

## Reaching black boys



Sixth-graders in an all-boys class at Ryerson Elementary present their work to classmates on Mix-Up Day, when students wore mismatched shoes. Their teacher used fast-paced lessons and other strategies to keep the boys engaged and curb misbehavior and suspensions. Class test scores rose, the principal later reported. [Catalyst file photo/Cristina Rutter]

On virtually every measure of educational success, African-American male students trail behind their peers in Chicago Public Schools. Black boys score lowest on state achievement tests, are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school and are less likely to go on to post-secondary education.

A significant factor behind these troubling statistics is harsh discipline imposed by schools. Research has found a strong correlation between absences, course failures and dropping out—and African American boys in CPS are more likely than any other group to miss school because of suspensions and expulsions.

Initiatives to curb harsh discipline have made little inroads in CPS, which posted the highest suspension rate among big-city districts surveyed by *Catalyst Chicago*. The district scrapped its zero-tolerance policy in 2006, but has done little to support alternatives to impose discipline without putting students out of school.

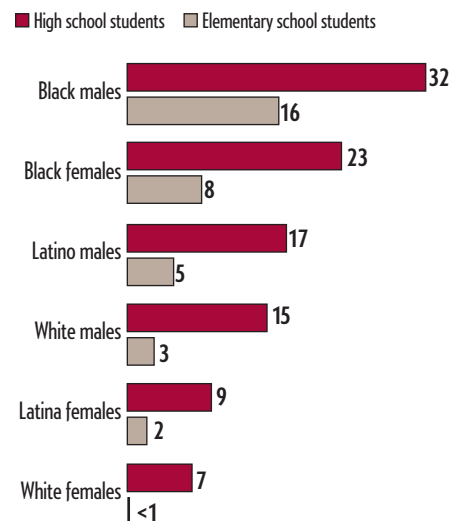
A recent national report on racial disparities in middle-school suspensions found that black boys accounted for 28 percent of suspensions, the highest rate of any group. The report cited other research on student behavior and discipline, which found that the racial gap was not due to more serious misbehavior among African American students. According to a *Catalyst* analysis of data from CPS and the Illinois State Board of Education:

- The overall number of suspended students declined in 2009, to 43,972 from 50,031. But black boys now make up 48 percent of suspended students, up from 45 percent, although they are just under 25 percent of the student population.
- Slightly more black male high school students were suspended more than once in 2009 compared to 2008: 4,787 vs. 4,478.
- Black male students made up 57 percent of expelled students in 2009, down slightly from 2008.

### KICKED OUT

Black males are more likely to be suspended than any other group in CPS. The disparities are especially stark in elementary school, where African-American boys are suspended at five times the rate of white boys.

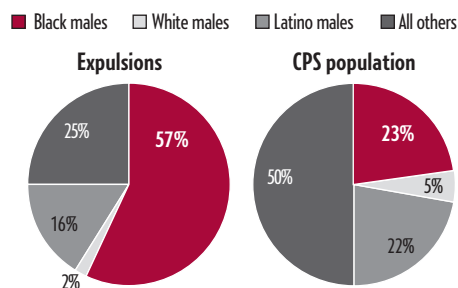
#### SUSPENSIONS PER 100 STUDENTS IN 2009 FOR ...



### HARSHEST PUNISHMENT, WIDEST DISPARITY

By far, black male students are expelled more than any other group. Boys, in general, are much more likely to be expelled than girls.

#### STUDENTS EXPELLED VS. TOTAL POPULATION, 2009



### CHICAGO TOPS THE LIST ON DISCIPLINE

A *Catalyst Chicago* survey shows that Chicago suspends more students than other big-city districts.

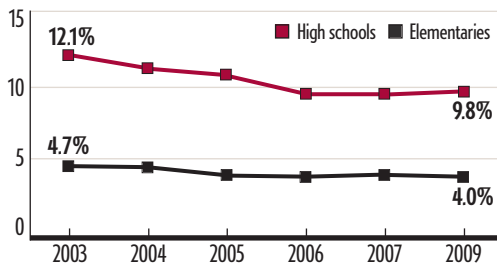
SUSPENSIONS BY DISTRICT, 2008	Per 100 students
Chicago	13
Houston	11
Dallas	10
Los Angeles	9
Palm Beach, Fla.	8

Source: *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of Illinois State Board of Education and local school district and state data. Figures do not include charter schools.

## FEWER BLACK MALES TEACHING

One in four CPS students is an African-American boy, but just one in 16 teachers is an African-American man.

### PERCENTAGE OF BLACK MALE TEACHERS IN CPS BY YEAR



Note: Data for 2008 could not be obtained.  
Source: CPS Department of Human Resources

## TEACHERS FOR TOUGH SCHOOLS

Judging by the data, principals at schools that struggle the most to raise the performance of black boys are seeking out black men to teach.

### HIGH-SUSPENSION SCHOOLS

Schools with suspension rates for black boys that are ...	Percent of black male teachers in ...	
	Elementaries	High Schools
Below the city average (< 24%)	3.4%	8.6%
Above the city average (24 % or more)	5.2%	10.0%

Source: *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of 2009 data from CPS Department of Human Resources and State Report Card

## Research and resources

- *Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis*, Southern Poverty Law Center. A study of the large and growing racial gap in suspensions in 18 urban school districts. <http://www.splcenter.org>
- *Yes We Can: The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education*, Schott Foundation for Public Education. Ranks states and school districts on graduation rates for black male students. <http://www.schottfoundation.org>
- The 2025 Black Men and Boys Campaign seeks to engage community groups, organizers, advocates, and other stakeholders to become involved in improving the lives of black boys and men in five areas: education, economic opportunity, health, parenting, and legal rights and responsibilities. The campaign is currently working in four cities: Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles and New York. <http://2025bmb.org>
- The Advancement Project, a civil rights law and policy organization, advocates for ending harsh discipline that sets the stage for students to drop out and get involved in the criminal justice system. <http://www.advancementproject.org>

## Searching for role models

African-American male teachers can be powerful role models for black male students, helping them academically and socially in the classroom. But in Chicago, as in the rest of the nation, black male teachers are in short supply.

Nationally, just 2 percent of K-12 teachers are African-American men. Chicago's numbers are somewhat better but have declined in the past five years.

"We know that to really teach black kids, we need some black teachers," says Marvin Lynn, an expert on minority teachers and an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Some research, he adds, has established a clear link between higher test scores and students and teachers sharing gender and race.

The lack of black male teachers is

### FOR MORE ON REACHING BLACK BOYS

Check out the award-winning May/June 2009 issue of *Catalyst In Depth* at [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org).

particularly stark in elementary schools. In Chicago, black boys are 51 percent of those suspended at the elementary level. Lynn says new research suggests that boys are falling behind early in their schooling, since elementary schools tend to reward conformity and quieter personalities, qualities that girls are more likely to exhibit.

"Men are more likely to understand the need boys have to be outspoken or their need to move around," Lynn explains.

## Don't treat black male students as 'problems'

In this excerpt from his guest column, David Stovall of the University of Illinois at Chicago writes about his school experience and the need for educators to change their attitudes and approach toward black boys. The complete essay is part of our May/June 2009 issue of *Catalyst In Depth*.



may never happen.

My concern is for the young African-American men who are never given a chance. These are the young people who are asked to learn under severely adverse conditions. In 2009, some schools still are without books in their libraries.

Working with schools over the last 18 years, teachers and administrators often approach me about their black male "problem." As soon as I hear black male students referred to this way, I cringe.

I've heard many claim they know how to solve the "problem" of being an African-American male, but few have attempted to get to know me—or other black males—personally, or to address systematically our issues and concerns.

Someone had to explain to me that teachers would respond more positively to me if, when I spoke up for myself, I organized my thoughts and actions to focus on changing my condition. For me, this happened in 4th grade when the teacher, Ms. Lester, told me that education is more than what happens in the classroom. These lessons stuck with me. Yet, for many black males, this

Mobility is an issue for students whose homes or schools were demolished to make way for high-priced housing that their families cannot afford.

To effect lasting change for the benefit of black male students, we need to ask these questions: Who is going to address the issues and concerns of African-American males on a systemic and personal level? More importantly, what are we doing to support their efforts?

We cannot make the mistake of treating African-American males as problems. Instead, we must be thoughtful in listening to their individual concerns and working with their families to address their specific situations.

Today, every time I see a young black male in the principal's office, I reach out through eye contact and often say, "I know what you're going through. Be strong."