# Race Matters: Protecting Access to Student Data on Race and Ethnicity in Connecticut

**Policy Report**
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## Introduction

Connecticut must address disparities in who is afforded access to opportunities and quality services and who is consistently denied. Connecticut is a state that experiences many disparities by geography,[1] economic status,[2] gender,[3] and race/ethnicity.[4] The persistence of these disparities affects us all. To uncover such disparities, government officials, advocates, and community members need access to concrete information about who benefits from the services that the state provides. Unfortunately, recent legislative proposals have threatened to cloak evidence of racial and ethnic barriers in education in secrecy, thereby limiting our ability to identify inequities where they arise or to measure our success in correcting them.

Every child in the state deserves a high-quality education that allows them to pursue their dreams and goals. By many estimates, Connecticut has provided a quality education for many students, even ranking third in the nation for our K-12 education system in 2018.[5] But this does not reflect the experience of all students. Across the state, the 248,519 students who identify as Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and mixed-race have different experiences in schools and in their access to educational opportunities.

Connecticut's education system, like many other state systems, is grounded in systemic racism. It can be seen in an education funding structure that means that Greenwich, where 62 percent of the students are White, can spend $21,000 per student, while Bridgeport, with 88 percent students of color, spends only $14,000. It is also evident in disciplinary policies that result in suspensions and expulsions of Black and Latino students at rates far above the statewide average. The State Board of Education has even acknowledged the existence of these disparities in exclusionary discipline by race/ethnicity and identified implicit racial bias as one of the drivers of the high rates of Black and Latino youth who are suspended and expelled in Connecticut.[6] We are all affected by the disparities created by systemic

racism in education. For example, disparate exclusionary discipline rates have been proven to push Black and Latino youth into the criminal justice system,[7] limiting their future opportunities and costing the state significant amounts of money in incarcerating these youth when they otherwise would be in school and contributing to their communities, town, and state as a whole.[8]

To decrease educational inequality on the basis of race/ethnicity in an effective and evidence-based manner, all stakeholders – educators, administrators, community members, families and advocates – need access to data that show how children of color are faring in the state's schools.

## *Why is this issue important now?*

Over the last five years, there has been a nationwide attempt to limit the ability of the federal government, states, and institutions to use race/ethnicity as a relevant factor in how they create policies and distribute resources. Proposed legislation in Massachusetts[9] and California[10] to further disaggregate data for people of Asian/Pacific Islander-descent to reflect differences in ethnicity was met with significant backlash, even though this change would have reflected federal guidance for collecting data on Asian-American communities.[11] Similarly, the ongoing court case involving Harvard University[12] that challenges race-based affirmative action in higher education could limit the ability of colleges and universities to correct for imbalances in access to higher education. **Both the opposition to expanded data categories and attempts to end affirmative action are representative of broad efforts to prevent education stakeholders from being able to correct for racial imbalances in access to education for students of color, especially those who are Black, Latino, and Native American.**

In Connecticut, during both the 2018[13] and 2019[14] legislative sessions, legislation was proposed to limit the reporting of education data by race/ethnicity with two exceptions: if the data were required by federal law or if the data could be disaggregated by every ethnic subgroup in the state.

### WHAT IS DATA DISAGGREGATION?

**Data Disaggregation** is the practice of breaking down a statistic, like graduation rates or enrollment counts, into smaller sub-populations.

For example, the statewide graduation rate for all students is 87.9 percent. **However, disaggregation by gender reveals that for female students, the graduation rate is actually 91 percent, while only 85 percent of male students graduate in four years.**

**Data can be disaggregated by many different categories.** Currently, publicly available education data in Connecticut are disaggregated by a range of categories including:
- Special Education Status
- Free and Reduced Price Lunch Status
- Grade
- Gender
- English Learner Status
- Race/Ethnicity
- Foster Care Status
- Military Family Status
- Homelessness Status

Given the sheer number of ethnic subgroups that exist, it is effectively impossible to disaggregate data to this level of granularity. This level of disaggregation may also violate Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act confidentiality regulations that protect the identities of students. If enacted as written, the legislation would prevent data from being further disaggregated by ethnic subgroups despite the significant amount of evidence that a student's ethnic background, not just their race as defined by the "top-five categories,"[15] has relevance in their educational experiences and outcomes. National data provide two examples of this:

- High school completion rates vary widely within Asian ethnic subcategories.[16] Thirty-eight percent of adults who identify as Hmong and 37 percent of adults who identify as Cambodian have less than a high school diploma. In comparison, nine percent of adults who identify as Asian Indians and 19 percent of adults who identify as Chinese have less than a high school diploma, respectively.
- Within Latino subgroups, sharp differences can be seen as well.[17] While 32 percent of adults who ethnically identify as Columbian have completed college and 24 percent of Cuban adults have completed college, the rates of college completion for other Latino American ethnic groups range from seven percent (Salvadorians) to 16 percent (Puerto Ricans).

While it would be difficult to disaggregate race/ethnicity data by *every* ethnic sub-category, schools, districts, and State Department of Education (SDE) should have the ability to disaggregate by ethnic subcategories when there are significant populations in the state. For example, people who are Puerto Rican, including children, make up well over half the Latino population in the state.[18] A more detailed disaggregation of race/ethnicity data would reflect this by not just reporting the data for Latino students overall but also reporting the data for students of Puerto Rican origin specifically. After Hurricane Maria, Connecticut's schools saw an influx of Puerto Rican children with unique needs, such as behavioral health needs as a result of experiencing trauma as well as language instructional needs.[19] The practice of disaggregating data by both race and ethnicity helps the state identify needs and target resources to these children and the schools they attend.

## *How are student race/ethnicity data protected?*

There are multiple different federal and state laws and practices used today to protect student data. Federally the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) governs how education data may be used. FERPA regulations protect all information directly related to an individual student, including their demographic data (race, gender, etc.) by preventing any public access to individual, student-level data. **Only certain people can access an individual student's data:**
- Parents,
- The student,
- Scholarship and financial aid providers to which the student has applied, or
- Another school, if the student has applied for a transfer.

Other school officials and third parties may have access to education data if the data are determined to be necessary to provide a service (e.g., afterschool programs, student services) or to evaluate a state- or federally-supported education program. But in these instances, strict contracts limit the accessibility of these data to certain people within the third-party organization.[20]

**Student Counts by Race/Ethnicity and Gender**
**Ashford School District**
**2017-18**

| Race/Ethnicity | Gender | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Female | Male | Total |
| Asian | * | * | * |
| Black or African American | * | * | 9 |
| Hispanic/Latino of any race | 17 | 15 | 32 |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 0 | * | * |
| Two or More Races | 6 | 11 | 17 |
| White | 160 | 171 | 331 |
| Total | 190 | 205 | 395 |

\* The data are suppressed to ensure confidentiality.

*Figure 1. Ashford Public School's enrollment data only displays values for categories where the number of students is 5 or greater*

Even publicly reported education data are limited to protect students.[21] Under the No Child Left Behind Act, disaggregated data cannot be reported if it could potentially reveal individual student information. To resolve this, the State Department of Education uses a practice called data suppression. If the number of students in a particular category is lower than five but higher than zero, then an asterisk is displayed instead of a number value. For example, when looking at the number of students enrolled in Ashford Public Schools (see Figure 1) by gender and race, no values between zero and five are displayed in an effort to obscure small numbers that might enable identification of an individual student. CSDE's data suppression practices have been analyzed and approved by the US Department of Education Privacy Technical Assistance Center.[22]
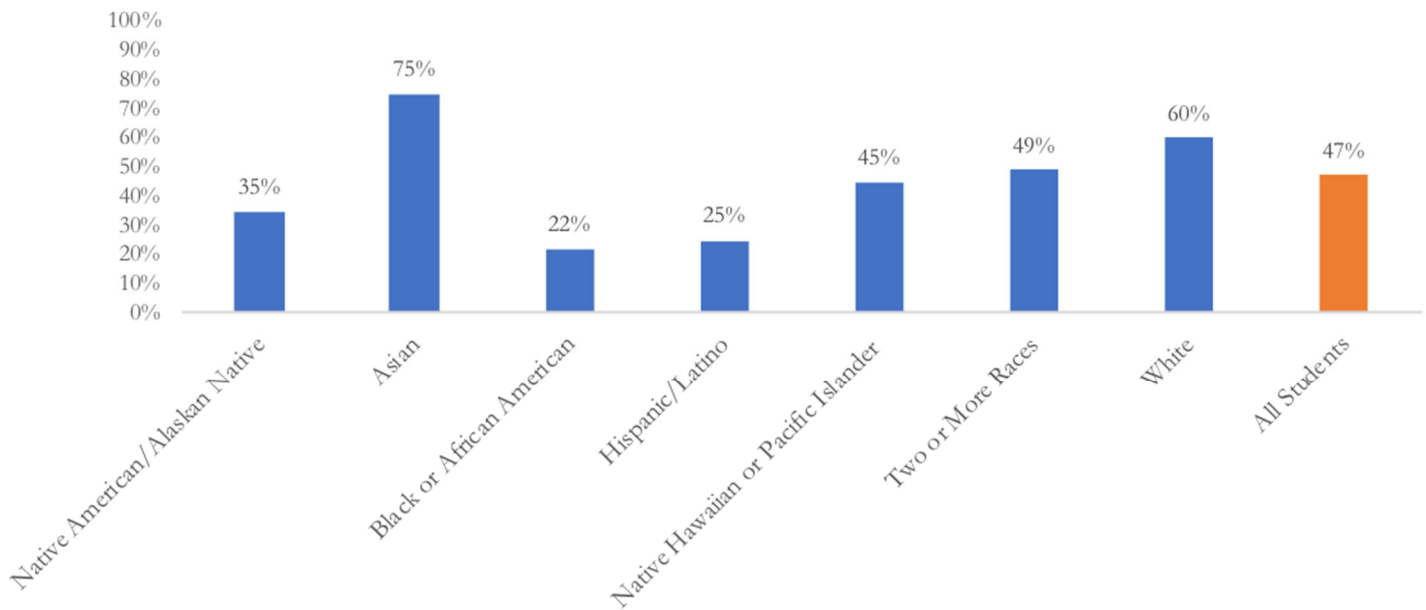
## *Optical Illusions – What Connecticut Looks Like With and Without Access to Disaggregated Race/Ethnicity Data*

Access to data disaggregated by race/ethnicity is essential to improve access to educational opportunity and achievement for students of color. When data are not disaggregated, the averages reported are often more reflective of populations of students that are numerically larger – such as White students across the state.

Take the example of statewide Smarter Balanced Math scores. Disaggregated data show us that math achievement across the state varies considerably. While students who are White and Asian both meet or exceed achievement standards at relatively high rates, students who are Black, Latino, and Native American

do not. These statistics signal to education stakeholders like parents, teachers, administrators, board of education members, and policymakers that, while math interventions may be important for all students, attention needs to be paid to understanding differences in math achievement between racial/ethnic groups and to provide targeted intervention to increase achievement rates among students who are Black, Latino, and Native American.

## Percent of Students "Met" or "Exceeded" Math Smarter Balanced Achivement Standards



Without disaggregated data, these differences would be impossible to identify because we would only see the statewide average, 47 percent. This is neither reflective of the high scores for White and Asian students nor the lower scores of Black, Latino and Native students.

A similar problem arises when measuring chronic absenteeism (students missing 18 or more days per school year), which has been linked to both lower rates of reading attainment and a decreased likelihood of graduating.[23,24] Furthermore, while common narratives suggest that chronic absence is simply a consequence of children who refuse to attend school or disengaged parents, research shows that factors like chronic illness, negative school climates, and parental mental health status contribute heavily to chronic absence.[25] If race/ethnicity data were unavailable, it would be easy to claim that only 10 percent of Connecticut's students were chronically absent in the 2015-2016 school year, which would be lower than the national average for the same year.

## Chronic Absenteeism Rate in Connecticut vs Nationwide
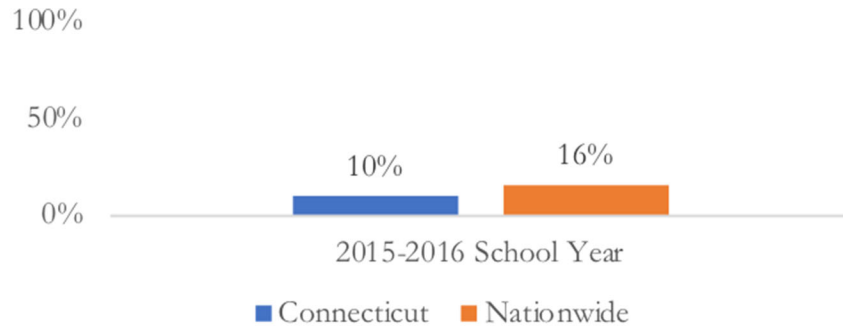


Unfortunately, the reality suggested in the statewide averages of chronic absenteeism is not the reality for all students across the state. Race/ethnicity data show us that students who are Black or Latino are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent than their White peers—a fact that has clear implications for their success in Connecticut's schools. It is essential to understand the unique factors that contribute to the disparate attendance rates for Black and Latino students to effectively create school- and district-level interventions that work for diverse communities. If these data were unavailable, it would leave schools, districts, and other education stakeholders without the information to make informed decisions to reduce chronic absenteeism.

## Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Race/Ethnicity
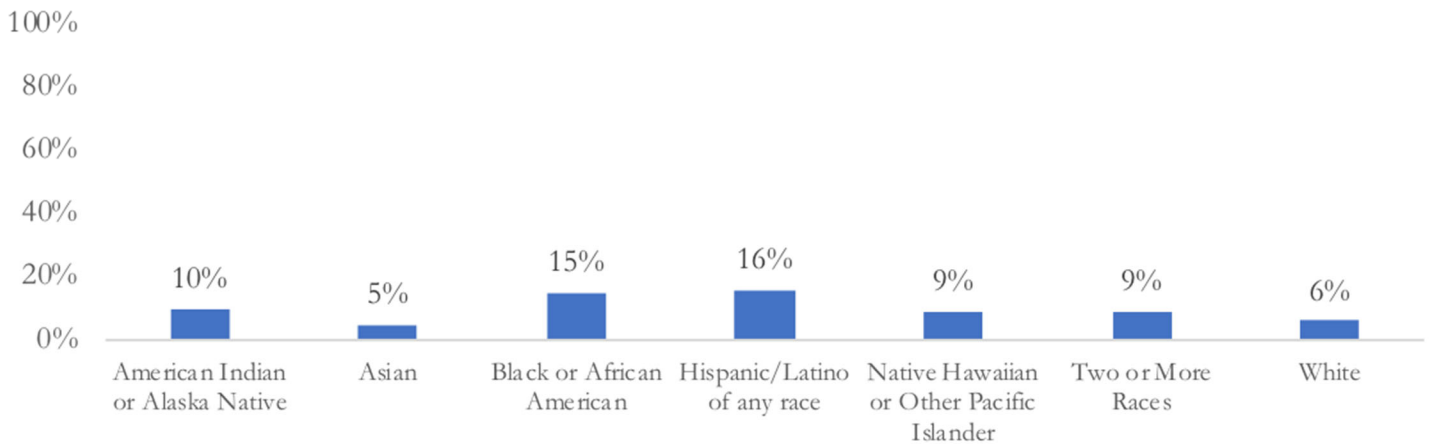


## *Policy Recommendations*

- **Maintain and expand protocols for the protection of identifiable student-level data.**

A student's personal information is just that—personal. It should be protected as such. While Connecticut is both compliant with FERPA and protects publicly reported data with practices like data suppression, school districts can do more to protect student data.[26] These practices include 1) designating a privacy official at schools to ensure compliance with federal protection laws, 2) developing school community policies on the use of student information, and 3) standardizing contract language to include clear expectations on the use and protection of student data for third parties.

- **Ensure that data on all sanction types (suspensions, expulsions, and arrests) are accessible and disaggregated at the state and district level.**

Disparities in the rates of exclusionary discipline of students of color is an issue that has been identified both in Connecticut and in the nation.[27] Unfair discipline policies and practices have been linked to a range of negative outcomes for students, including higher rates of criminal justice involvement and lower graduation rates,[28] especially for Black and Latino youth.[29] Unfortunately, the only exclusionary discipline data that are available publicly in Connecticut and disaggregated by race/ethnicity are suspension rates. While suspensions are the most common form of sanction reported to SDE, more serious sanctions like expulsions[30] and arrests[31] keep students out of school for longer periods of time and may include contact with police or courts. Access to meaningful race/ethnicity data throughout the discipline continuum is essential to have a full picture of who is being disciplined in Connecticut schools and how they are treated.

- **Require that all future data be collected and reported to reflect the diversity of our state.**

Connecticut is a state that is increasingly becoming more diverse. Between 2008 and 2017, the percent of children who are of color rose from 37 percent to 45 percent.[32] Currently, we only allow people to choose from five racial groups. This limited number of designations ignores ethnic differences that may be important in education, irrespective of a student's race. By limiting access to data by ethnic subgroup, we may obscure intra-group differences in education that have been documented by education researchers on a national level. For example, national data show that among Asian-Americans and Latino-Americans, educational achievement rates vary quite widely. Expanding categories of race/ethnicity to include country of origin for Asian- and Latino-Americans has been suggested by federal guidance and should be adopted by school districts and SDE.[33]

- **Expand access to data on identity intersections like race and gender, disability status and race.**

Identity is an incredibly complex and multifaceted concept. Race is not the only student identity that has an impact on educational outcomes. A student's gender identity, disability status, class, and sexual orientation could all have an impact on how they experience school and their outcomes. While access to data about each individual identity group is invaluable to improving outcomes for students, it still only tells a limited part of the story. Education data systems should be improved to allow analysis that reflects this reality. Any reform of state data systems should require that all publicly available education data can be analyzed in terms of intersections such as gender and race, disability status and free and reduced-price lunch status, and any other categories found to be relevant to a student's educational experience and achievement.

## *Conclusion*

It is now commonly acknowledged in education research that disaggregating student data by race and ethnicity has a positive impact for students in that it informs how schools can improve experiences for children of color. Ensuring that all of Connecticut's children of color are adequately and accurately

represented in our conversations about how to expand educational opportunities in the state requires access to disaggregated race and ethnicity data. Connecticut and all of its school districts should work to ensure that data on student race and ethnicity are protected, but not to the detriment of accessing the data itself. A student's race and ethnicity have been shown to have a significant impact on how children experience their education. Attempts to cloak evidence of racial and ethnic barriers to success will only lock-in existing inequalities by obscuring them from public view, thereby reducing our ability to measure our success in addressing such disparities. **If the state wants to ensure that all of its students are able to reach their full potential, it will protect and expand access to data practices and tools that allow us to see how all of our students and their communities are faring.**

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