

Introduction

The Indiana Disproportionality Project (IDP), a collaboration of the Indiana Department of Education and Indiana University, has been studying and addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education for the past four years. During the first two years, the project concentrated on collecting quantitative data in order to understand where disproportionality occurred, what patterns it had, and which areas of the population were most affected. In the third year, the project conducted a qualitative interview study in seven diverse districts to explore the causes of disproportionality at the local level.

Quantitative Data

Three data sets were used to describe special education enrollment across Indiana's 295 school corporations for the 1998-1999 and 2000-2001 school years: 1) general student enrollment; 2) disability category enrollment by ethnicity; and 3) service setting (e.g., mainstream vs. separate class) by ethnicity. General enrollment figures for each school corporation in the state were obtained from the Indiana Department of Education's Web site. Data for disability category and setting for each of Indiana's 295 school corporations were drawn from data collected and maintained by the Indiana Department of Education Division of Special Education.

Based on a review of existing methodology, the Indiana Education Policy Center chose three criteria as a guideline for determining whether a given proportion of ethnic representation represents disproportionality at the local level: 1) the $P \pm 10\%$ of P comparison of proportions first recommended by Chinn and Hughes (1987); 2) a two-sample z-score test that assesses statistical significance of discrepancies, a method that has been used as one criteria by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights; and 3) case-by-case review in categories with less than 10 African Americans enrolled, in order to avoid undue influence of single cases.

In the last year, IDP's methodology has shifted to reflect the emerging national conversation regarding measurement of disproportionality. Thus IDP is using three indices: the composition index, the risk index, and the relative risk ratio to describe the extent of disproportionality across the state and in individual school districts. As a criterion measure, a chi-square test determines whether the observed disproportionality at the district level is significantly different from proportionality. IDP continues to use the "10 student rule" as a lower limit to apply any statistical criteria.

Equity Action Projects

When IDP presented the qualitative and quantitative data to the special education directors from all seven participating districts, three special education directors volunteered to undertake Equity Action Projects (EAP) that would begin to address the issues of disproportionality in their districts. The following year (June 2003), IDP organized a state conference on disproportionality, which was attended by 21 districts with disproportionality. Five of those districts then volunteered to join the original three districts in creating Equity Action Projects.

EAP combines an insider/outsider approach, in this case the school district and the university, with an action research approach to creating, learning about, and systematizing change to address issues of equity in the school setting. IDP staff works directly with district staff to research best practices, analyze data, and help facilitate discussion while leaving the decisions on plan design to the district-based teams. The model combines what IDP believes about creating sustainable change with what we know about best practices in education.

The planning phase of the Equity Action Project model evolves differently in each district as it addresses the following five questions:

- * What do we know about disproportionality in our district?
- * What actions can we take to have the greatest impact on disproportionality in our schools?
- * Who needs to be part of the planning team?
- * How do we include others in the process?
- * How will we know if we are making a difference?

Participating districts are at varying stages in the process, two in implementation and six in planning. The pre-referral intervention process is being explored by four districts. One district is looking at parent involvement and has created a task force to address the achievement gap, another district is looking at classroom instruction. The process is stalled in one district and at an exploratory stage in the other.

A few preliminary findings:

- * Focus groups are an invaluable part of the process both for information finding and including more stakeholders in decision-making.
- * Issues of equity are difficult to talk about; time to do so is necessary.
- * The ways in which a plan will actually address disproportionality, and the ways in which we will know if it's working, need to be part of every meeting.