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Addressing the Achievement Gap for African American Students in Tacoma Public Schools

Final Report to Superintendent and Board of Education of Tacoma Public Schools:

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“If our examination and understanding of the root causes of educational inequity are too shallow, then our approach will necessarily be superficial and ineffective” –

Christine Sleeter

INTRODUCTION

Tacoma Public Schools is the second largest school district in the state of Washington and has become a minority majority district in the past few years. This diverse learning community has a long history of challenges for more than fifty years in providing an equitable education for all of its students. On-going and recent complaints from the African American community about disparities in student achievement have elevated the sense of urgency for a response from the district as to its plans to address this chronic problem known as the Achievement Gap. This Achievement Gap is a number of different gaps that result in this phenomenon of low achievement. These gaps include an opportunity gap, resource gap, readiness-to-learn gap, a preparation gap, and a teacher quality gap that constitute an overall education gap.

In 2009, we continue to witness the cumulative effects of years of pedagogical failures in our schools. At a time when jobs require higher levels of math, science, technology, and literacy than ever before, the economy is becoming increasingly dependent on the groups that often receive the poorest education. As history has shown, African Americans have been denied by law and custom equal opportunity to an education. While laws have changed and gains have been made, there continues to be grave concern for the disparity in academic achievement for African American students.

According to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), over half of Tacoma high school students qualify for free and reduced lunches. They score below the state average on the WASL and have a higher than average high school dropout rate, resulting in lower than average high school graduation rates. More than half of these students do not meet college entrance requirements. Tacoma has lower college enrollment and lower college persistence rates than the state average.

While the achievement gap exists for several different student groups in Tacoma Public Schools, this inquiry focuses on African Americans who now comprise 23 percent of the district population and constitute the largest ethnic group in the schools (**Appendix 1**). The data indicate that a high degree of disproportionality, disparity, and structural inequalities exist in the district in such areas as test scores, discipline, dropouts, graduation rates, grade-point averages (GPAs), attendance, participation in Highly Capable and Advanced Placement Programs, Special Education placement, course-taking patterns, teacher assignments, teacher quality, and other factors that contribute to the achievement gap. While poverty, unemployment, crime, and other social ills might well be related to low achievement, these reasons can't be used as an "excuse" for persistent low test scores. Overall, the district has been facing sub-par scores for years and knows that it must make improvements. The current administration is moving in that direction.

The Black community has voiced concern for decades about the low achievement of their students and insists that the current status is not acceptable under any circumstances. Numerous letters have been written to a number of different superintendents over the years, studies made, reports issued, and strategies attempted to only minimum avail. Renewed concern by several organizations in the African American community, particularly the Black Collective, NAACP, and the Ministerial Alliance has increased the "sense of urgency" for the district to address these long-standing problems.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tacoma Public Schools has a long history of challenges in providing an equitable education for its African American students. Recent complaints from the African American community about disparities in student achievement have elevated the sense of urgency for a response from the district as to its plans to address this chronic problem commonly known as the Achievement Gap. While laws have changed and gains have been made, there continues to be grave concern for the disparity that exists in the district.

The Black community has voiced concern for decades about the low achievement of their students. Numerous letters have been written to a number of different superintendents over the years, studies made, reports issued, and strategies attempted to only minimum avail.

In 2008, the Washington State legislature provided focus to the issue of the achievement gap by passing HB 2722. This bill established an Advisory Committee of African Americans that identified five key areas that contribute to both the challenges and the solutions of the achievement gap. These include teacher quality, teaching and learning, school and district leadership, student support, and family and community engagement. The Advisory Committee identified some of the primary and secondary causes of the achievement gap and provided recommendations to address it.

Closing the achievement gap requires a systemic, comprehensive approach and must go beyond implementing a particular program or two. Commitment, political will, deliberate actions, intentionality, and the sustained effort of everyone in the system are required to close this gap. While improvements can be shown in reading and writing at all grade levels, math has proven to be the greatest area of challenge for all students in all districts in the state. Even though some improvements have been made, many African American students remain below the level of meeting or exceeding the state standards.

By way of historical reflection, Tacoma attempted voluntary desegregation in 1961 when minority enrollment was just under nine percent and a pattern of *de facto* segregation was developing in district schools, particularly at the elementary level in the Black community. The NAACP has been perpetually involved in attempts to secure an equitable education and eliminate racial isolation for African American children in Tacoma. The Black Collective has voiced concern since its inception, and the Ministerial Alliance has been vocal with their dissatisfaction about the status of academic achievement for African American children.

In 1965, Tacoma's Black community viewed continued segregation as a crucial issue that merited actions beyond discussion, committee recommendations, and policy pronouncements. In the fall of 1966, a gradual desegregation process began. The momentum toward full desegregation of Tacoma's schools had been established by the 1968-69 school year, and school officials introduced programs designed to enhance the quality of desegregated education. Tacoma became the first school district to offer voluntary desegregation without a court order.

This historical overview serves the purpose of putting today's challenges facing the district in perspective. Seven superintendents later and an increase of minority students to 51 percent, with African Americans being 23 percent, the Black community again draws attention to the inequitable

education and disparate outcomes of the education process for African American students in Tacoma Public Schools.

Findings in this report address issues such as the lack of a comprehensive approach to address the issue, teacher quality, teacher absenteeism, school and district improvement plans, intervention efforts, professional development, data collection and use, collaboration with community efforts, program offerings that result in better achievement, leadership, communications, parental involvement, discipline and attendance matters, special education, grade point averages, drop-outs, graduation, recruitment and retention of staff, organizational structure, human resource management, equity and diversity, community engagement, school and district climate, and student support services. Recommendations follow that address these issues and provide a framework around which decisions can be made and activities can continue that contribute to the closing of the achievement gap for African American students in Tacoma Public Schools.

BACKGROUND

According to a Staff Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights in 1979, the population of Tacoma was 147,979 in 1960, of which 7873 (5.3 percent) were minorities. By 1970, the total population had increased slightly to 154,581, while the minority population of the city doubled during this period. According to the 1970 census, minorities in Tacoma were as follows: Blacks, 10,436 (6.8 percent); Hispanics, 2,248 (1.5 percent); Native Americans, 1,703 (1.1 percent); Asian and Pacific Americans, 1,608 (1.0 percent); and other minorities, 452 (0.3 percent).

In 1963, the first year that student enrollment by race was compiled, minority students numbered 2,924 (just under 9 percent) of the total school district's enrollment of 32,844. By 1969, enrollment in Tacoma's schools increased to 37,186 and the number of minority students increased to 4,991 (13.4 percent). However, as the total enrollment declined to 32,677 in 1975, the minority proportion continued to increase, and by 1975 there were 6,101 minority students, comprising 18.7 percent of the student population.

Desegregation efforts in Tacoma schools began in 1961 when the superintendent, Dr. Angelo Giaudrone, focused attention on the developing pattern of de facto segregation in the district's schools, particularly at the elementary level in what was then referred to as the central area. In 1963, the Tacoma Branch of the NAACP urged its national legal division to request a federal investigation of Tacoma Public Schools, after several years of activity that did not yield satisfactory results. After several committee recommendations and policy statements, the School Board failed to initiate desegregation of the schools. Tacoma's Black community viewed continued segregation as a crucial issue that merited actions beyond discussion, committee recommendations, and policy pronouncements.

No federal investigation of the district took place immediately, but the school board did begin actions designed to eliminate racial isolation in the schools which took place within a year after the NAACP stated before the school board that it was their responsibility to educate district students in desegregated schools. By 1965, the Tacoma branch of the NAACP ran out of patience and again urged its national legal division to request a federal investigation of the school district for possible violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. No federal investigation was immediately forthcoming. However, the first in a series of school board actions designed to eliminate racial isolation in the schools took place within a year after the NAACP charges were made. In the fall of 1966, a gradual desegregation process began.

By 1968, the Tacoma Association of Classroom Teachers (TACT) was voicing significant support for desegregation. As a five-point program was being implemented, the Association requested a cooperative effort with the district in development of programs designed to eliminate and prevent de facto segregation, rather than to rely upon remedial and compensatory education. TACT also urged District involvement in curricular revision, education of school personnel in the area of human relations, and increased recruitment of members of minority groups to achieve a more multi-ethnic staff.

The momentum toward full desegregation of Tacoma's schools had been established by the 1968-69 school year, and school officials introduced programs designed to enhance the quality of

desegregated education, with a very successful summer counseling program that contributed the most to the successful desegregation of the public schools. Tacoma became the first school district to offer voluntary desegregation without a court order.

In April 1970, the State Board of Education and the State Board Against Discrimination (now known as the Human Rights Commission) issued a joint policy statement requiring the elimination of racial segregation in Washington's public schools and defined as those with enrollments of 40 percent or more of any minority group. Tacoma was successful at desegregating its schools without open hostility or debilitating conflict. The smooth desegregation process was contributed to by the steadily growing proportion of minority teachers in the district. Consideration and respect for the community paid off in Tacoma and was perhaps the most important factor in the smooth transition. Teachers and counselors reported an improvement in attendance and motivation among minority students after desegregation. The City of Tacoma was a direct beneficiary of the district's successful desegregation effort, according to the US Commission on Civil Rights in 1979.

Racial tension in the community has also been an on-going issue. In April of 1986, the City of Tacoma and Tacoma Public Schools jointly appointed a special commission to look into the causes of racial tension in the community. A comprehensive report was developed that addressed many of the same issues discussed in this report but much more in-depth. It was criticized by the City Council when presented but commended by the school district superintendent.

This historical review serves the purpose of putting today's challenges facing the district in perspective. Seven superintendents later and an increase of minority students to 51 percent, with African American students being 23 percent, the Black community again draws attention to the inequitable education and disparate outcomes of the education process for African American students in Tacoma Public Schools. The report that follows provides an overview of the current status of educational achievement for this target group more than 40 years after what was considered successful desegregation, showing considerable deterioration in student achievement and community relations.

Closing the achievement gap requires a systemic comprehensive approach and must go beyond implementing a particular program or two. Commitment, political will, deliberate actions, and the sustained efforts of everyone in the system are required to close the gap. This work requires courage to change the education system and the culture of the district and its schools if the achievement gap is to be closed. The results must be sustained over time for African American students and other students who are not being successful in Tacoma schools.

Information provided by Tacoma's Research and Evaluation Department for 2008 show that the achievement gap for African American students in reading at the 4th grade level decreased by 14 percent over a period of 10 years, yet the 2008 WASL indicates that 29 percent still read below state standards. For math, the achievement gap increased by 10 percent while 68 percent still remain below standard, with 40 percent of those well below. Writing also shows a 5 percent decrease in the gap, with 45 percent still remaining below standard. (**Appendix 2, 3**)

The achievement gap for African American students in reading at the 7th grade level decreased by 2 percent over the 10 year period, yet the 2008 scores indicate that 49 percent are still below standard. For math, the achievement gap increased to 26 percent, doubling the size from 10 years ago. Test scores indicate that 75 percent did not meet standards, with 51 percent well below. A 5 percent decrease in the gap for writing was achieved, with 29 percent not meeting the standard. (**Appendix 4, 5**)

At the 10th grade level in reading, the achievement gap decreased by 14 percent over 10 years, with 24 percent not meeting grade level. In math, the gap increased by 7 percent, while 72 percent did not meet standard. Writing showed a gap decrease by 11 percent, with only 10 percent remaining below standard. All of these figures illustrate that while African American students show overall improvement over the 10 year period, the numbers that remain below standard in the specific subject areas are quite serious and unacceptable to both the district and the community. (**Appendix 6, 7**)

This review and analysis have utilized extensive data, internal and external interviews, numerous reports and documents, and other such information that relates to this issue, that time has allowed. The five key areas of education identified by the HB 2722 Advisory Committee: Teacher Quality, Teaching and Learning, School and District Leadership, Student Support, and Family and Community Involvement guided the parameters of this inquiry and provide the structure around which this study was undertaken.

LEGISLATIVE ATTENTION TO THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In 2008, the Washington State Legislature passed HB 2722, which called for the appointment of an Advisory Committee charged with creating a plan which, when fully implemented, will close the education gap for African American students. The committee identified five key areas of education that contribute to both the challenges and the solutions of the achievement gap for African American students.

1. Teacher Quality – *knowledgeable professionals who effectively meet the academic, cultural, and social needs of students*
2. Teaching and Learning – *structured, rigorous and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction*
3. School and District Leadership – *a commitment to high achievement for all students that intentionally guides policies and practices*
4. Student Support – *academic, social, psychological, and cultural resources students need to succeed*
5. Family and Community Engagement – *partnerships that inform and support academic achievement*

The Advisory Committee found that the achievement gap for African American students is caused primarily by:

- Inequitable distribution of skilled and experienced teachers
- Insufficient and inequitable school funding
- Inadequate, obsolete, and unbalanced distribution of facilities, technology, and instructional materials
- Inequitable access to demanding, rigorous pre-college coursework
- Institutional racism
- Lack of cultural competence among teachers, school staff, administrators, curriculum and assessment developers, and the school system itself.

Secondary causes of the achievement gap are:

- Inter-generational poverty
- Families/communities who are not able to support or adequately advocate for their children and often are not welcomed by the education system
- A lack of supplemental services such as mentoring and tutoring to students whose backgrounds subject them to the inequities and acknowledged risk factors

FINDINGS

1. **Ethnic Trends** – Tacoma Public Schools became a majority minority district in 2008 with 23 percent of its students being African American. This compares to 10 percent in 1969.
2. **Old Issues Re-Visited** – Decades-old issues such as disproportionality, structural inequalities, racism, de facto segregation, and community mistrust continue to plague Tacoma Public Schools. Fifty-five years after the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court Decision, education is still separate and unequal for many African American students.
3. **Emerging District Priority** – Closing the achievement gap for African American and other low-performing students has become a district priority, as evidenced by this commissioned inquiry and other strategies being initiated. The achievement gap has not been an agenda item for open discussion in Tacoma Public Schools or at School Board meetings for quite some time. There have not been open discussions or a consensus on solutions for reforms to close the gap. Discussions and actions have not been deliberate or intentional in the past. Subsequently, the gap has not achieved the level of attention needed at the district level, and it has not been adequately addressed for the groups most affected. The effort has resided with individual building principals. However, the current administration is committed to changes that will result in different learning outcomes for all students.
4. **Commitment to Change** – A comprehensive systemic approach is needed for Tacoma Public Schools to re-commit itself to academic excellence for all students, which means that the needs of African American students will be met and the achievement gap will be closed over a sustained period of time.
5. **Community Issues** – For a number of decades, the African American community has had a contentious relationship with Tacoma Public Schools over the long-standing issue of disproportionality in a number of different areas of concern as manifested by the academic achievement gap. A different kind of gap exists between the community and the district in the areas of trust, communications, accountability, School Board governance, leadership, and community involvement. Demands for information and corrective actions have intensified, and patience with the existing situation has grown thin. Many await changes promised over the years.
6. **Standards-Based Curriculum** – The district has embarked upon an initiative this year to establish a Standards-Based Curriculum and Instruction model that is expected to result in improved academic achievement and better articulation of expectations and outcomes.
7. **Teacher Quality** – Teacher quality has been shown through extensive research to be the school factor that makes the greatest impact on student achievement. Consistent exposure to effective teachers can overcome obstacles to learning and even to closing the achievement gap. A rigorous curriculum is essential, but so is plenty of help for students who don't understand something. Supportive parents are hugely important, of

course, but no single factor inside the school building determines academic progress as much as an effective teacher. The achievement gap cannot be closed without closing the teacher quality gap. In Tacoma, there are only 57 teachers working outside their endorsement areas and many of these are in specialty programs such as SOTA, ESL, and ELL. At this point, there is no system of evaluation in place to validate teacher quality in Tacoma. Few teachers are currently on improvement plans of any kind. Yet, many students continue to fail at meeting state standards.

8. **Quality Teachers** – The degree to which quality teachers are available to African American students in Tacoma schools could not be determined with the available information. However, on any given day, hundreds, if not thousands, of students in Tacoma schools are without a qualified teacher and/or substitute due to chronic absenteeism. This occurs mostly on Mondays and Fridays and before and after holidays (specific data is available from Human Resources). With no teaching there can be no learning. It is apparent that student learning cannot happen under these conditions. According to Education Trust, if districts took the simple step of assuring that African American and other low-performing students had teachers of the same quality as other children, about half of the achievement gap would disappear.
9. **School/District Improvement Program** – District systemic support is crucial in the success of school improvement efforts. Systems theory involves looking at the patterns of interactions that cause and sustain a problem, instead of seeing the problem as an isolated event. The newly revised District Improvement Plan does not provide a systemic approach to the development of the changes to disrupt the “status quo.” In the absence of specific directions to schools for targeted and differentiated interventions, a general purpose plan is presented with a “one size fits all” approach, while the achievement gap remains or gets worse. Low-performing schools are not planning for the focused intervention needed to close the gaps in their buildings as a result of this general approach to school improvement.
10. **Professional Development** – A comprehensive, coordinated program for professional development is not in place in Tacoma Public Schools. The program offerings are not aligned with the needs of the district. A Leadership Conference was provided last year before the beginning of school and was very well received. Many staff were not able to attend due to limited space. The conference content did not appear to be aligned with the needs of the district such as Cultural Competency Training, Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching, Culturally-Relevant Curriculum, Multicultural Inclusion, Cross-Cultural Communications, Working with Hard-to-Reach Parents/Families, Understanding Institutional Racism, Effective Engagement of Ethnic Communities, Relationship Building, etc. A random scattering of training in diversity was made available but in the midst of other choices. For a district with the majority/minority diverse make-up as Tacoma, teachers and administrators need the skills and knowledge necessary to become successful with diverse learners, and district-sponsored professional development is the vehicle to make it happen. Current plans for this year's summer conference were recently announced, and it will focus on Standards-Based Instruction and Cultural Competency.

There is a direct link between better professional development and higher student achievement. “Studies that take into account all of the available evidence on teacher

effectiveness suggest that students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low-performing teachers,” according to the Fall 2007 report, “How the World’s Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top” by McKinsey & Co. Having great teachers in every classroom is critical to creating educational equity.

11. **Data Collection and Use** – Tacoma has an outstanding data reporting capacity. Pat Cummings, Director of Research and Evaluation, and his staff provide a wealth of information in a variety of formats concerning the district and students on various subjects and make that information readily available. The question is, how much use is made of the excellent information that is gathered? Do the district and buildings make data-driven decisions or not as it relates to student achievement and the contributing causes, such as attendance, discipline, GPA, course-taking patterns, parent and community engagement, teacher assignments, principal mobility, school climate, etc? Unless school personnel clearly understand the problems they are trying to solve, they cannot develop meaningful, measurable outcomes. The Data Collection System –TAD – now makes it possible for student information to be accessed for immediate use by teachers, principals, parents/guardians, and other authorized individuals. No longer can a student’s academic status be unknown if assistance of any kind is needed.
12. **Tacoma 360** – In collaboration with governmental and social service agencies, Tacoma Public Schools is currently engaged in Tacoma 360, an initiative that when fully operational will provide needed social and health services and support to students and their families in order to increase academic success for greater numbers of students. If implemented as envisioned, this program initiative could make a difference in the district.
13. **Program Offerings** – There are a number of successful programs and proven practices currently offered in this state that has shown great promise for academic achievement for African American students such as AVID, MESA, GEAR-UP, College Success Foundation, etc. Yet, the district has very few of these programs and consequently African American and other students do not have access to programs that recognize their learning styles, areas of interest, and motivation to learn.
 - a) AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a particularly successful program that targets under-represented populations – students of color and students in poverty who will be first-generation college students. The program prepares students as a cohort who travels together from year to year learning the skills needed to be successful in college – reading, writing, inquiry and collaboration. AVID provides tutoring and mentoring for students who develop personalized post-secondary plans with their teachers and counselors. Jason Lee Middle School is in its first full year of AVID, and Stewart Middle School will be included next year. The program was previously offered at Foss High School; but the reason for discontinuing is not clear.
 - b) MESA (Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement) is another outstanding program that serves under-represented youth in encouraging them to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). MESA programs provide enrichment opportunities for students from elementary to high school using best practices and exemplary curriculum. This program has an

excellent track record for students who are successful in the STEM subjects graduating and continuing to college and post secondary activities. At one point, MESA was in all five high schools and half of the middle schools. There are currently no programs in the high school and only three at the middle school level.

- c) GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) encourages low-income and high school students to stay in school, work hard, have high academic expectations, and go to college. This program provides tutoring and mentorship opportunities, as well as college and career planning information for students and parents throughout middle and high school. Such a program is no longer in existence in Tacoma Public Schools. The previous program did not get re-funded, but such a program is badly needed, given the student population of the district.
- d) The College Success Foundation (CSF) has had a presence in the district. It is in its final year at Foss High School, after a two-year extension. The program began in 2001 and advocates for post-secondary education opportunities in Washington State. The Foundation also provides scholarships and opportunities for mentorship to low-income, high-potential students. Its Washington Achievers Program has the greatest impact on African American students providing college-readiness skills, guidance and support, academic support, and course selection, yet this program has also come to an end. It was provided at Foss High School and focused on opening the access to a more rigorous college-preparatory curriculum for low-income and under-represented students. Data shows that the benefits emerged quickly. Within four years, Foss had the highest number of students in the program (253) and the highest percentage (52 percent) earning a Bachelor's Degree among the 16 Achievers High Schools in the state. Staff conflicts contributed to the program's demise. Middle school students also benefit from the scholarship and mentoring programs that are provided by the CSF.

The College Success Foundation (CSF) has been quite successful in Tacoma schools with African American and other students. Over a period of eight years, more than \$21 million have been awarded for college scholarships. The various program components have proven to be very successful in the schools that have participated, and African American students have fared quite well. As a result of the work of the CSF in Tacoma schools, teachers provide more college information, students take more rigorous classes in Math and English, more students take college-eligible courses, more students graduate with course requirements for admission to Washington four-year colleges (21 percent), more students take the SAT/ACT college entrance exams, and more enroll in college. These are phenomenal results and the district should capitalize by further enhancing the partnership that exists between CSF and Tacoma schools. Given their unique resources, the CSF should be encouraged to expand their programming into all middle and high schools, with a formalized partnership agreement with the district.

- e) Navigation 101 is a curriculum for middle and high school students that helps them develop a future plan and provides them with one-on-one support to accomplish their academic and personal goals. This program exists in all middle and high schools in the district. Budget cuts for the 2009-10 school year have eliminated the

Graduation Support Specialists at the high school level, which was a critical component of the program. These staff provided assistance and support to students in the form of guidance, counseling, Collection of Evidence, portfolio development, scholarship and college application, staff professional development on graduation requirements, etc. Without this student and staff support, graduation and drop-out rates will again be adversely affected.

14. **Leadership** – Tacoma’s leadership has not been stable for a long time. It does not appear that the organizational structure has been focused on academic achievement of its students. Responsibility and accountability have not been emphasized to the departments and the buildings. A great deal of autonomy exists at most levels of the organization, and a clear focus on students is not evident. In the absence of a district strategic plan, there is not a coherent educational reform program to address the achievement gap and other challenges facing the district. The current administration is making changes, hiring new staff, embarking upon strategic planning, adding a new innovative school (SAMI), and bringing a focus to the issues. It does so against a backdrop of historical and traditional practices and resistance to change that have existed for decades. Top-level management changes that are currently underway should provide the needed paradigm shift for transformational change that is necessary to address and close the achievement gap over time. Principals are key but are not adequately trained to provide leadership in their buildings to address the achievement gap. Much-needed training is being implemented this summer to provide assistance in this area. The School Board must be a key player in establishing expectations and holding the district accountability through the Superintendent.
15. **Communications** – It is no longer just about school improvement; it is about discovering fundamental ways to change how school districts function so that they maximize the effectiveness of their schools. Managing the dynamics of these changes requires ongoing and open communication among all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, community, parents, and students). This area is weak and requires a re-examination as to effectiveness and transparency.
16. **Parental Involvement/Engagement** – The notion of parental involvement extends beyond attendance at school functions or field trips. Implementing outreach programs to engage families and communities in partnerships requires resources, expertise, and the determination to make it happen. While there are numerous activities to involve parents and families, there still lingers the challenge to engage parents/families of low-performing students. A long-standing challenge of how to involve African American parents continues to perplex school officials. Being able to communicate across cultural groups would aid in this effort. Cross-cultural communications must be a component of cultural competency training for staff in outreach activities. Partnerships with African American community organizations could provide assistance in reaching this group of parents and families. Traditional means can no longer be the accepted approach. Many African American and other parents of color are not satisfied with the quality of their students’ education in Tacoma and the responsiveness to their needs. Many of them desire to be involved in the education of their children but do not feel welcomed and/or respected.
17. **Discipline** – As an indicator of problems, discipline of African American students is grossly out of proportion. The number of students who are suspended and expelled is

cause for alarm. African American students constitute the largest number of discipline events (7789) over five years and the largest number of individuals (2062) involved in discipline issues. Over the same period of time, 42 percent of the 7884 Defiant/Disruptive Behavior incidents, 47 percent of the 2527 fighting incidents, and 30 percent of the 1162 Alcohol/Drug Incidents involved African American students. **(Appendix 8, 9, 10, 11)** There are various explanations and reasons for this discipline profile, and they are all quite complicated. Understanding underlying causes for behaviors and actions can lead to strategies for improvement. Discipline actions are the end result of serious situations gone unchecked for a long period of time. It differs from one building to another, indicating serious classroom management issues for some teachers and a lack of building leadership to deal effectively with such situations. One of the key factors to the problem of disproportionality in discipline is the lack of uniform discipline definitions and procedures, combined with liberal suspension policies that leave teachers and principals with too much discretionary authority in the administration of the policy.

Student responsibility for behavior is a needed element to meet this challenge. The community must be involved in this effort. The number of students involved in the criminal justice system at both Remann Hall and the County Jail is disproportionate for African American students and will only increase without effective interventions. For students whose behavior results in suspension, expulsion, and/or incarceration, academic achievement is greatly impacted. “Forgotten children” include those who are out of school due to dropping out, being suspended or expelled and receiving no education, such as those served by the Maxine Mimms Academy. The disproportionality in discipline must be addressed and eliminated if the achievement gap is to be closed for this group of students.

18. **Attendance** – While the average daily attendance for African American students for middle and high school was 93 percent, there is a clear trend of poor attendance at the 8th grade which is an indication that many students will have problems as freshmen and beyond, if not corrected. Poor attendance leads to low achievement and eventual drop-outs. **(Appendix 12, 13)**

19. **Special Education** – Tacoma Public Schools has a higher-than-average Special Education population of 13.3 percent, compared to 12.6 percent for the state. **(Appendix 14, 15)** The ethnic distribution of students in Special Education programs is proportional to the student demographics of the district. However, upon closer examination, African American students are unevenly distributed in certain categories of programs such as Behavioral Disorders, Learning Disabled, Mental Retardation and other such subjective diagnoses. The four-year average SPED weighted risk ratio indicates that African American students are over-represented in some categories, with Emotional/Behavioral Disability being the most over-represented. For this group of students, the out-of-school suspension or expulsion rate for 10 days or less is 43 percent of the SPED student population, and for more than 10 days, the rate is 33 percent of the population. **(Appendix 16, 17, 18)** What are the issues surrounding this data? Is there a relationship between the over-representation and the expulsions or suspensions? Is Tacoma Public Schools paying enough attention to what is happening to African American students in light of the fact that their overall number in SPED does not exceed their incidence in the population? When disaggregated further by gender, are boys more affected than girls?

How can the district ensure equity in this important area? To what degree does subjectivity play a role in the placement of African American students in SPED when cultural competency is not included in training efforts for staff? The data raises questions that should be further explored.

20. **Intervention Class Trends** – Black middle school students are enrolled in Honors classes at a disproportionate rate than their incidence in the population. They are only 15 percent of the Language Arts and Math classes. Their participation rate in remedial classes is disproportionate in the opposite direction. Black students are 29 percent of the Language Arts classes and 31 percent of the Math classes. For high school, Black students are 14 percent of the Honors Language Arts classes and 15 percent of the Honors Math classes. Yet, for intervention classes, Blacks are 30 percent of the remedial Language Arts classes and 29 percent of the Math classes. Such disparity does not demonstrate high expectations for Black students. (**Appendix 19, 20**)
21. **Grade Point Averages** – African American students have lower grade point averages than Asian, White, and Hispanic students at the middle school level and much lower averages than Asians and Whites at the high school level. This trend is related to the achievement gap and indicates low performance that also needs to be addressed. (**Appendix 21, 22**)
22. **Drop-Outs** – Dropping out of school is a process of disengagement that begins early. Such disengagement from school is often preceded by indicators of withdrawal (e.g. poor attendance) and unsuccessful school experiences (e.g., academic or behavioral difficulties). Students who are at risk of dropping out can be identified with reasonable accuracy in the elementary and middle school years. Drop-out prevention must be part of any plan to address the achievement gap.
23. **Graduation** – African American students graduate on time at the same rate as the average for the district (68 percent), which is less than Asians, Whites, and the state average (72 percent). The extended graduation rate increases to 74 percent, still equal to the district average, but trails the Asians, Whites, and the state average (77 percent). (**Appendix 23,24**)
24. **Recruitment & Retention** – An active program of recruitment and retention is not in place in Tacoma, according to Human Resources. With the ethnic profile of staff and students in the district, such an activity would benefit the education system. African American staff are under-represented at all levels in comparison to African American students. (**Appendix 25**). Without a focused and concerted effort to change this profile, academic achievement will continue to be impacted as students are without role models.
25. **Organizational Structure** – Currently, there is no organization chart for the district. It is under construction by the Superintendent and when completed should clearly identify roles, responsibilities, and accountability for student learning and support.
26. **Human Resource Management** – The department is being revised with a focus toward improving the system’s capacity to deliver a higher quality education for all students.

27. **Equity and Diversity** – This office should be more involved in staff training and professional development. Currently, the office is focused on complaints investigations, and the remaining aspects of the role and responsibility for this position are not implemented. Skills and talents of the director are under-utilized by the district.
28. **Curriculum and Instruction** – Both curriculum and instruction are vitally important areas of consideration when addressing the achievement gap. This report, however, did not focus on these topics as it specifically relates to African American students, because the topics are general in nature to the entire district and to all students and requires an in-depth examination. A shortage of time did not allow such a review for this report, but I am certain, based on experience and background knowledge, that curriculum and instruction contribute to the academic achievement gap in general and low-performing students in particular, which represent many African American students.
29. **Community Engagement** – The achievement gap will only be dramatically reduced through partnerships that involve families and the community in the education of African American and other minority students. These partnerships can also be instrumental in building the resolve to marshal the necessary resources to achieve the goal of closing the gap. Community-based programs and community-based organizations can play an important role in enhancing young people’s academic success.
30. **District Climate** – A comprehensive Climate Survey was recently completed and contains a wealth of information. Once the results are analyzed, synthesized, and publicized, the district will be able to target certain areas for improvement and make changes where needed. The community is demanding change, and it is generally felt by staff that a climate for change is in the air.
31. **Student Support Services** – Very minimal student support services are provided for a district this size. A number of programs have proven to be quite effective with the academic success of African American students; yet, they are sketchy and scattered and not intentional or deliberate. Summer School is offered for course retrieval to graduate, but at a cost of \$150/course for free and reduced lunch students and \$250/course for others. The affordability issue prevents access to this program for many who need it. Supplemental Educational Services (SES) are available in the community but have not been accessed by students who are most in need and could benefit from the programs. The process whereby these services are made known to students and families should be reviewed and a renewed effort put forth to match students with services. The community needs to be informed about these services and their involvement sought in disseminating the information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop an organizational structure that places the responsibility and accountability of district and school improvement as the primary focus of closing the achievement gap.
2. Develop a comprehensive Strategic Action Plan with a focus on students and closing the achievement gap, including accountability measures and performance indicators that result in an equitable and high-quality education for all students. Jump start reforms that will transform public education in Tacoma.
3. Provide a Comprehensive Plan for Staff Development that is mandatory for teachers, administrators, and other staff involved in the teaching and learning process. Topics to be covered in training should include the following: Multicultural Education, Cultural Competency, Culturally and Linguistically-Responsive Teaching, Culturally-Inclusive Curriculum, Learning Styles, Understanding Institutional Racism, and Cross-Cultural Communications with Staff, Students, Parents/Families and the Community.
4. Ensure that African American students are provided quality teachers at every stage of their education. The definition of quality will include ability to successfully teach ALL students, in addition to the language in NCLB.
5. Ensure that African American students are adequately represented in specialty programs such as SOTA, Highly Capable, SAMI, AP, IB, etc.
6. Meet with representatives of the African American community, including parents, on a regular basis (semester or yearly as new data is available) to report on the status of closing the achievement gap and increasing test scores. Focus should be on initiatives to improve attendance, decrease dropouts, decrease discipline incidents, improve GPAs, improve parent/family engagement, increase numbers in Highly Capable and Advanced Placement programs, increase graduation rates, increase college-going rates, etc. Establish base-line data presented in charts in the appendix of this report, and determine the metrics around which progress will be measured and reported to the community.
7. Complete the review of the Highly Capable program, and make the necessary changes to eliminate the gross disproportionality that currently exists for African American students.
8. Appoint a Drop Out Prevention Task Force to explore whether or not Tacoma schools are truly equitable for ALL students in the system and to provide a forum to have an open and honest conversation about what district policies, practices, and personal beliefs contribute toward inequity.
9. Review and update discipline policies and procedures, develop uniform definitions, and provide training for appropriate staff in the implementation of the policies and procedures. Provide staff training in culturally-relevant classroom management, so as to eliminate the disproportionality that exists in discipline in Tacoma schools.

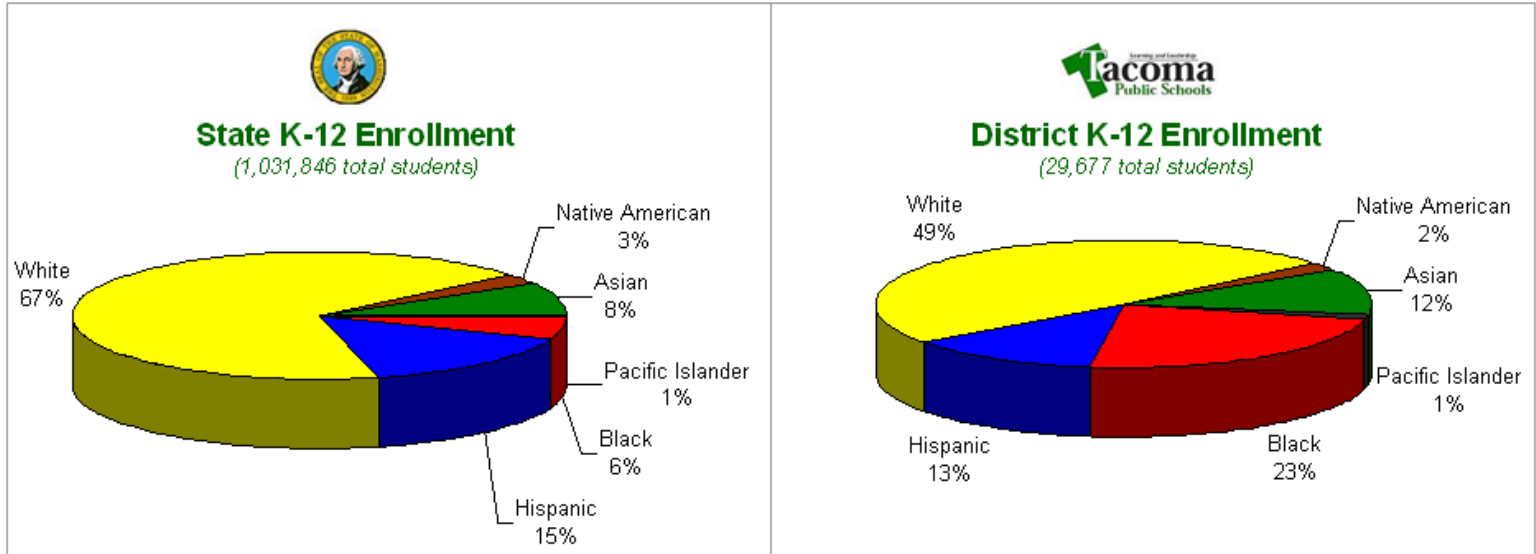
10. Develop a specific Outreach Program for African American parents and families to enhance their engagement in the schooling process for their children.
11. Convene several African American student Focus Groups to inquire about the learning environment in Tacoma Public Schools.
12. Develop innovative recruitment and retention programs to increase the numbers of African Americans staff at all levels of the organization.
13. Accelerate the attention currently being given to chronic absenteeism of teachers. Ensure that all students are provided a highly-qualified teacher on a daily basis, so that effective teaching and learning can take place. Without such a condition, the achievement gap will continue to exist and schools will continue to fail many of their students.
14. Perform a comprehensive curriculum audit to ensure multi-cultural inclusion in all subject areas.
15. Put into place an accountability system for principals and teachers to ensure that African American students are receiving a rigorous and equitable education.
16. Enhance and formalize the partnership with the College Success Foundation to expand program services throughout all middle and high schools to help more African American students succeed through school and make it to and through college.
17. Make better use of the MESA Program as a resource for African American students in middle and high school throughout the district who have an interest in math, engineering, and science. This program has proven to be quite successful, especially for African American males, given the chronic problem in the area of math for all students.
18. Strengthen partnerships with aspects of the African American community; e.g., Black Collective of Pierce County, Black Ministerial Alliance, NAACP, Tacoma Urban League, Allen Renaissance Institute (ARI), Maxine Mimms Academy, Race & Pedagogy Initiative of UPS, Black churches and other programs in the African American community to assist in addressing the problems of academic achievement, attendance, discipline, parental/family involvement, school preparation, early learning (birth to five years) and general readiness. It will take the whole village, in partnership with the schools and the district, to make a difference in the lives of African American children in Tacoma Public Schools.

None of the above recommendations can be implemented in isolation. They must be part of a comprehensive strategic plan focused like a laser on improving student achievement.

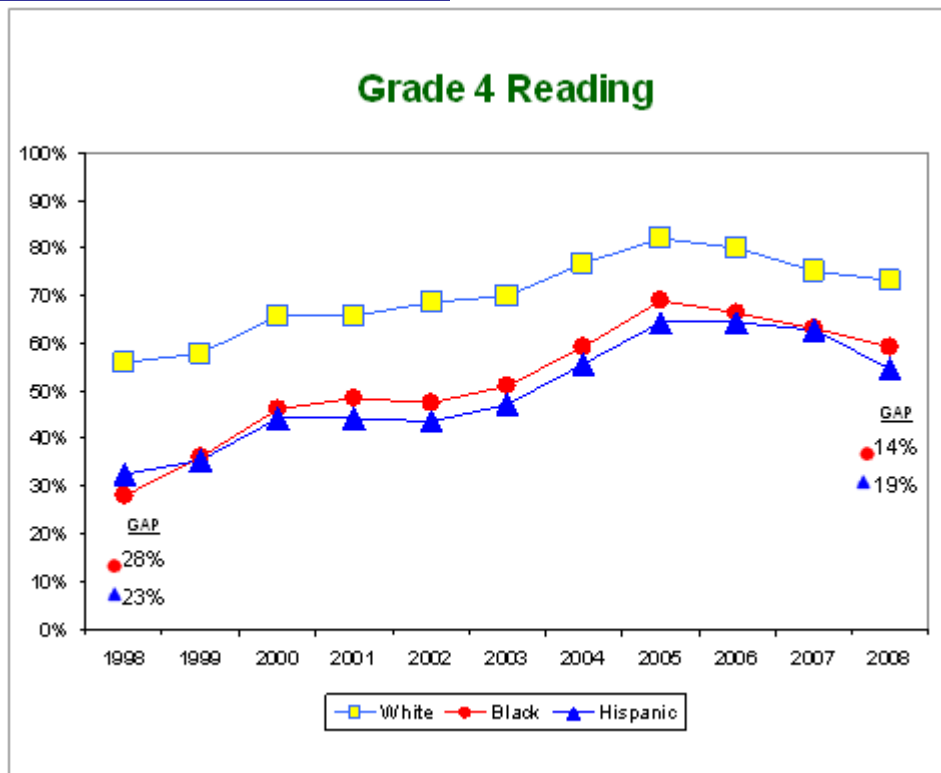
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deep appreciation is expressed to a number of key individuals in Tacoma Public Schools who provided invaluable assistance in the course of this study and the preparation of this report. Heartfelt thanks are given to Pat Cummings of the Research and Evaluation Department and his staff; Dr. DaVerne Bell of the Equity and Diversity Department and her staff; the Human Relations Department; numerous staff who provided requested reports, data, and other information; staff who made time available for interviews and meetings; the School Board who provided time to be interviewed; community members and organizational representatives who provided input; parents who shared their experiences; and all others who participated in some way. Many thanks to Superintendent Art Jarvis for involving me in this very important work for Tacoma Public Schools.

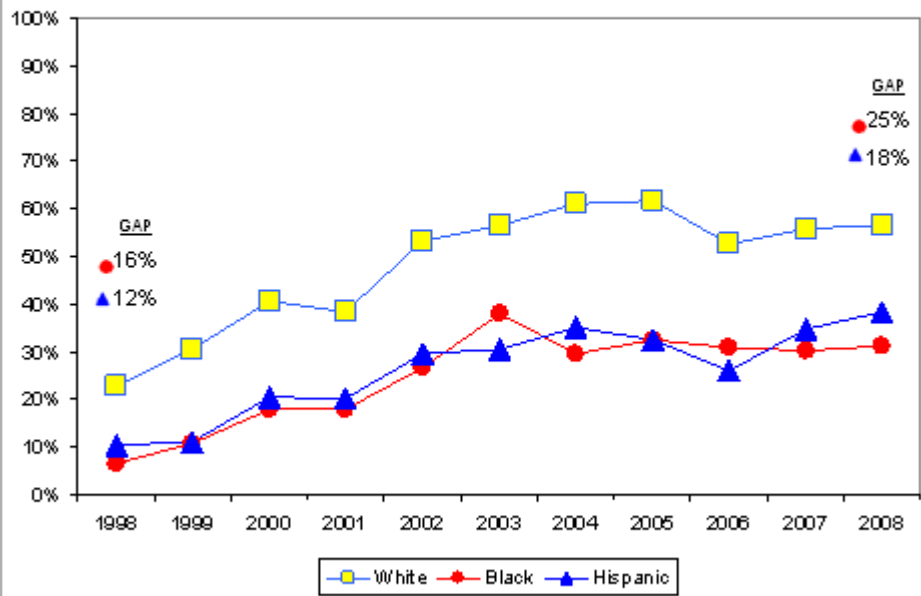
1. Enrollment Demographics for Washington State and Tacoma School District



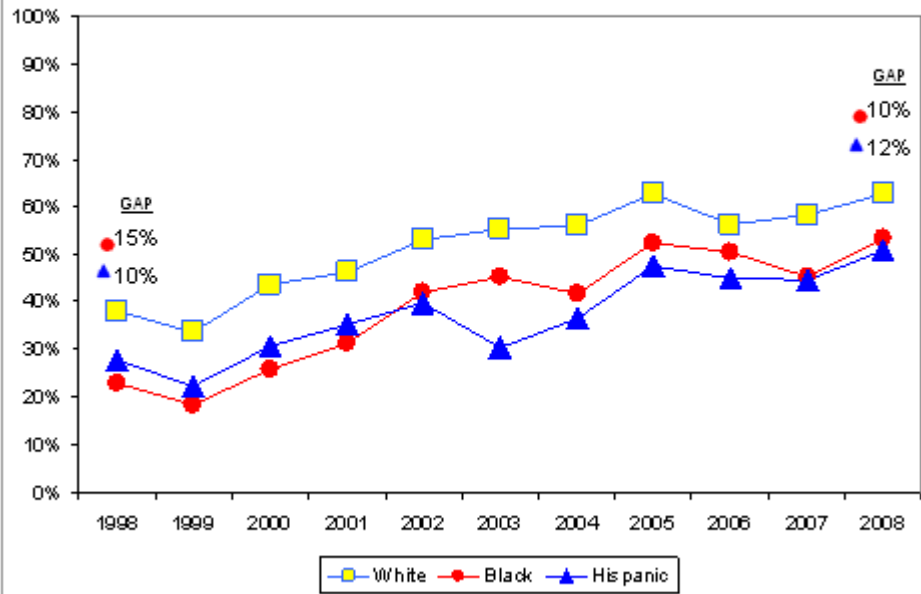
2. and 3. WASL Grade 4 Achievement GAP



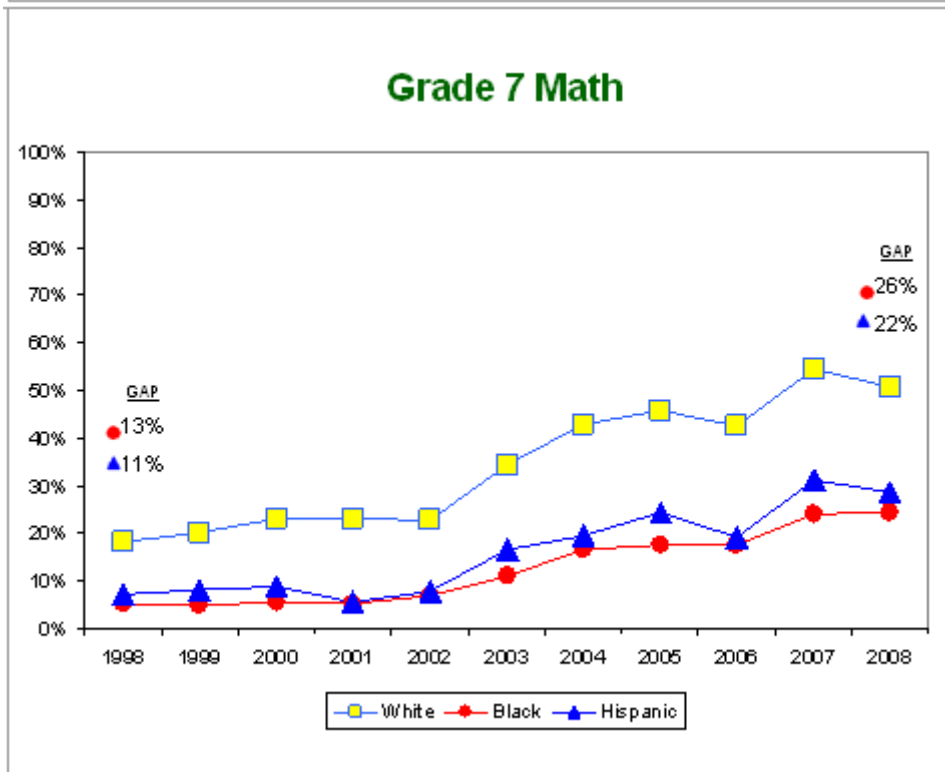
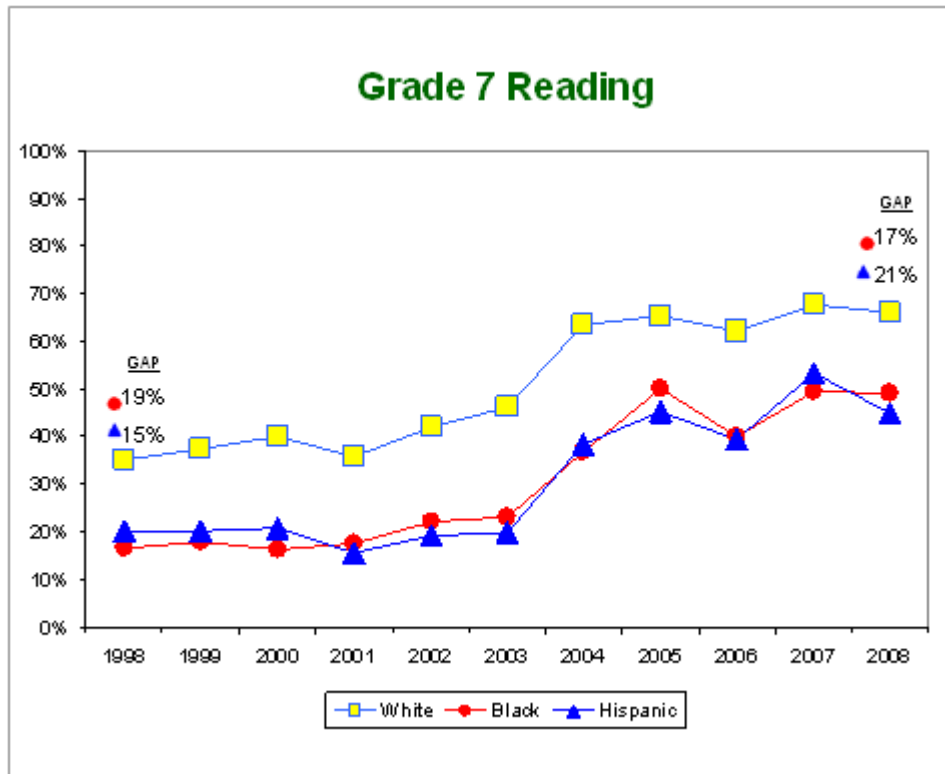
Grade 4 Math

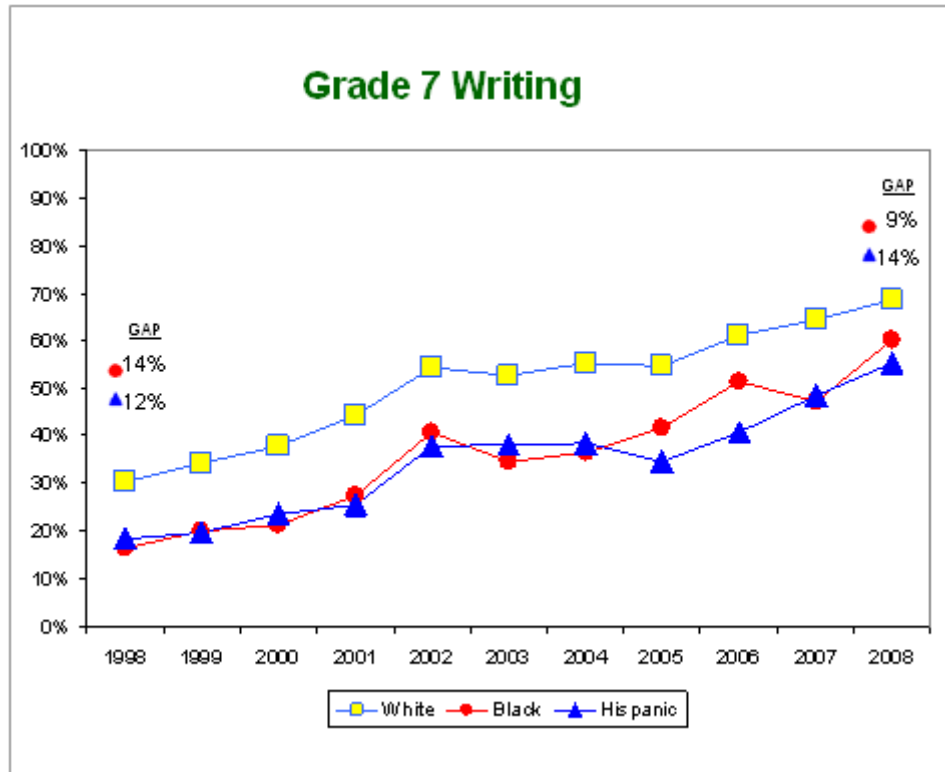


Grade 4 Writing

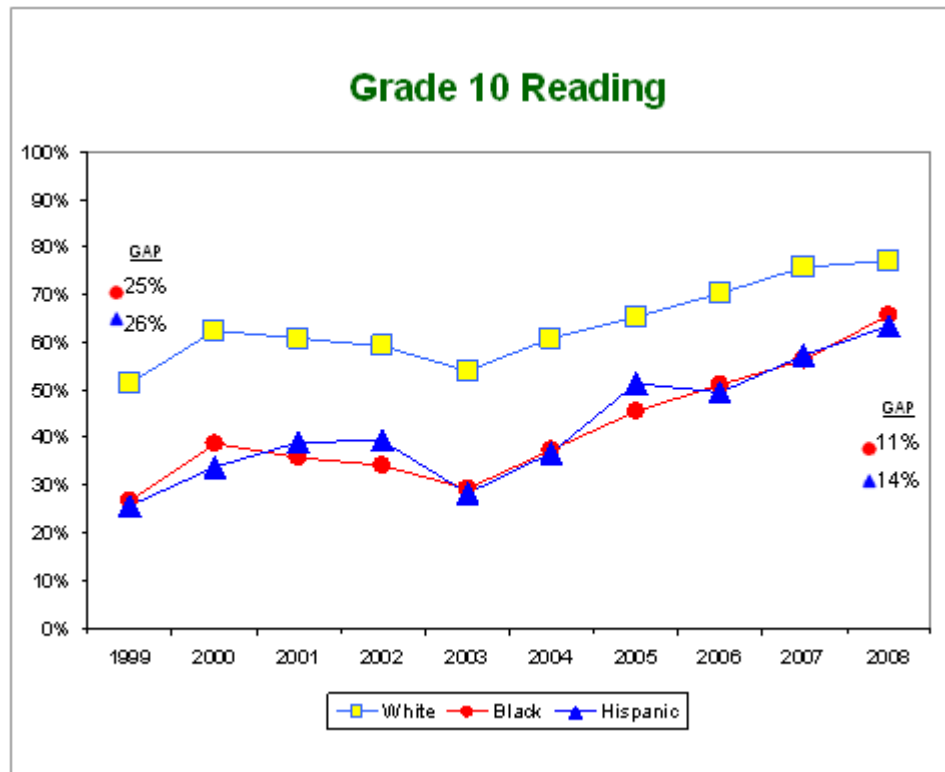


4. and 5. WASL Grade 7 Achievement GAP

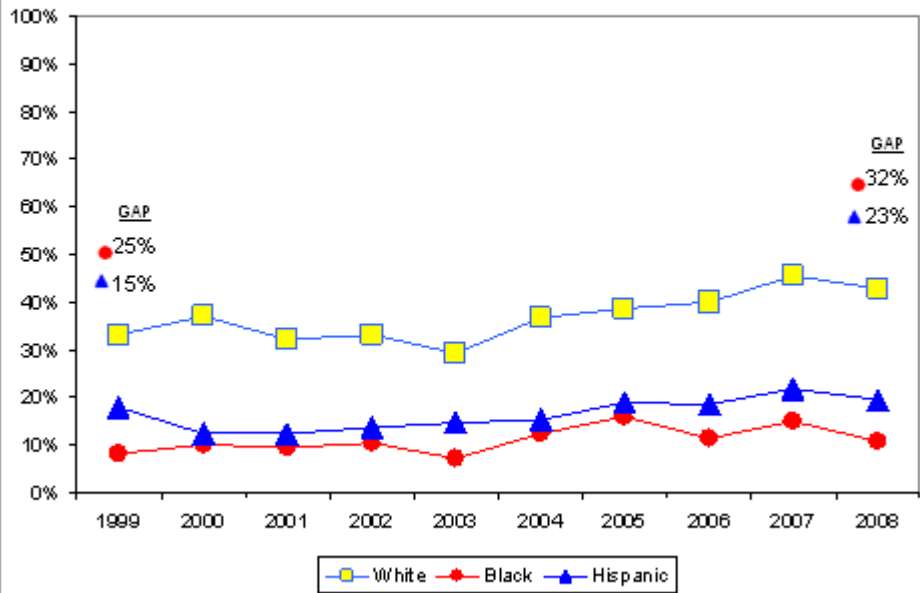




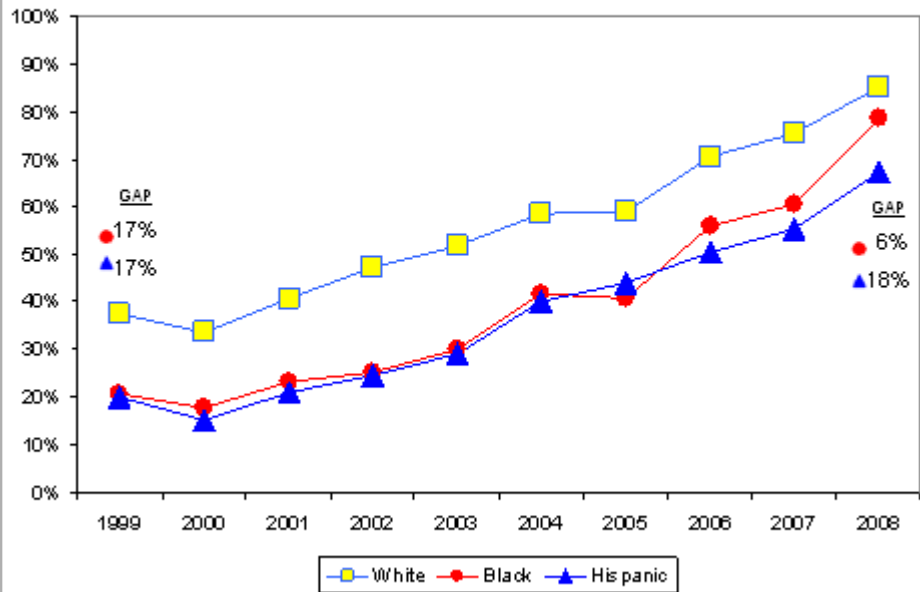
6. and 7. WASL Grade 10 Achievement GAP



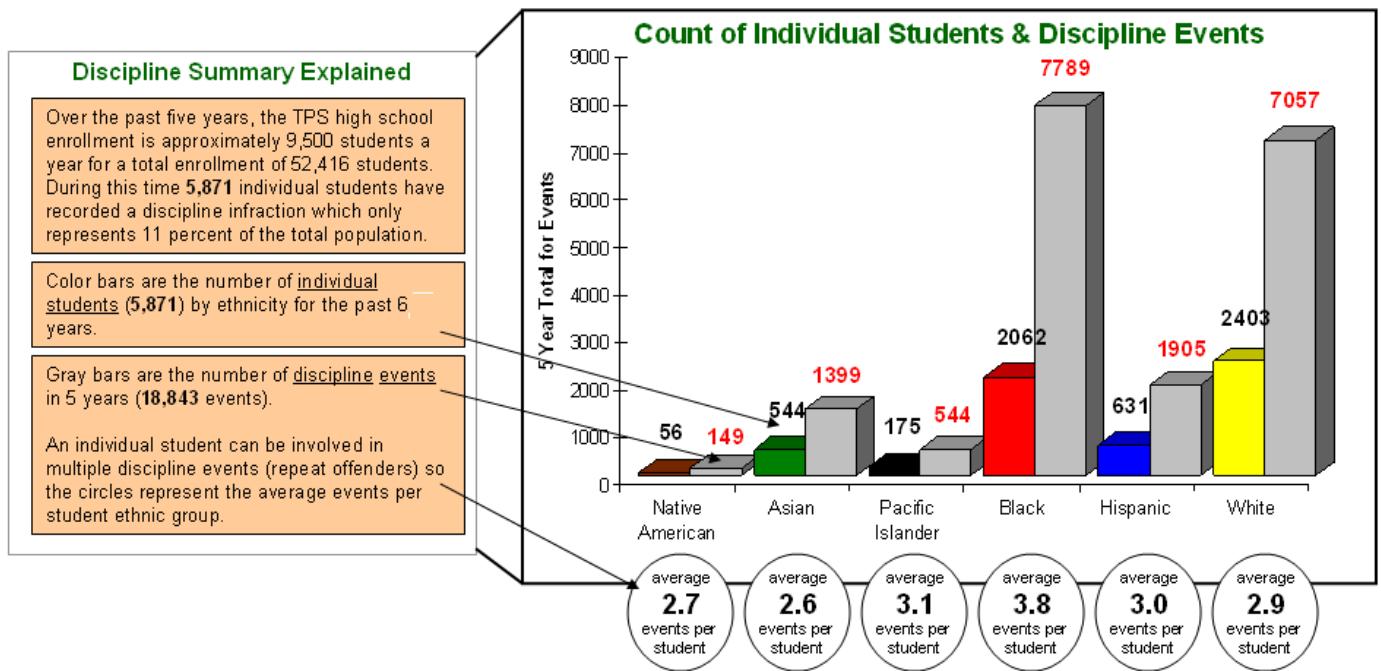
Grade 10 Math



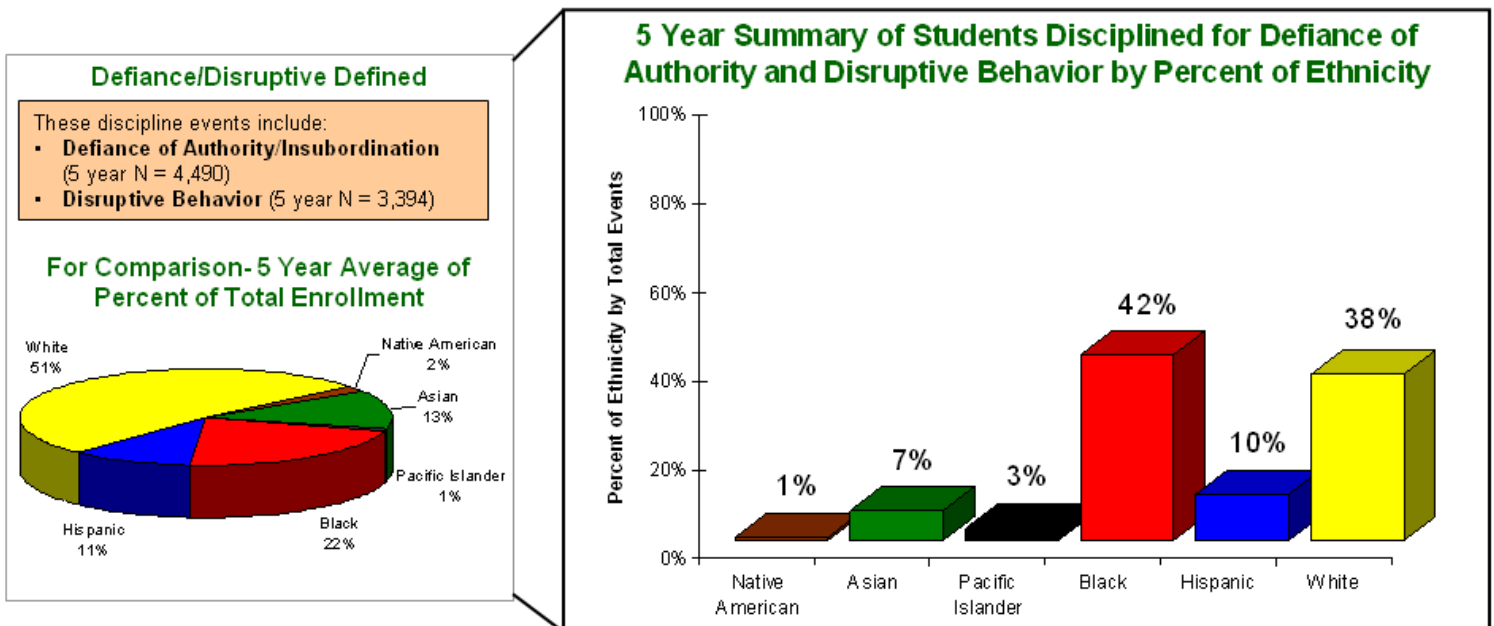
Grade 10 Writing



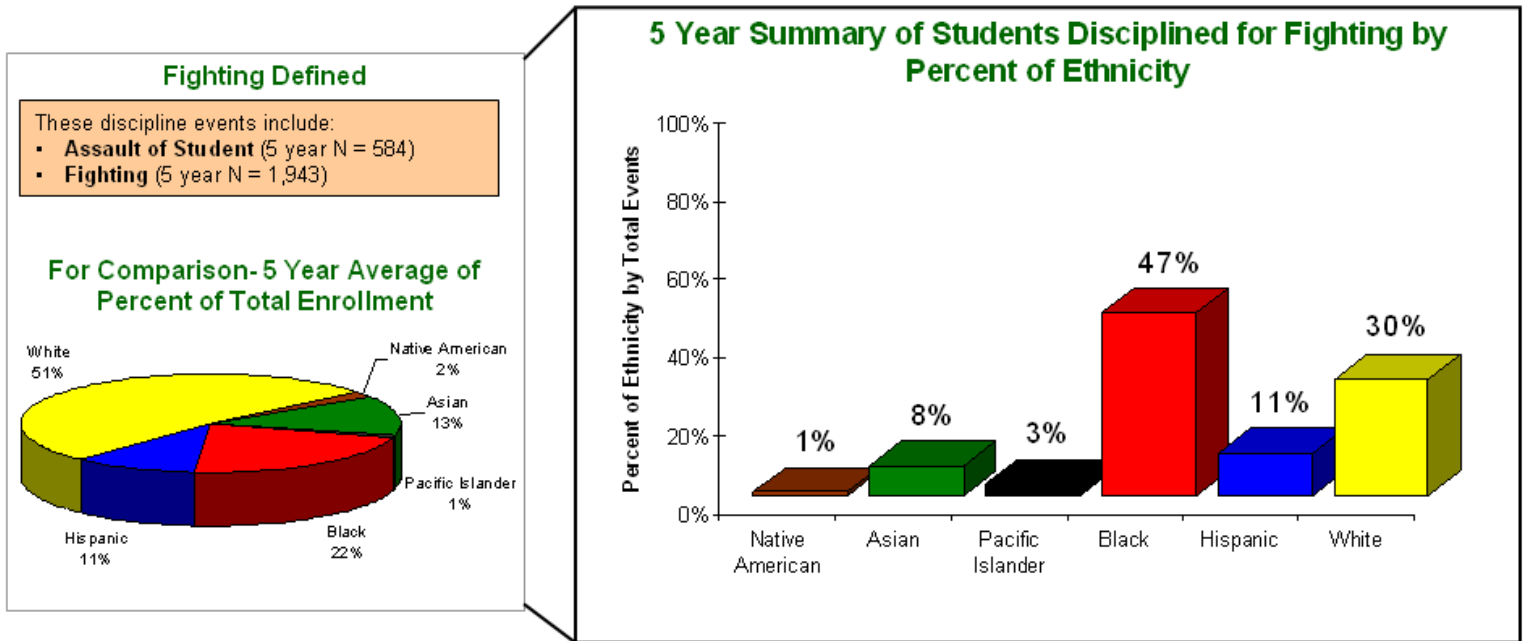
8. Five Year Count of High School Discipline Events And Individual Students by Ethnicity



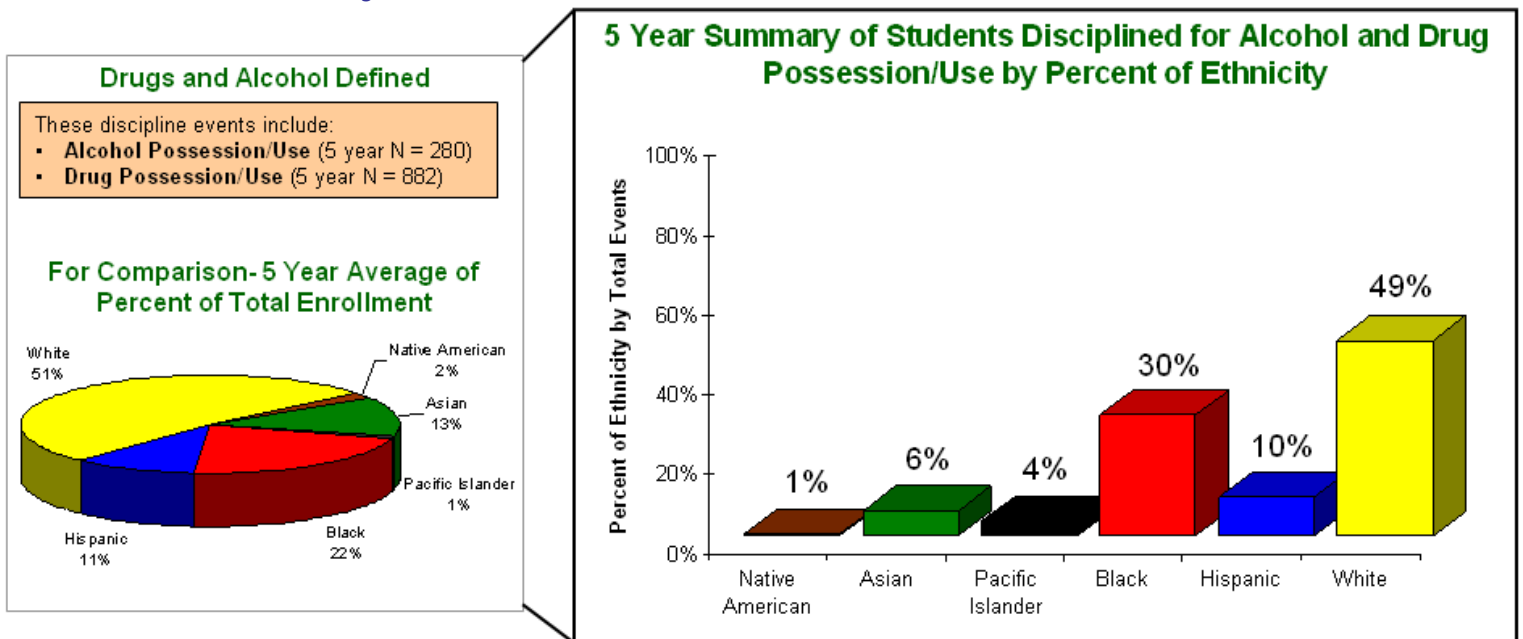
9. Five Year Summary of Students Disciplined for Defiance of Authority and Disruptive Behavior by Percent of Ethnicity



10. Five Year Summary of Students Disciplined for Fighting by Percent of Ethnicity



11. Five Year Summary of Students Disciplined for Alcohol and Drug Possession/Use by Percent of Ethnicity

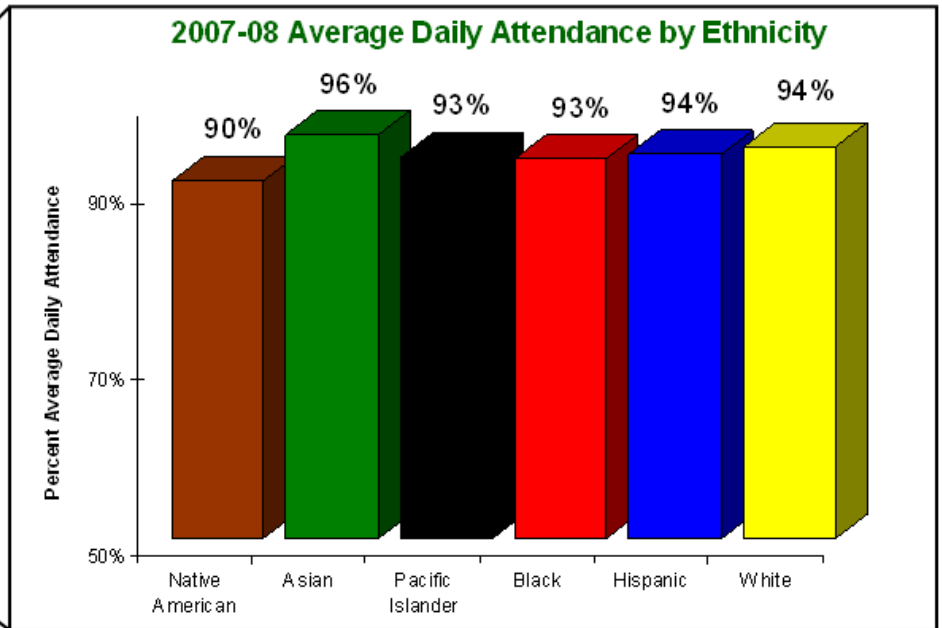


12. Average Daily Attendance for Tacoma for Middle School Students by Ethnicity

MS Average Daily Attendance by School and Grade

	Gr 6	Gr 7	Gr 8
A. Giaudrone	95.0%	92.9%	88.2%
Baker	98.6%	98.4%	91.5%
Gault	95.6%	94.9%	90.7%
Gray	92.6%	92.0%	87.6%
Hunt	96.1%	96.9%	89.2%
Jason Lee	92.4%	93.0%	89.6%
Mason	98.6%	98.0%	92.9%
McIlvaigh	92.8%	92.0%	90.4%
Meeker	99.8%	96.4%	94.2%
Stewart	98.8%	93.6%	90.4%
Truman	93.3%	95.6%	92.0%

Average Daily Attendance – The percent of days attended. For example, 90% ADA would mean a student is absent 18 out of 180 days

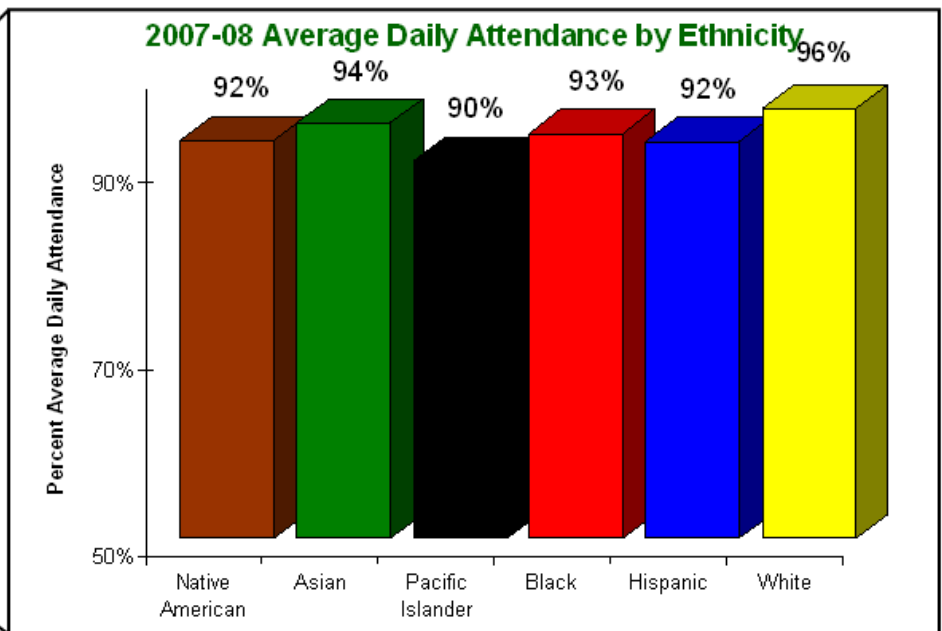


13. Average Daily Attendance for Tacoma for High School Students by Ethnicity

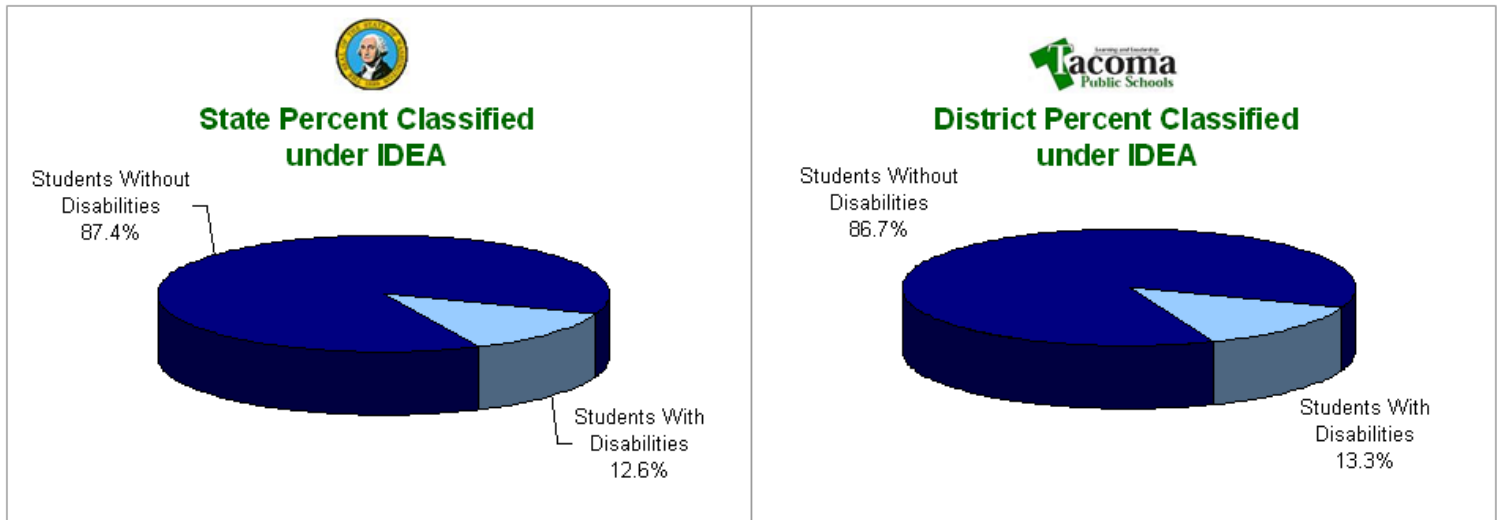
HS Average Daily Attendance by School and Grade

	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12
Foss	97.7%	98.3%	97.8%	92.5%
Lincoln HS	88.3%	89.8%	90.7%	91.5%
Mt Tahoma	88.9%	91.4%	92.0%	90.8%
Oakland	77.1%	85.7%	88.6%	92.3%
SOTA	94.3%	95.5%	96.3%	96.2%
Stadium	97.4%	97.7%	97.8%	94.3%
Wilson	97.2%	98.1%	98.7%	97.4%

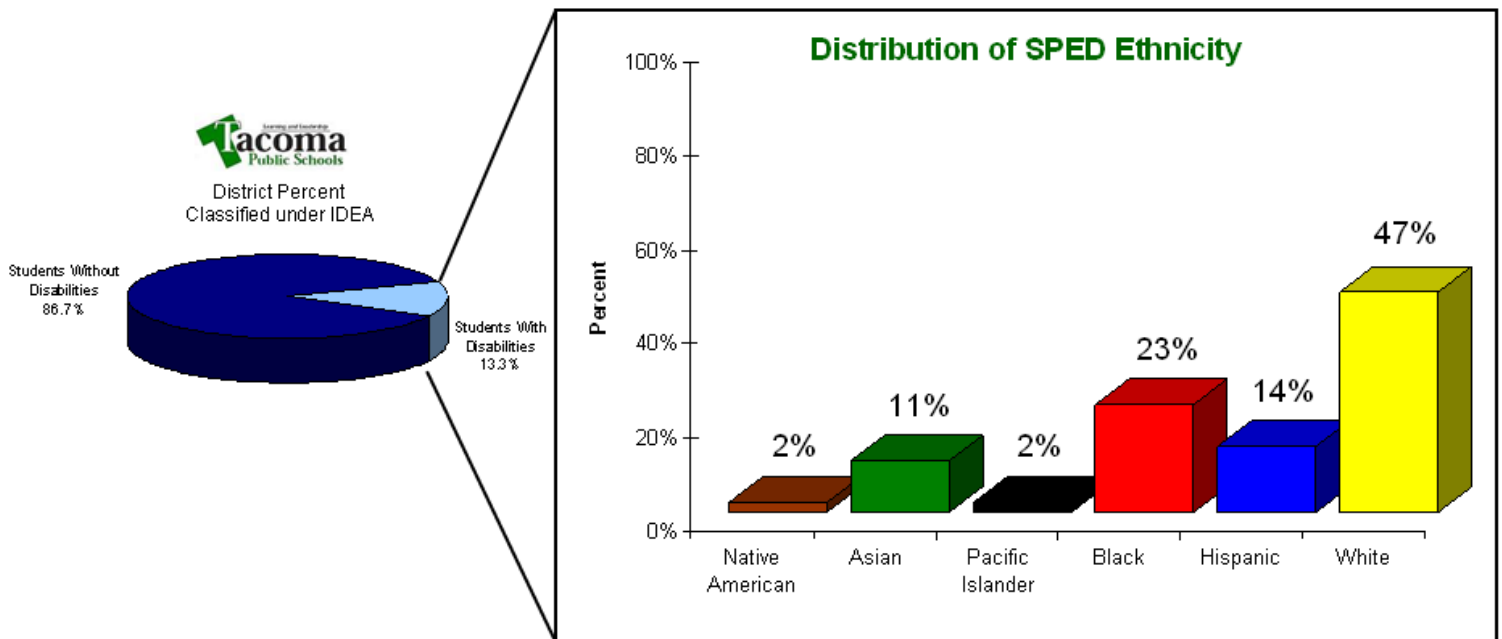
Average Daily Attendance – The percent of days attended. For example, 90% ADA would mean a student is absent 18 out of 180 days



14. Percent Special Education Students Washington State and Tacoma School District



15. Special Education Students by Ethnicity Tacoma School District



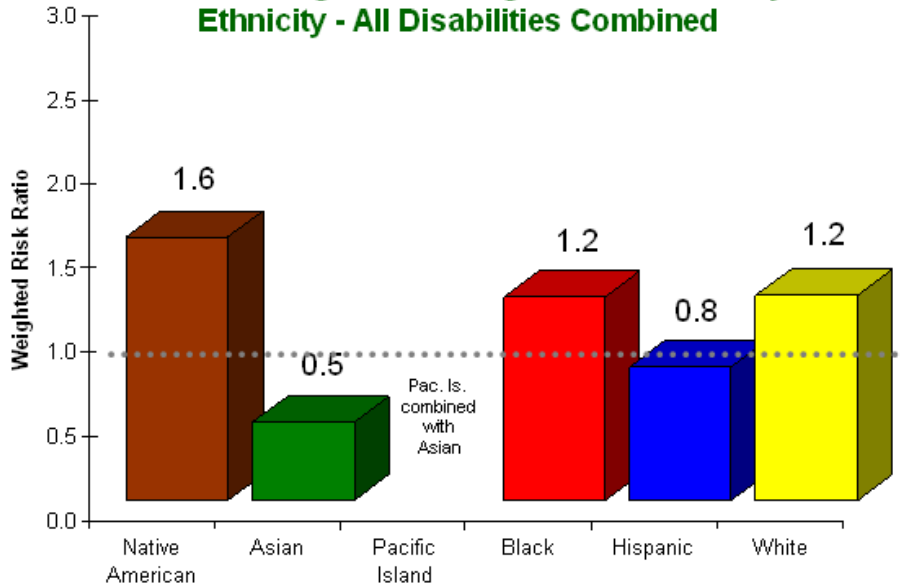
16. Four Year Average Special Education Participation by Funding Category and Ethnicity

Weighted Risk Ratios by Category

	All Disabilities	Autism	Comm Disorder	Emotional/Behavioral Disability	Health Impaired	Specific Learning Disabilities	Mental Retardation
Nat.Am.	1.6	1.2	1.0	2.4	1.8	1.6	2.0
Asian/PI	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.5	1.0
Black	1.2	0.7	0.9	1.8	1.0	1.5	1.4
Hispanic	0.8	0.4	0.9	0.5	0.4	1.0	0.6
White	1.2	2.1	1.3	1.3	1.9	1.0	1.0

Weighted Risk Ratio – a WRR greater than 1.0 indicates the degree to which students are over-represented in the special education category. For example, a score of 2.0 indicates that the group is two times more likely to be included in the category than all other students. A score of 0.5 means the students are half as likely to be included in the category.

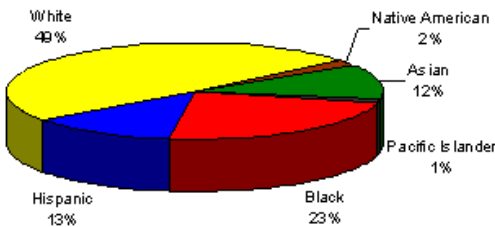
4 Year Average SPED Weighted Risk Ratio by Ethnicity - All Disabilities Combined



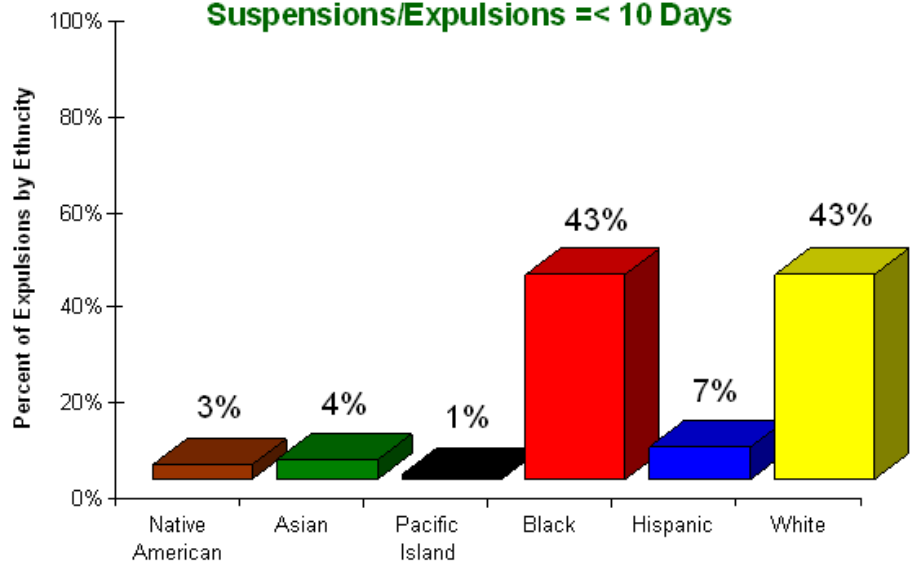
17. Percent of Special Education Students with Out-Of-School Suspensions or Expulsions for Durations Less Than or Equal 10 Days

There were a total of 689 special education students suspended for less than or equal 10 days during the 2007-08 school year

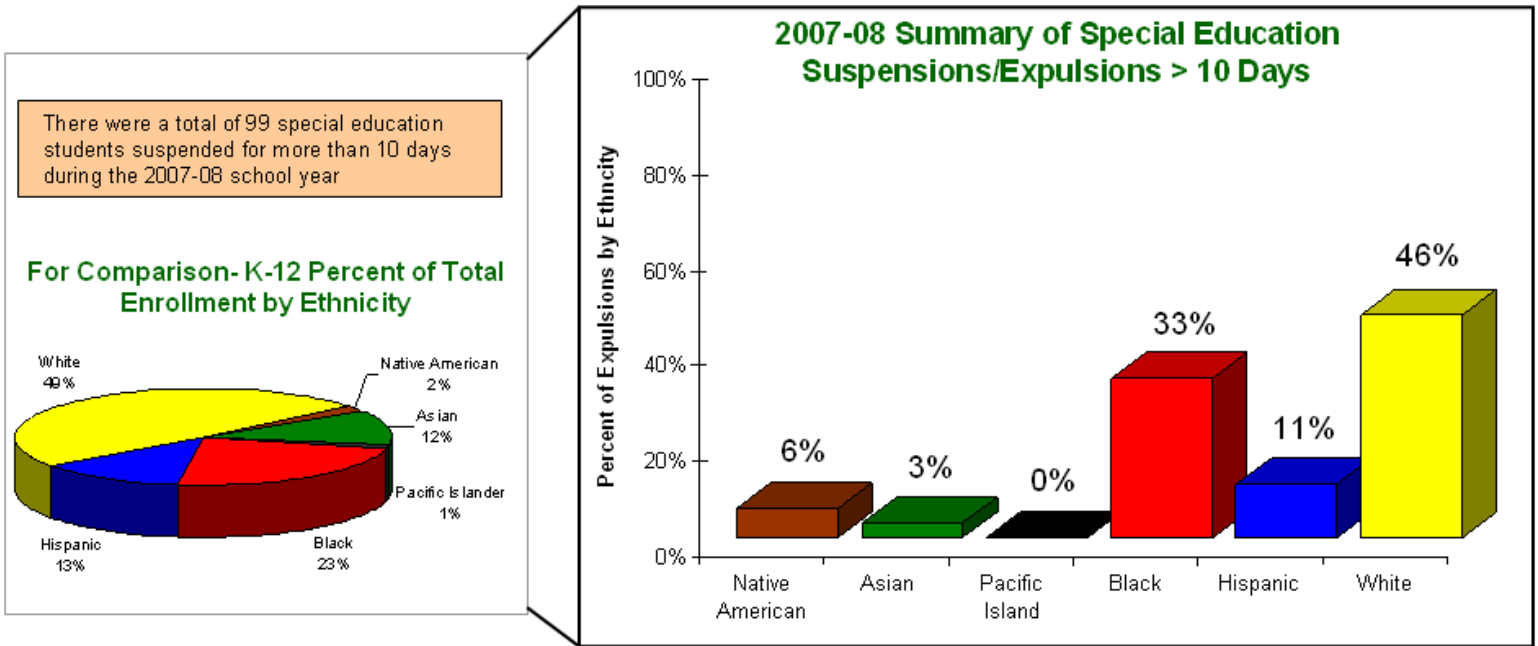
For Comparison- K-12 Percent of Total Enrollment by Ethnicity



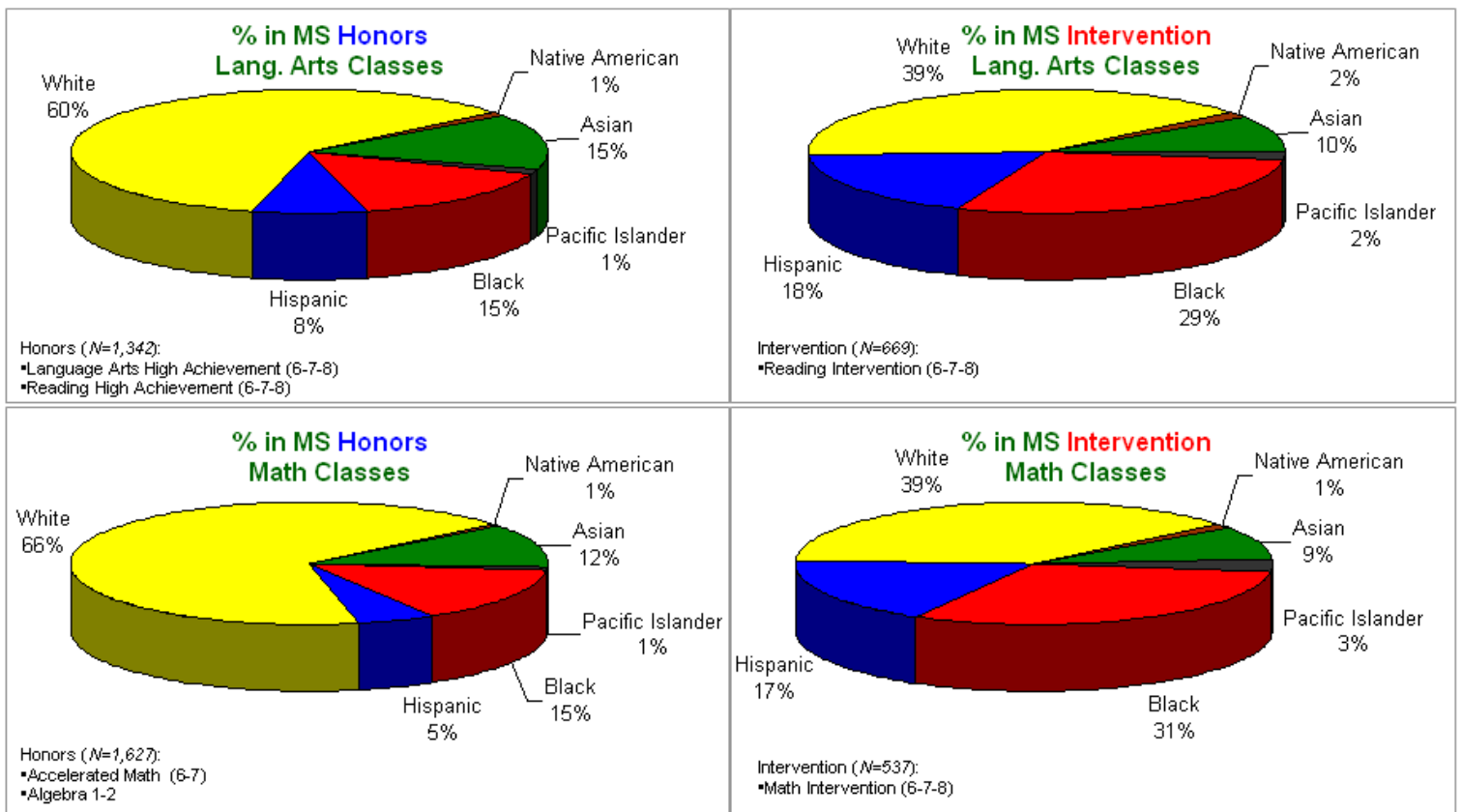
2007-08 Summary of Special Education Suspensions/Expulsions =< 10 Days



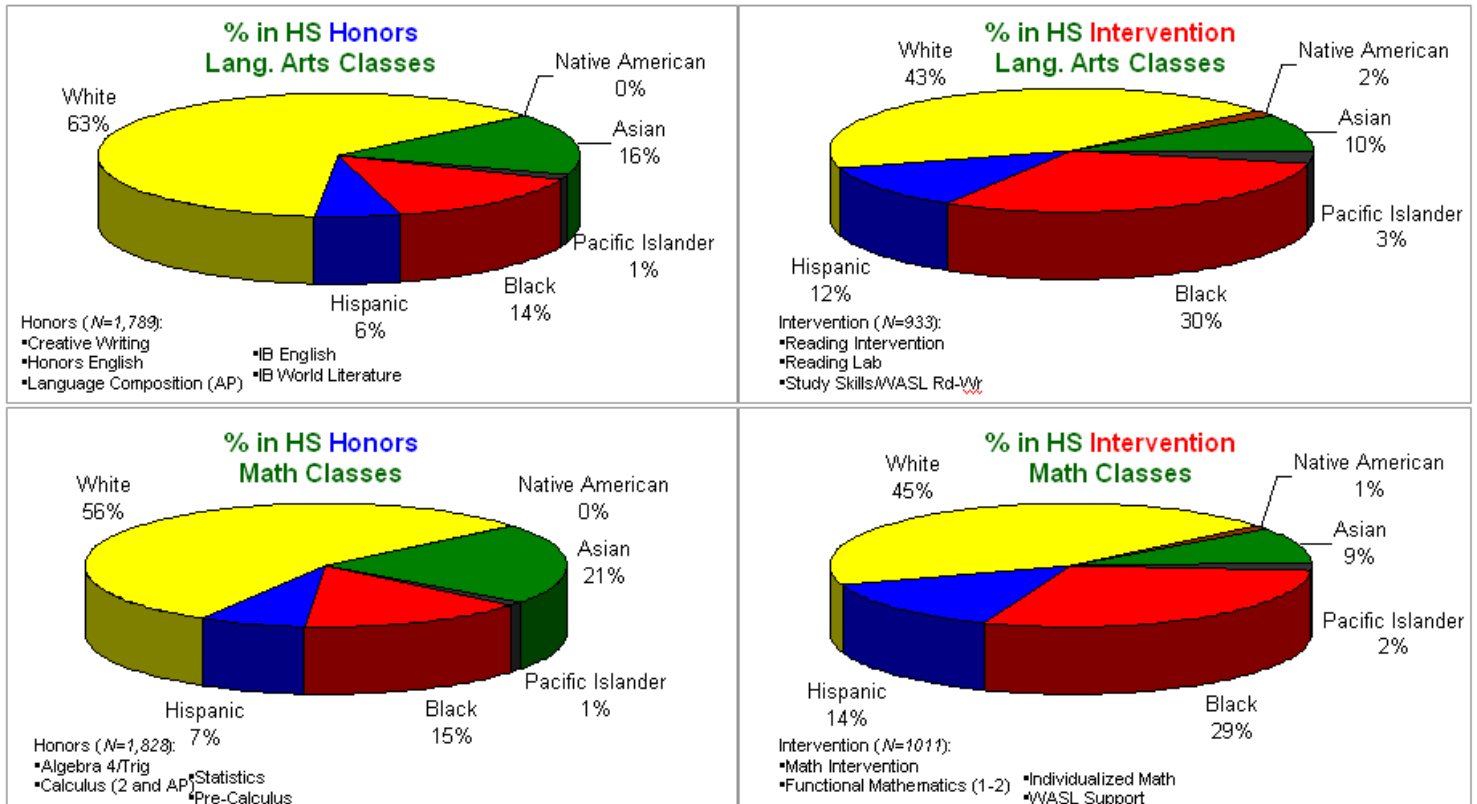
18. Percent of Special Education Students with Out-Of-School Suspensions or Expulsions for Durations More Than 10 Days



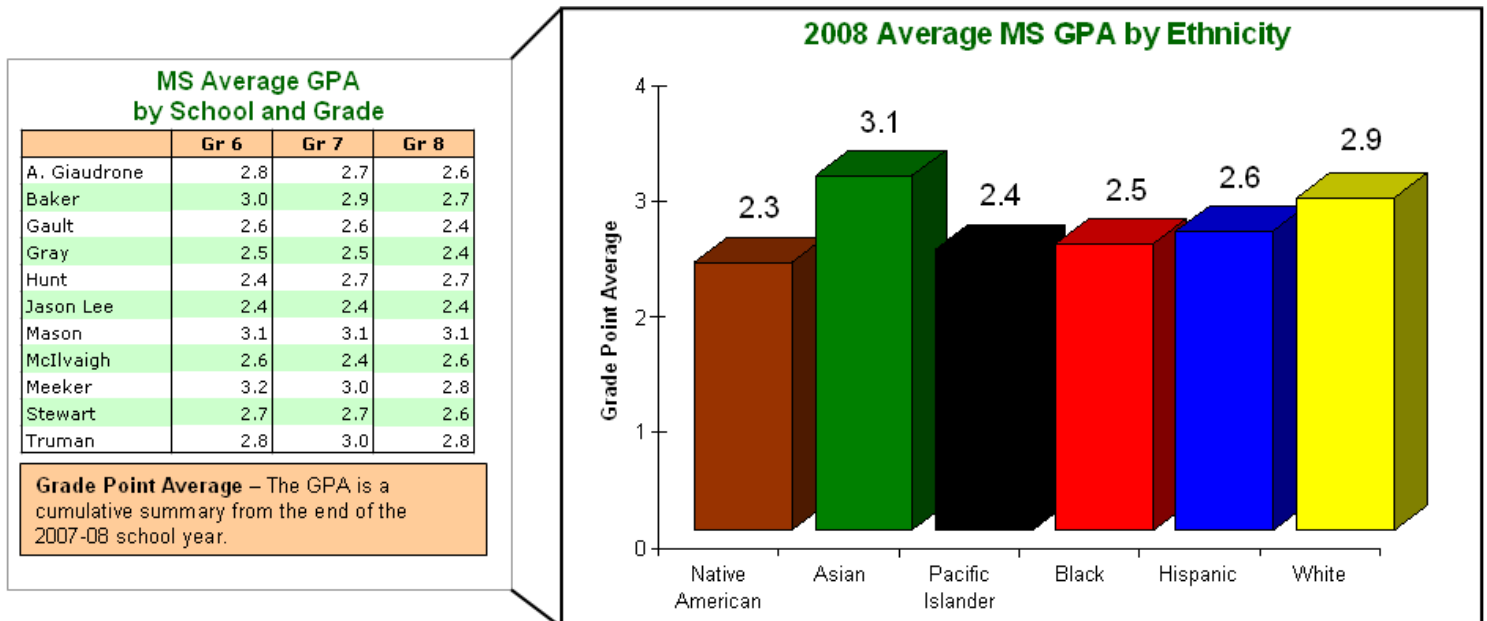
19. Percent of Middle School Students in Honors and Intervention Classes



20. Percent of High School Students in Honors and Intervention Classes



21. 2008 End of School Year Average GPA for Tacoma for Middle School Students by Ethnicity



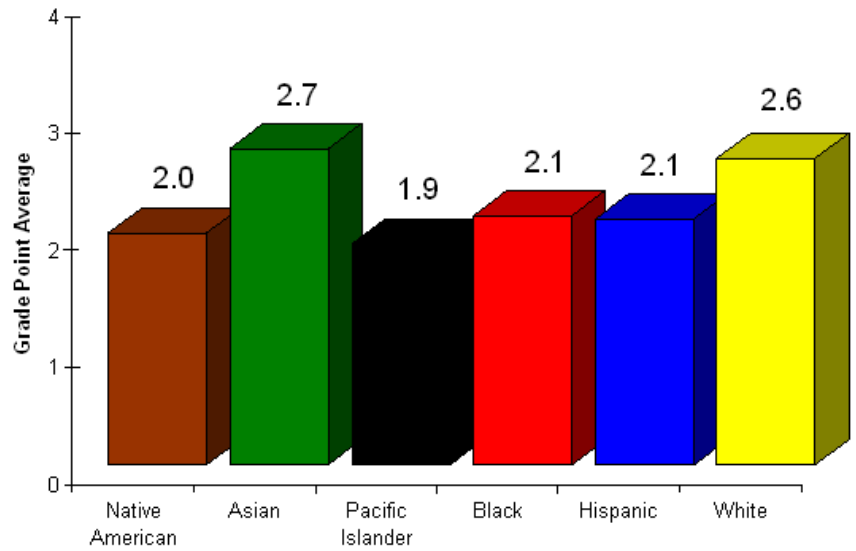
22. 2008 End of School Year Average GPA for Tacoma for High School Students by Ethnicity

HS Average GPA by School and Grade

	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12
Foss	1.7	2.1	2.5	2.7
Lincoln HS	1.6	2.0	2.3	2.5
Mt Tahoma	1.8	2.3	2.5	2.6
Oakland	0.8	1.3	1.7	1.9
SOTA		2.8	2.9	2.9
Stadium	2.0	2.4	2.7	2.9
Wilson	2.1	2.5	2.5	2.7

Grade Point Average – The GPA is a cumulative summary from the end of the 2007-08 school year.

2008 Average HS GPA by Ethnicity



23. Percent of Tacoma Students Graduating On-Time from High

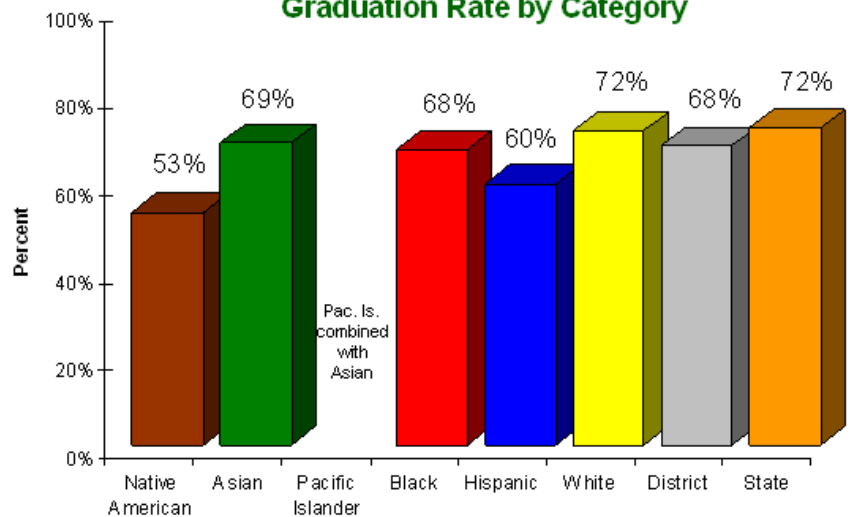


% of On-Time Graduation 2 Year Trend

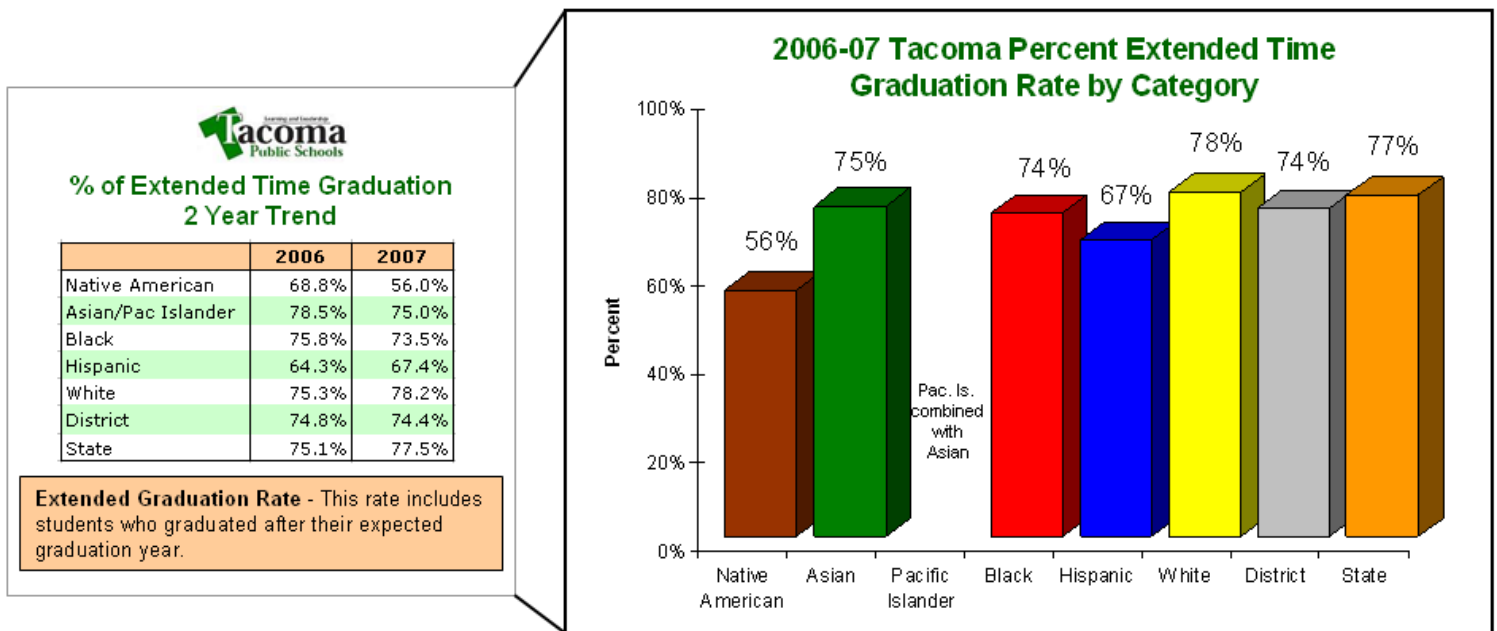
	2006	2007
Native American	58.9%	53.2%
Asian/Pac Islander	70.8%	69.2%
Black	65.4%	67.5%
Hispanic	58.8%	59.8%
White	69.1%	71.8%
District	67.6%	68.4%
State	70.4%	72.5%

On-Time Graduation Rate - These students would have started grade 9 and were expected to graduate "on-time" (in four years).

2006-07 Tacoma Percent On-Time Graduation Rate by Category



24. Percent of Tacoma Students Graduating Extended Time from High



25. District Staff (Administrators, Teachers and Others) by Percent of Ethnicity

