Have Schools Increased Their Use of the SWIS School Ethnicity Report?

Kent McIntosh, Bert M. Eliason, Robert H. Horner, Seth L. May

February 2014

Research Statement and Rationale

Racial and ethnic disproportionality in school discipline remains a critically important topic for educators (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, and Booth, 2011). Studies continue to show that students of color, particularly African American students, receive disproportionately higher rates of office discipline referrals and suspensions (Losen and Skiba, 2010; Shaw and Braden, 1990; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002). Although there have been promising outcomes reported through the implementation of positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) for students as a whole (Bradshaw, Debnam, Koth, and Leaf, 2009; Simenson et al., 2012) and for students with disabilities (Tobin, Horner, Vincent, and Swain-Bradway, 2012), school administrators cannot assume that racial discipline gaps have been or will be eliminated (Skiba et al., 2011). Although schools implementing PBIS have been shown to have statistically significantly lower rates of disproportionality, a racial-ethnic discipline gap often remains (Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011).

To ensure an equitable education for all students, there is a need for school teams to review their data informing whether the implementation of PBIS has improved the outcomes for each racial-ethnic minority group. The Schoolwide Information System (SWIS) and the SWIS School Ethnicity Report may help in the use of such data. Any school that uses SWIS has real-time access to the School Ethnicity Report. To view this report, a school must first enter the student population count for each of the groups in the SWIS "Race-Ethnic Enrollment" fields, as well as the race-ethnicity of students receiving referrals. The School Ethnicity Report then presents three histograms, illustrating 1) the percentage of all enrolled students compared to the percentage of office discipline referrals received by each racial-ethnic group; 2) the percentage of all enrolled students compared to the percentage of students from each group with referrals; and 3) the percentage of students within each racial-ethnic group with referrals. Together, the graphs provide a comprehensive picture describing the extent of proportionality and disproportionality of school referrals at any given time during the school year. Despite its utility for answering important questions, this report has a history of being underutilized. Vincent (2008, November) found low rates of schools using the School Ethnicity Report in 2005–6 and 2007–8. The purpose of this brief is to examine change in the proportion of schools 1) entering ethnicity enrollment data into SWIS, and 2) viewing the School Ethnicity Report from the time of the Vincent brief through the 2011–12 academic year.

Data Source
The data for this brief comes from the Schoolwide Information System (SWIS) and includes access (views) of the SWIS School Ethnicity Report from 2004–5 through the 2011–12 school years. A common practice in schools adopting schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports is to use a data-based decision-making process to track progress toward enhanced school environments through improved student behavior. During the 2011–12 school year, 8,886 schools used the web-based data collection system SWIS to track their discipline data.

Methods
We sampled eight recent years of data, including all schools using SWIS. For each year, we examined the number of schools that entered ethnicity data by completing the "Race-Ethnic Enrollment" fields, and the number of schools that viewed the School Ethnicity Report at least one time during the school year.

Results
Figure 1 shows a significant increase (2150 to 8886, 413 percent) in the number of schools that were using SWIS between 2004–5 and 2011–12. It also shows an increase (1162 to 5779, 497 percent) in the number of schools entering ethnicity data. Concurrent with those increases, Figure 1 shows growth (462 to 2770, 491 percent) in the number of schools accessing their ethnicity data by viewing the School Ethnicity Report.
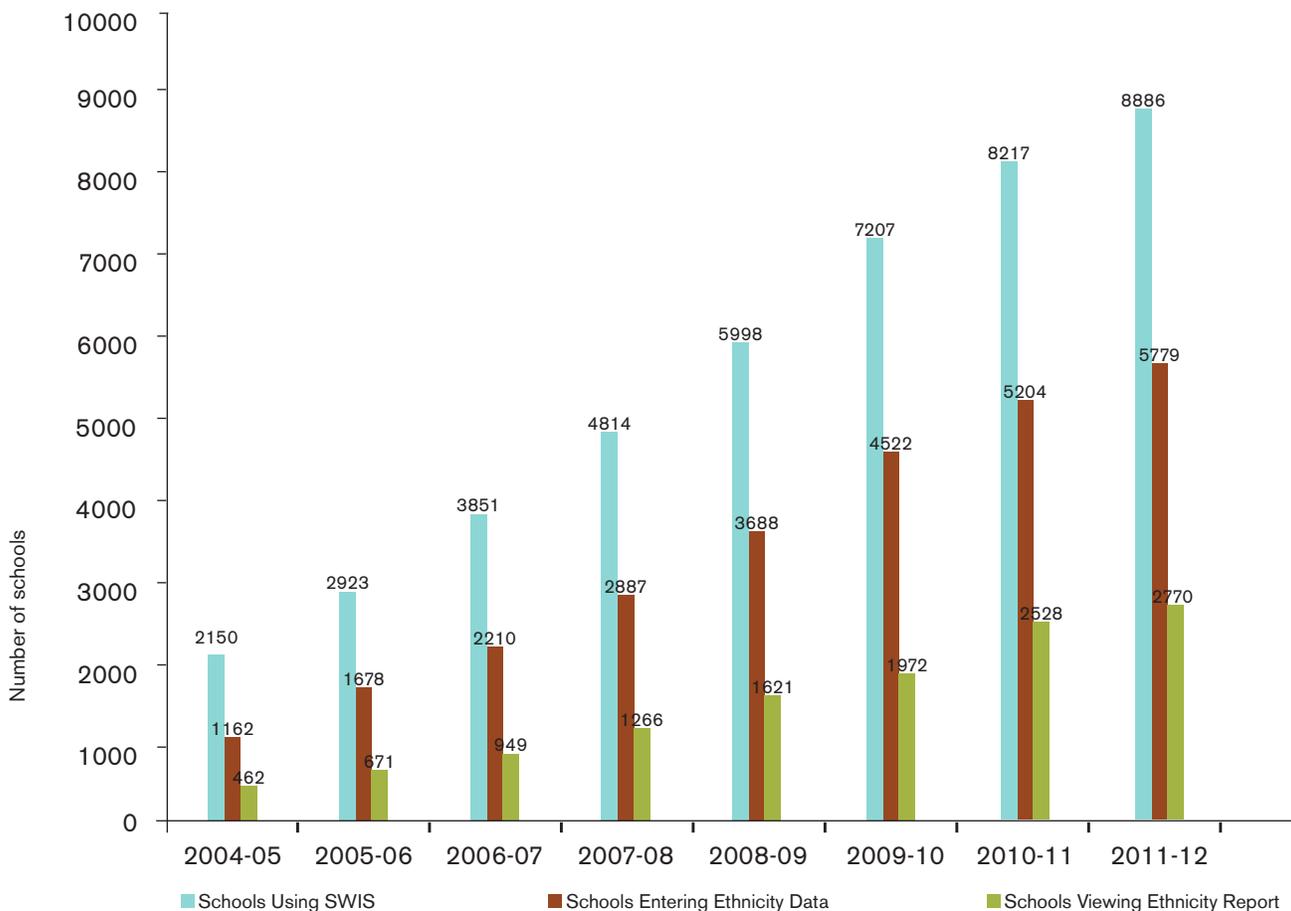
Figure 1.
SWIS Schools and Ethnicity Data

Figure 2 shows the proportion of schools entering race-ethnicity data that also viewed the School Ethnicity Report at least once. It answers the question, "Of the schools that could view the School Ethnicity Report, what percent of schools actually viewed it?" Despite the sharp growth demonstrated in Figure 1, Figure 2 shows that the actual percentage of schools viewing their ethnicity data has grown, but at a much slower rate.

Figure 1.
Percent of Schools Entering Ethnicity Data that also Viewed School Ethnicity Report
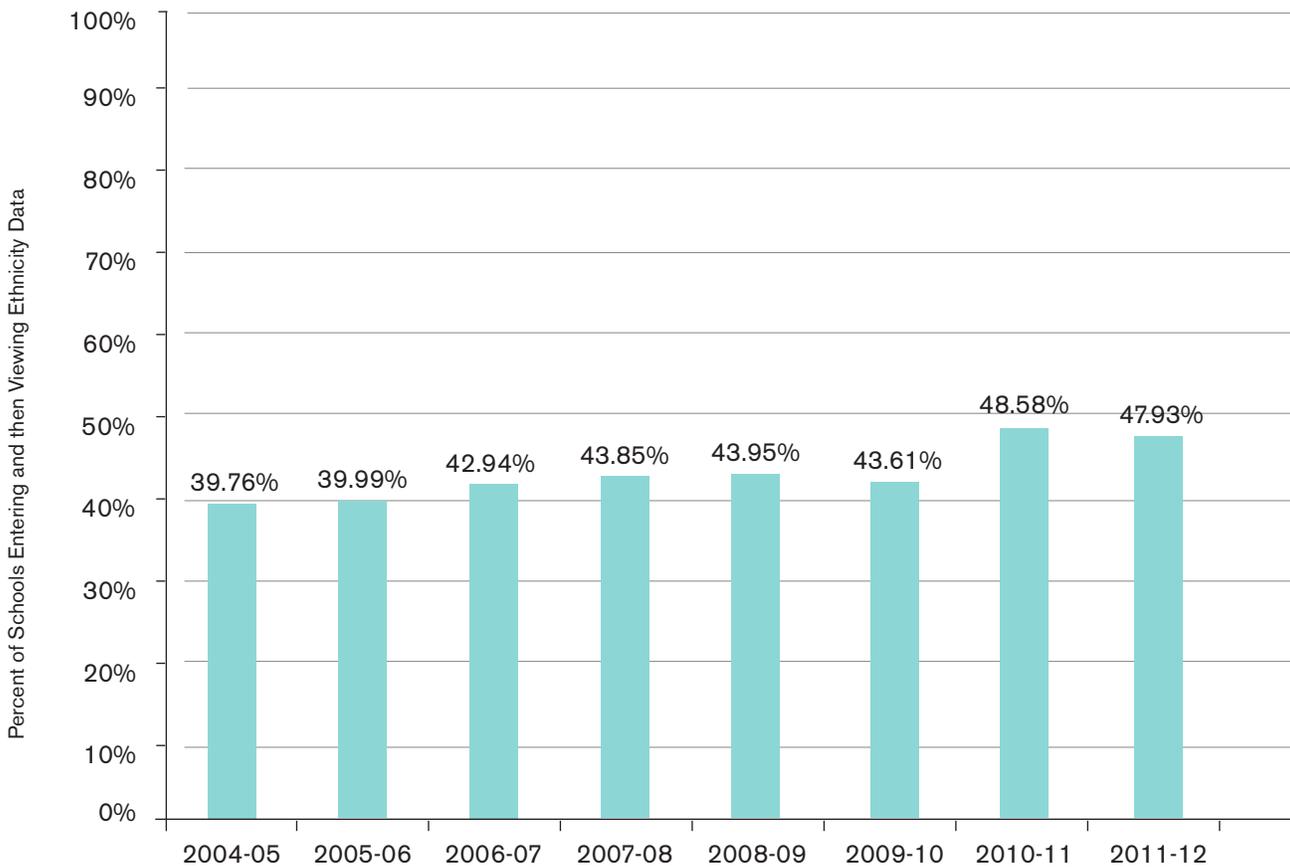
Discussion

Although more schools have been entering and viewing ethnicity data over this eight-year period (from 462 to 2770 schools), the proportion of schools accessing this report remains very low. In 2011–12, only two-thirds of the schools using SWIS entered ethnicity data. Throughout this eight-year period, fewer than half of the schools that entered ethnicity enrollment information viewed the School Ethnicity Report even once during the school year.

The low rate of schools accessing their racial-ethnic disproportionality data gives cause to wonder why. It is possible these reports are more difficult to read than other SWIS reports. The School Ethnicity Report uses comparative ratios and multiple charts, and it has been reported that the first two histograms are difficult to explain when compared to each other. It is also possible that schools are apprehensive about looking at the data because they may be reluctant to see possible disproportionality, or they might not feel they have effective interventions if they did find disproportionality.

Regarding the School Ethnicity Report, some possible solutions exist. PBIS Applications, the developer of SWIS, could put more emphasis in training on the use and understanding of the School Ethnicity Report and offer support and coaching for the use of the ethnicity report for decision-making. Concerns about appropriate interventions when schools face issues of disproportionality in the distribution of office discipline referrals are legitimate. There are no easy answers for these

3

sometimes complex situations. Some ideas include:

- Schools and school districts can enact policies to deter explicit bias. Explicit biases are related to conscious, deliberative, and/or intended outcomes. Behaving disproportionately because of explicit bias would clearly demonstrate unfair and unprofessional behavior by educators or educational staff members. Policies to promote and ensure equity through training and accountability may help address the distribution of discipline referrals.

- Schools and school districts could reduce implicit bias through the clarification of discipline and suspension policies and reducing ambiguity. Implicit bias is usually unconscious, spontaneous, and often related to habit from direct and/ or vicarious experiences. Providing clear guidelines for what behaviors warrant referrals and suspensions may help educators and educational staff members make more objective decisions.

- Schools, school districts, states, and educational institutions may use their data to identify specific contexts where disproportionality exists (e.g., types of problem behavior, locations, time of day) and provide specific training to help educators make more objective discipline decisions. The SWIS Drill Down feature's Ethnicity Graph may be used to identify the situations (e.g., locations, time of day, problem behaviors) that are most likely to result in disproportionate office discipline referrals (ODRs) and suspensions. Specific problems that local or national data indicate as more likely to result in disproportionate school discipline call for considered action. Learning to identify these situations and self-assess potential bias may help educators reduce disproportionality more precisely.

Summary
Although there has been a dramatic increase in the use of SWIS and the SWIS School Ethnicity Report during the last eight years, the proportion of schools entering school ethnicity data and actually viewing the School Ethnicity Report has grown much more slowly. We consider viewing the report just once in a school year insufficient for good decision-making, yet this brief shows that fewer than one-third of the schools using SWIS in 2011–12 entered student ethnicity data and then looked at the results of the School Ethnicity Report even once during that school year. Concerns for why so many are failing to access this important data may be complex, but review of the data and willful action related to those findings might help schools make greater gains in providing equitable education for all students.

References
Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P. I., and Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Losen, D. J., and Skiba, R. J. (2010). *Suspended education: Urban middle schools in crisis*. Montgomery, Alabama: Southern Poverty Law Center.

Shaw, S. R., and Braden, J. P. (1990). Race and gender bias in the administration of corporal punishment. *School Psychology Review, 19*, 378–383.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., and Peterson, R. L. (2002). "The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment." *The Urban Review, 34*, 317–342.

Vincent, C. G. (2008, November). Do schools using SWIS take advantage of the "School Ethnicity Report"? PBIS evaluation brief. Available at http://pbis.org/evaluation/evaluation_briefs/nov_08_(1).aspx.

Vincent, C. G., Swain-Bradway, J., Tobin, T. J., & May, S. (2011). Disciplinary referrals for culturally and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities: Patterns resulting from school-wide positive behavior support. *Exceptionality, 19*, 175-190.