade below them, and so on. This not only will build links and relationships, but it will also provide more opportunities to discover which children are thriving and which are struggling; the more points to discover when a child is struggling, the more quickly the school can respond and offer assistance to that child.

Each of the recommendations listed above should start during the beginning of the school year. In order to guarantee that progress is being made, school staff should meet once a month to discuss progress and any concerns, without fear of reprisal or discipline. To ensure openness, I would recommend an outside and impartial mediator guide these discussions and present a synopsis of the data to the teachers. If the teachers are able to see that their decisions are actively moving the dial and are constantly reinforced to continue what is working, while having the space to contribute and provide input on how to improve the recommendations, then it increases the chances that teachers will remain motivated and will hold each other accountable.

Section 4: Stakeholder Analysis and Communication Plan

As noted above, the SY20 District Goals and Equity Implementation/Action Plan for Oak Park Elementary School District 97 had its own Stakeholder/Community Research on BOE Equity Policy, which surveyed and interviewed teachers, parents, and students. There are three things that will be considered as a response to the research: one, addressing each stakeholder's concerns; two, developing a plan of communication between stakeholders; and three, ensuring the continuation and expansion of the survey.

The importance of the stakeholder survey cannot be overstated, and each stakeholder group that was surveyed provided invaluable information for how the school and stakeholders can work together to accomplish their goals. For instance, teachers noted that discipline and a lack of targeted resources were factors that could help explain inequities between the students. Moreover, teachers disagreed about whether discipline was appropriate or disproportionate; allowing teachers to honestly express their opinions is important to making teachers feel valued and heard. Therefore, I think it would be wise to continue to survey teachers throughout the year about their experiences and concerns with the recommendations listed above. The teachers in the survey recognized that there were inequities, and maintaining an open and responsive channel to their observations will be necessary to adapt and respond to challenges in realizing the recommendations. I also think that it would be wise to work with the teachers to realize one of their suggestions, which is an improved student data tracking system to help them know which students they need to provide extra support for. The recommendations will put more responsibilities on the teacher, and providing them with the tools that will assist them will be important to maintain buy-in and stay motivated.

The success of the recommendations relies on the buy-in of not only teachers, but also parents. According to the survey, parents expressed multiple concerns about advocating for their child to get the resources they need, the schools and teachers not setting high enough expectations, and concerns about how their advocacy of their child will be perceived based on their race and stereotypes. As with the teachers, it will be important to maintain parental involvement in the survey in order to know whether these concerns are being addressed. As mentioned earlier, it will be important to maintain up-to-date contact information for the parent

and student, but this need not be used exclusively for issues like absenteeism. To continue the chain of motivation and reinforcement, a monthly update of positive improvements and successes should be communicated to each parent, whether through email or a phone message. Any improvement is improvement, and even struggling students deserve support and motivation from their parents. These brief interactions can also be used to collect concerns from the parents, as well as notify parents of potential opportunities offered within the school – which could be as simple as maintaining a webpage and directing parents to that webpage.

Lastly, students as a stakeholder need to believe that they belong in school, as noted in Goal 1 of the Action Plan. The survey of students, which included both Hispanic and African American students, showed that “both groups raised concerns regarding explicit bias, a lack of equity in discipline, and cultural competency” (10-11). As the data in Section 1 showed, the students are not wrong in their perceptions – there is explicit bias, inequity in discipline rates, and an overall lack of cultural competency. The Action Plan is now focusing on retention rates of teachers of color, which is an important first step in broadening the cultural competency teachers bring to the classroom. However, the most vulnerable students in the district, which are black and/or low-income, will inevitably become disengaged if inequities in treatment are not addressed. Therefore, there needs to be a way for students to report suspected wrongdoings without fear of reprisal. To accomplish this, students should be told that they can report any suspected wrongdoing or bias either directly to administration or over the phone; after the report, the student should be given the option to talk with a counselor or mediator that can address those concerns with the teacher or administrator. Moreover, I think it would be wise to hold an annual meeting with students, parents, and teachers to highlight the progress and struggles with the recommendations. Students must of course be held accountable for their behavior when it is inappropriate and should be held to high expectations, and by collecting data for each student based from multiple teachers, a more cohesive picture of the student’s struggles and potential will develop.

Works Cited

The Oak Park 97 School Improvement Plans <https://www.op97.org/about/school-improvement-plans>

Illinois Report Card <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>

Oak Park Elementary School District 97 SY20 District Goals and Equity Implementation /Action Plan <https://v3.boardbook.org/Public/PublicItemDownload.aspx?ik=45204007>

NWEA <https://community.nwea.org/docs/DOC-2731>