

## National Reports Confirm What Teachers Know

Experienced teachers find deep satisfaction in teaching classes where the students work collaboratively with each other and the teacher to learn the material. We all know that mutual respect and a focus on hard work result in high levels of student achievement, and conversely that a lack of discipline in the classroom hinders learning. Recent releases of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 2017 scores and a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on discipline in schools reflect these truths.

The NAEP test, frequently referred to as *The Nation's Report Card*, provides a look, every two years, at how third and eighth graders are doing in reading and math. The tests are administered across the nation to a random sampling of students scientifically designed to give a statistically accurate look at student ability in these two areas. Sample sizes are large enough to provide accurate snapshots for students in each state. And, for 27 districts who voluntarily participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), results are also available for their cities.

The NAEP website allows you to quickly find the results for your state and district (if they participated in TUDA) in [reading](#) and [mathematics](#) and compare them to results from previous third and eighth grade classes. Nationally, [the story of the 2017 results](#) is that scores are stuck where they were two years ago when there was a disappointing drop after years of slow progress. Of even greater concern, significant gaps between ethnic groups and top and bottom performers have persisted and even worsened in a few cases.

The discipline report, [Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities](#), was conducted by the GAO at the request of Congress. The report looks at school-year 2013-14 discipline data and attempts to shed light on possible civil rights violations in the administering of school discipline. The report shows a troubling disparity between black boys and other students in how frequently they receive serious disciplinary sanctions. For example, black boys made up 15.5 percent of the students but represented 39 percent of student expulsions.

Many in the media misinterpreted the GAO report. For example, the [Washington Post](#) headlined their story, *"Implicit racial bias causes black boys to be disciplined at school more than whites, federal report finds."* However, the report itself states, "Our analyses of these data, taken alone, do not establish whether unlawful discrimination has occurred."

Quite simply, the GAO report does not identify the reason for the disparities. In some cases, the discipline disparities may be the result implicit bias of teachers. But I believe it is much more frequently the case that the differences are caused by poverty and broken homes that in some cases are the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow laws. No one really knows all the reasons for these disparities, but research by William Jeynes [recently published in CEAL's Teachers of Vision Magazine](#) points toward two factors, religious faith (specifically Christianity) of students and family structure, as having the highest impact for reducing the achievement gap.

As Christian Teachers we need to be acutely aware of these differences and be prayerful in disciplining children. We need to be particularly thoughtful when disciplining students who we know may have several strikes against them before they start school. This does not mean that we should avoid serious disciplinary sanctions when students commit serious offences. But we do want to make sure that we communicate effectively to students that they are loved and that our disciplinary actions are an attempt to turn them toward abundant life.

The GAO report has [sparked debate](#) in the offices of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos over whether she should repeal Obama era guidance restricting the use of suspension and expulsion. She held separate meetings with supporters of the Obama guidance and those opposed to it and is now carefully weighing possible repeal of this guidance.

We should pray for wisdom for Secretary DeVos, but we should also realize that Government regulations will never solve the deep matters of the heart affecting our students. However, the Holy Spirit—working in the lives of teachers and their students—can make a huge difference.

Teachers need to have a full range of disciplinary tools at their disposal, so they can tailor sanctions appropriate for the needs of individual students. Regulations and rules, whether they are from the district, state or federal government, that restrict the ability of teachers to provide students with the most appropriate sanction, hinder the teacher’s ability to help students develop intellectually and socially.

As we prayerfully consider the best course of action for each of our students, including those who most need loving correction, we should be encouraged by this admonition from Proverbs:

*Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.*

*Do not withhold discipline from a child;*

*if you strike him with a rod, he will not die.*

*If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.*

(Proverbs 23:12-14)

This is not to say that schools should implement corporal punishment. But it does mean that those who feel that strong disciplinary sanctions should never be used do not understand the blessings of discipline spoken of in Hebrews 12.

*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

(Hebrews 12:11)

**Does President Trump need some friends?** We all need Godly friends to help us keep our course true and the President is no exception. Here is a [prayer for President Trump](#) based on this need.

**CEAI is interested in your thoughts.** Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org). John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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