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How one man is challenging the over-representation of black students in special education

By [Erin Hinrichs](#) | 10/12/17



MinnPost photo by Erin Hinrichs

Keary Saffold's personal experiences navigating the education system have inspired him to challenge the over-representation of students of color, especially black kids, on emotional or behavioral disorder plans.

Keary Saffold can still remember the way his second-grade teacher made him feel when he wrote “God” instead of “good” on a spelling test and she curtly pointed out his mistake.

“It made me feel two inches tall,” he said, adding it’s the sort of interaction that can trigger or fuel an inferiority complex in youth.

Reflecting on his elementary years in the Minneapolis Public Schools district, Saffold admits he could be “rambunctious” at times, feeling pressure to assert his masculinity while among his peers. But the reason he still thinks back to that particular moment in second grade is because it exemplifies the strained relationship he had with his teacher — the very teacher who approached his parents, suggesting they get him evaluated for an emotional or behavioral disorder.



“As I look back on it, she didn't know who I was. I was a poseur and she bit the bait,” he said. “Society makes a lot of our boys feel like they have to have a certain approach to things, a certain way of handling themselves.”

Thankfully, he says, his parents — both educators — knew who he really was, and they stood their ground. Rather than allowing anyone to mislabel their boy, they exercised their right to open enroll him in other districts that better fit his needs. He attended public school in Mendota Heights, then a Catholic school in St. Paul, and graduated from the St. Paul Public Schools' **Central High School**.

Now he's a parent in the Twin Cities, with two boys who have both been flagged by their teachers for emotional or behavioral disorder evaluations. He and his wife also resisted. They eventually moved their youngest son, whose teachers began insisting on an evaluation his kindergarten year, to **Best Academy**, a charter school in North Minneapolis, during his third-grade year.

“When I transferred him — same year, same kid, different setting, different teacher, different level of expectation — he went to the top of his class,” Saffold said. “I saw the shift in my son. He was excited. His confidence was through the roof.”

Saffold's personal experiences navigating the education system have inspired him to challenge the over-representation of students of color, especially black kids, on emotional or behavioral disorder plans. It's a largely subjective, catchall disability category. And this imbalance signals a need to re-examine how educators' racial biases — implicit or explicit — play a role in how this label is being designated.

“I don't see the benefits of anyone ever receiving this label. It's something that I feel like is happening right under our noses. It's a very racist, systematic approach that we've inherited, and something needs to be done about it,” he said. “As I look at the many students who have received this label and the trajectory they've been placed on, it ignites my passion to address it.”

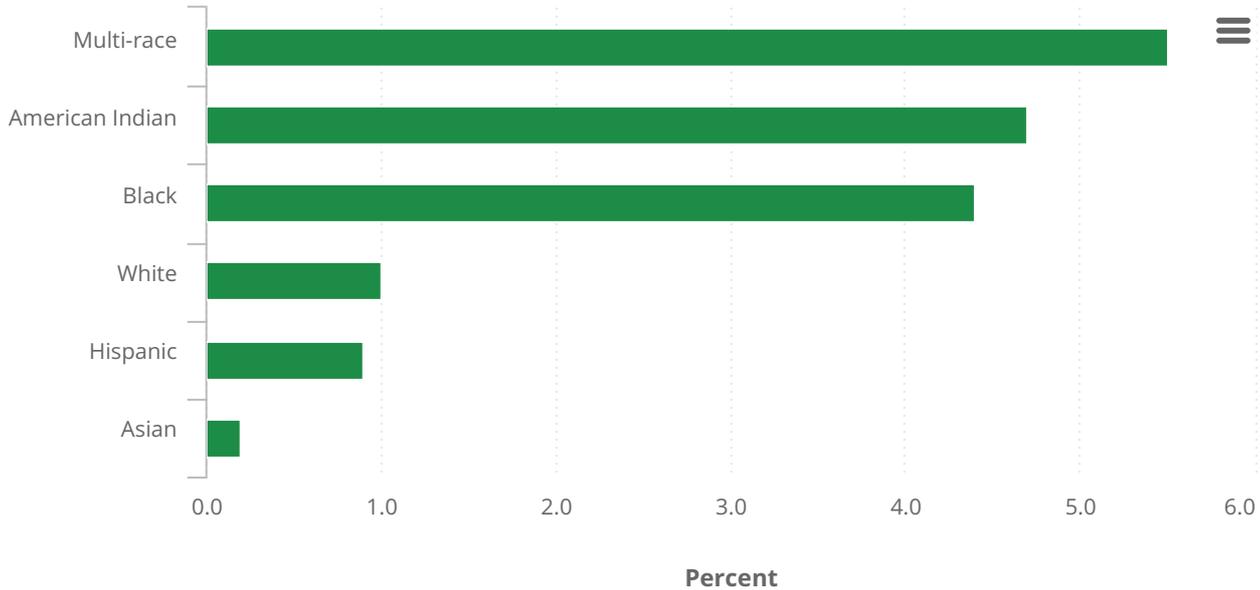
Recently equipped with a \$50,000 pilot-project grant from **Minnesota Comeback**, Keary is setting out to train 150 parents in the Twin Cities to serve as behavior development advocates at their schools and in their communities. The project aligns with his work as president and CEO of the KWS Consulting firm he established in 2006 and the **KWST Behavioral Development Group**, which he founded in 2017.

A clear imbalance

A breakdown of the most recent student disability data, from the 2015-16 school year, provided by the state Department of Education shows that racial disparities within special education persist in the Twin Cities.

In the Minneapolis Public Schools district, black students accounted for 67 percent of all students given the emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) label. Yet black students only made up 36 percent of the student body. Put another way, 4.4 percent of all black students in the district were identified as having this particular disorder.

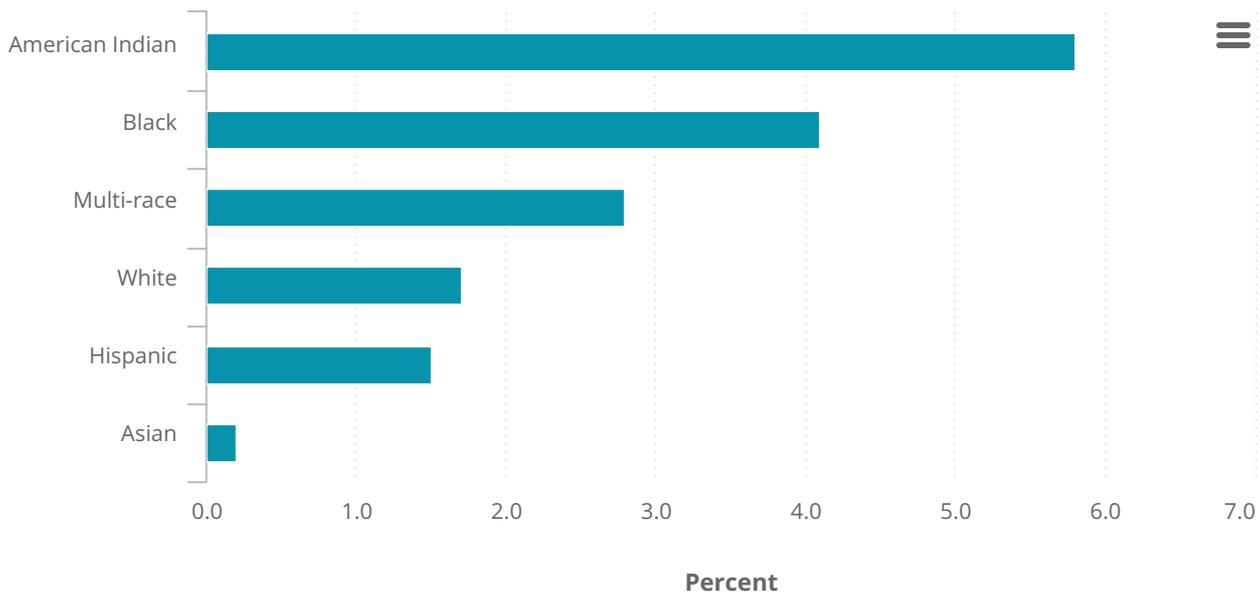
Portion of Minneapolis Public Schools students classified with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, by race



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

In the St. Paul Public Schools district, black students accounted for 56 percent of all students given the EBD label. That same year, black students only made up 27 percent of the study body. That means 4.1 percent of all black students were given the EBD label.

Portion of St. Paul Public Schools students classified with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, by race



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

Black students aren't the only minority group more likely to end up receiving this label. American Indian students and multiracial students are also more likely than their white, Hispanic and Latino

peers to be identified this way.

This imbalance matters because students given the EBD label are set up on a different trajectory than their peers, sometimes as early as their kindergarten year. While some students may benefit from the associated services provided — whether it be more one-on-one attention or a more structured learning environment — there are some negative outcomes associated with the label.

According to federal statistics, about 40 percent of EBD students become high school dropouts. Those who manage to stay in school are less likely to make the same academic gains as their peers. These students are also burdened with a stigma that comes associated with a special education label — the sort of thing that can negatively impact their self-esteem and sense of potential. Offering a recent example, Saffold says he was in a school where he heard an adult single out a student by name over the school's PA system, telling them their special education bus was waiting for them.

Beyond academics, these students are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline measures. And some districts consolidate students given the most severe emotional or behavioral disorder labels in separate school buildings, as is the case with Minneapolis' Harrison Education Center. While these schools are designed to be a temporary placement for students, few ever exit and return to mainstream classrooms.

“For me, these schools are the pipeline, from school to prison,” Saffold said. “I refer to them as ‘baby jails.’ Harrison is just one. We have a ton of them throughout the metro area.”

Empowering parents

In the master's program he recently completed at St. Mary's University, Saffold focused on the over-representation of black students given the EBD label in his thesis. Now equipped with some seed funding to empower parents of color to advocate on the behalf of their children, he's hoping to disrupt what he views as a label that was created to resegregate schools.

He's committed to training 150 parents, with the expectation that they'll turn around and conduct similar trainings for other parents in their communities, whether it be at a church, a library or someone's home. The grant funds will cover associated venue, food and child-care expenses, as well as compensation for 25 lead parent advocates, Saffold and three others who work for his consulting firm who are helping with this project.

Participants will develop a deeper understanding of the role implicit bias plays in the identification of students for EBD plans, the historical context of the issue, the impacts on students who receive the label, the side effects of the most often prescribed medications, and effective ways to advocate for children who might otherwise be mislabeled.

Having advocated alongside parents in a prior role he held at a first-ring suburban public school district, Saffold says there are a number of things parents should consider before heading into a meeting to discuss their child's learning needs. First, he tells them to never go into a meeting alone, even if that means bringing a neighbor along. That's because walking into a room where their kid's teacher, principal and other support staff are convened can be intimidating, not to mention that all the education jargon can leave a parent feeling incompetent.

In his opinion, when these sorts of special-education evaluation conversations with minority parents are guided by another person of color, parents let their guard down. Having sat on both sides of the table, Keary says it's important for parents to realize that people of color can push the status quo just as hard as any white person. To keep parents focused, he advises them to ask a simple question when presented with a request that their child be evaluated for an emotional or behavioral disorder: What is the trajectory of students who get this label?

"Solutions to the issue require intentional efforts from educators and administrators, authentically working together with parents, to create interventions and services that truly benefit students without depending so heavily on special-education services that remove and displace students from their peers while lowering educational and behavioral expectations," he said.

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COMMENTS (11)**Numbers**

SUBMITTED BY PAT TERRY ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 10:25AM.

When you talk about over-representation of students of a certain race, you have to look at more than the raw numbers - percent of student body vs. percent of EBD students. Are different standards being applied to black and white kids? Is racism a factor? Or are do more black kids (who have a much higher poverty rate at urban schools in the metro) have behavioral problems at these schools.

The same issue came up with suspensions, where it was black kids getting suspended at rates above their share of the student body. But having kids at diverse schools in St. Paul (Ramsey and Central) the experience of my kids was that the kids who got disciplined earned it, and unfortunately those kids were usually black. I realize that its anecdotal (as is Saffold's experience with his kids) but I think it demonstrates the need for better analysis than just the comparisons of percentages of student body and suspensions/EBD.

This article is also very poorly written. For example:

"According to federal statistics, about 40 percent of EBD students become high school dropouts. Those who manage to stay in school are less likely to make the same academic gains as their peers."

This implies that an EBD designation results in kids being more likely to dropout and/or to make academic gains. Its a correlation/causation problem. The kids who are likely to dropout/do poorly also likely have behavior problems. The problem isn't the label - its the behavior.

It is only reasonable to ask the questions you pose,

SUBMITTED BY STEVE TITTERUD ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 11:38AM.

...but you'll probably be branded a racist suffering from implicit bias for even asking them.

The article's unstated assumption - apparently widely shared by the Minneapolis & St. Paul school leadership class - is that if there were no racism involved, disciplinary rates and EBD designation rates would have to be the same, and if they are not the same, the cause must be nothing other than racism.

Wearing such blinders, you have to wonder how any other real-world source of these problems (other than racism) can EVER be addressed.

For sure

SUBMITTED BY PAT TERRY ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 12:23PM.

Very tricky to talk about. And my thoughts on this were very different before having kids in public school in St. Paul.

What happened with the disproportionate suspensions is that it morphed into a policy where they didn't discipline kids for disruptive and violent behavior. And the result of that was pure chaos.

I suspect kids getting sent to EBD are mostly because they are disrupting class every day. And when a teacher in charge of 30-40 kids at one time can't change a kid's behavior, that's what is going to happen or the whole class suffers.

causation/correlation

SUBMITTED BY HOWARD MILLER ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 6:28PM.

If the EBD designation compels the school to urge the parent(s) to get treatment and if they resist getting that treatment because neither the child nor the parent(s) wish the child to be medicated which seems to make him nervous (e.g. akathisia, side effect of 60% of 'behavior managing' drugs) or suicidal (see black box warnings for all anti-depressants), then the school reports the parent(s) for medical neglect. After several reports (fast forward a bit) the family is referred to child protection (57% of black children in their lifetime). This can and often does lead to the removal of the child who is placed in a shelter and then in a (probably white) foster care

home where the child WILL be medicated (MN's foster children are prescribed anti-psychotics at a rate that almost leads the nation; Children & Youth Services Review, 0190-7409, 2012).

This article was not poorly written. It is a true and effective articulation of a problem that extends back (see MN Public School MNCRIS data since the '70's) decades and is a very clear, non-anecdotal description of the start of the "school to prison" pipeline which is a manifest fact. The responses to the article are perhaps even more telling than the article itself.

Utter nonsense

SUBMITTED BY PAT TERRY ON OCTOBER 17, 2017 - 5:13PM.

All you have done in this comment is string together a bunch of out-of-context data points. Seriously, parents resist an EBD designation and their kids are off to white foster homes?

Teachers do refer children to child protection, but its not simply as a response to failure to follow EBD recommendations. Teachers are sometimes the only hope children have to stop or intervene in abusive home situations. Its a very twisted view to blame teachers for calling child protection, when its the neglect/abuse of the parents that generates those calls. If you think the decision to involve child protection is taken lightly, you are completely ignorant of what teachers must deal with.

I agree with the comment that "school to prison pipeline" is a term that needs to be retired. It isn't school that is turning good kids bad and sending them off on the path to prison.

Differing discipline for EBD students

SUBMITTED BY HADDAYR COPLEY-WOODS ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 2:01PM.

Great article, although I'm rolling my eyes at the 'reasonable' racism in these comments.

One thing that I'd like to add to this article is that there are some modes of discipline, such as prone restraint, which are illegal to do to kids who do not have special ed labels, but which ARE legal to do to kids with special ed labels in Minnesota. (It has been banned in many other states entirely as it has KILLED some children.)

Guess who disproportionately receive prone restraint in Minnesota?

Ten year old black boys in districts with low African-American populations.

Noting the racial disparities and potentially lethal outcomes of prone restraint, the MN Department of Education issued a report recommending banning it.

The state declined.

Here is the study, entitled "The Use of Prone Restraint in Minnesota Schools: August 2011 through January 2012"

And here is the link: http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName...

At one time I would have rolled my eyes too

SUBMITTED BY PAT TERRY ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 3:10PM.

And then I had kids in St. Paul public schools

I recognize that my experience is anecdotal. I form my opinions based on what my kids, and their friends, and their teachers, and other parents have to say. And yes, almost all of those people are white.

But the kids who were violent and disruptive - and thus disciplined/sent to EBD - were predominately black. And when SPPS stopped punishing violent and disruptive kids for a couple years, all of the kids - regardless of race - suffered. Kids (and in some instances teachers) got hurt and bullied. It didn't fix a thing for the violent/disruptive kids but ruined things for everyone else.

I could have shipped my kids off to private school, like some parents I know did. I didn't and instead worked to elect a new school board and get a new superintendent so kids and teachers would be safe at school.

If someone can show me something that suspensions or EBD assignments are being handed out in a racist manner - that the standards used for black and white/other kids are different, then I am with you. But if its just looking at percentages, you haven't shown anything.

Racism is real.

SUBMITTED BY TOM KENDRICK ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 2:43PM.

Prejudice and bigotry are real. Even the teaching profession has people who harbor subtle or not very subtle prejudice against the students they teach. In that way, they are like any other profession. We all wear blinders, even when we make a concerted effort to reflect on our own biases, as public school teachers all are required to do.

But the fact is, disruptive students take time and resources and attention away from everyone else in the classroom, namely those kids who generally follow the rules. What is a teacher to do? And if an inordinate number of those kids who are off task happen to be black, then part of the reason has to be not just teacher racism but something about the home life of those kids who are off task. And even a cursory glance at the current socio-economic situation for a lot of black families - start with single mothers and absent fathers - and you have a recipe for acting out in the classroom. Who WOULDN'T act out? I sure would!

The public school teachers who are my colleagues work very hard to examine themselves and their inherent prejudices. They welcome all who enter their doors. They work extremely hard to help every child find the path to success. We are not perfect, but we will work with any and every parent who will pitch in and work with us toward eliminating those challenges their (often black) kids face.

And please, please, PLEASE stop using that tired and erroneous phrase "school to jail pipeline." It's the home to jail pipeline that most troubles me.

There is no doubt that too

SUBMITTED BY ILYA GUTMAN ON OCTOBER 12, 2017 - 9:29PM.

There is no doubt that too many kids are "flagged by their teachers for emotional or behavioral disorder evaluations," but why do we need to bring race into it? Cited statistics, as any statistics, does not prove anything unless there is specific research showing causation, which obviously doesn't exist. I am very glad that Mr. Terry and Mr. Titterud understand it and all it took was a little bit of personal experience. It is too bad that questioning racism is immediately branded racism, as the above gentlemen also observed and Ms. Copley - Woods proved.

Special Education

SUBMITTED BY FRANKIE DOLINAR ON OCTOBER 15, 2017 - 11:40AM.

As a retired educator, I know the process and repercussions of giving a student a special education label. It can and does affect a person for life, and the negatives are usually much greater than any benefits of special education's help. So many mistakes have been and continue to be made regarding students who are identified in this way. The process for parents is extremely intimidating. They are facing a committee of "knowledgeable" educators, and they have only themselves to hear the opinions and actions planned for their child. Teachers are put into this process without adequate knowledge and training. This is a dangerous weakness of the system in general. I do not have a clear answer to this issue, but I agree that it is so often life harming. Mr Saffold speaks of another problem within this system. He is right, race is so systemic that bringing this issue to the forefront as an important starting point.

Cheers to Keary Saffold

SUBMITTED BY CHRIS COMMERS ON OCTOBER 16, 2017 - 9:49AM.

Addressing the achievement or opportunity gap in MN is something everyone seems to agree is a good thing. But when the conversation lands on racism, white supremacy, or social injustice a defense of the status quo (structures including inappropriate "behavioral" interventions) too often ensues. Educators go to work with the goal of creating learning opportunities for all learners! But clearly, as MN has the largest achievement gap in the nation, we are failing to achieve that goal!

We need the work of Keary Saffold, we need the work of Innocent Classroom, we need educators who are willing to speak loudly and clearly about the moral importance of providing opportunity for success for our children. And, obviously, as we shift away from an industrial educational model we've practiced for over 100 years, we need to continue to meet needs of the children of parents who flourished under that system of punishment, coercion, and compliance - those who had their needs met and were valued in a system that didn't value all.

