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Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the production of this set of material designed to support American Indian and African American students so that they experience fair treatment throughout their education. Through the vision, support, and guidance of Nancy Larson and Elizabeth Watkins of the Minnesota Department of Education, the project was completed with the collaboration of parent representatives, education specialists representing a variety of disciplines, school district administrators, and faculty from the program in Counseling and School Psychology from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls (UWRF). Other faculty adding support to this project were from St. Scholastica in Duluth, and St. Mary's University in Minneapolis.

Many other persons, professionals, and advocates for the needs of children, parents, and caregivers contributed recommendations and strategies to the materials contained in this document. Parents shared stories and cultural liaisons added their perspectives. Different perspectives were considered in defining the issues and reviewing the literature on disproportionate representation.

Debate about the issues and content was passionate, rich, and all focused on improving outcomes for American Indian and African American students. The issues considered were broad in scope, necessitating difficult decisions about content to include and content to exclude. Frank conversations about race, culture and class were necessary. Those were difficult but necessary conversations to truly define and understand the issues impacting placement decisions involving American Indian and African American students.

With discussions about race and culture, definitions about racial identity are confusing. The focus of this manual is on the needs of American Indian and African American students. For American Indian students tribal affiliation and tribal attachments are often used as a key determinant for heritage.

Most definitions of African Americans include a descendant of slaves component, or that one ancestor was born in America. The term Black is often used to globally refer to students of color, but the term Black students can include students who are descendants of slaves and those who are immigrants to the United States and those who are English Language Learners (ELL), typically from African countries. Therefore, analyzing data on African American students who are descendants of slaves is difficult.

For White students, connection to ancestry from Europe is often a key component. In some literature some persons refer to European American. As a foundation of references to race for the purposes of this manual, the US Census definitions are a starting point. Even this foundation is imperfect. In recognition of our multi-cultural society many individuals claim identification to more than one race, which is allowed by the US Census.

In discussing issues where a racial component is a factor, different terms are applied. These terms include, White peers, mainstream population, or predominant culture. In many respects these comparisons are environment specific. In a school with 90% or more of the students
identifying as white, phrases such as mainstream and predominant culture apply. Consider though a setting where the student population is 70% African American, 15% White, 10% Asian and 5% other. References to mainstream or predominant culture then need to be re-defined. From the perspective of test developers, a White middle class orientation is often used as the foundation for assessment. Comparison to White peers are made to illustrate the discrepancy in performance between groups of student.

**US Census Categories**

**White** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

**Black or African American** – A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

**American Indian or Alaska Native** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

**Asian** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

Decisions on content were for the manual were guided by a focus on positive expectations and outcomes for American Indian and African American students. From reviewing the literate participants working on the project affirmed beliefs in the capacity of educators, staff, and administrators to work collaboratively with caregivers, parents, and other advocates, to revise, enhance, or implement strategies, procedures, or decision-making rubrics that contributed to the success of American Indian and African American students within public schools in Minnesota.

Success is defined as a combination of reduction in disproportionate representation in special education programs, combined with improvement in the academic achievement of American Indian and African American students. As well, maintaining placement in traditional classroom settings versus use of exclusion placements is a marker of change. In the long term success is shown by more American Indian and African American students completing high school.

A systemic perspective was adopted early in the revision process. Many complex factors converge to contribute to the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students within special education settings. Solutions to the concern of disproportionate placement involve multi-prong approaches. A systemic approach combined with individual responsibility, founded on professional ethics, is necessary to address factors that contribute to disproportionate placement of African American and American Indian students in special education programs.
Among the goals in producing the material for this project was to confirm that there is a path to change to reduce inappropriate placement of African American and American Indian students, and to provide information for addressing the needs of American Indian and African American students.

The path to change for improved services for American Indian and African American students is based on several steps.

Steps to change include

1. Recognition of the problem;
2. Identifying sources of error with a school system;
3. Training educators and administrators on issues of culture and impact on assessment or assessment decision-making;
4. Collaborating with parents and caregivers;
5. Collecting data through school wide review (considered self-assessment);
6. Implementing a plan of improvement and;

Communication about this project can be directed to:

Donald Lee Stovall, Psy.D  
Professor, University of Wisconsin-River Falls  
226 Wyman Education Building  
410 South 3rd. Street  
River Falls, Wisconsin 54022

Donald.Lee.Stovall@uwrf.edu
The following provided expertise and support to the production of this material

**Minnesota Department of Education Staff/Consultants**

Nancy Larson, Director, Division of Special Education  
Elizabeth Watkins, Special Education Diversity Consultant, Division of Special Education  
Vicky Weinberg, SLD Consultant, Division of Special Education  
Phil Sievers, PBIS Consultant  
Shirley Kampa, American Indian Consultant, Division of Special Education

**School Climate Workgroup Members**

Leslie Laub, MS Special Education, Ed.S General and Special Education Administration,  
MA Licensed Psychologist, Educational Consultant  
Erin Lavery Wanat, M.A., Director of Special Education, Innovative Special Education Services  
Lynn Smith, Ph.D., School Climate Solutions  
Edna McKenzie Ed.S., Special Education, Special Education Teacher – West Metro Education Program  
Caroline Baker, Ph.D., N.C.C. Assistant Professor: University of Wisconsin – River Falls  
Todd Savage, Ph.D. NCSP, Associate Professor: University of Wisconsin – River Falls  
Marilyn Leifgren, Ed.S. School Psychologist, Consultant, Adjunct Professor,  
Concordia – St. Paul, St. Mary’s University of Minnesota

**American Indian Workgroup Members**

Valerie Tanner, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Chair, Undergraduate Programs in School of Education, St. Scholastica, Duluth  
Jackie Crowe Fraedrich, M.Ed., Consultant  
Merlin Williams, B.A.  
Marie Wilson, M.S., Special Education, District Program Facilitator, Minneapolis Public Schools, Member of Menominee Tribe  
Shirly Kampa, Minnesota Department of Education Consultant  
John Villebrun B.A.  
Alicia Zeta, B.A.  
Joan Bibeau, B.A  
Aquila Tapio, B.A.  
Tanis Henderson, B.A.
African American Workgroup Members

Donald Stovall, Psy.D., Professor, School Psychology Program, University of Wisconsin-River Falls
Portia McClain, MA Education with specialization in Linguistics and African American English University of Minnesota Adjunct Professor
Marcus Washington, Ed.S., School Psychologist
Edna McKenzie, Ed. S., Special Education (MA Education), Adjunct Professor, St. Mary’s University, Special Education Teacher West Metro Education Program
Troy Gonzales, Ph.D, St. Mary’s University Minneapolis
Sarise Crayton, Parent Representative, Parent Advocate
Andriel Dies, J.D., Parent Representative, Parent Advocate

Assessment Workgroup Members

Scott Woitaszewski, Ph.D., Professor and Director, School Psychology Program UW-River Falls
Kelly Demers, Ed.S, NCSP, School Psychologist
Portia McClain, MA., Consultant
David Olson, Ed.S., MSW, NCSP, School Psychologist, Faribault Schools
Marilyn Leifgren Ed.S, School Psychologist

Content Reviewers:

Alexander Hines, Winona State University
Keisha Coleman, Consultant
Kenneth Turner, Assistant Principal North St. Paul, Consultant
Lynn Davis, St. Cloud State University
Marcellus Davis, Diversity Coordinator, Robbinsdale Schools
Rhinnel Atherton, Winona State University

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Scott Woitaszewski, Ph.D., Director, School Psychology Training Program
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Caroline Baker, Ph.D, N.C.C. Assistant Professor UWRF, Wisconsin School Counselor Association
Andriel Dies, J.D., Chief Diversity Officer, University of Wisconsin-River Falls
Molly Van Wagner, UWRF Grants and Research Office

Graduate Student Researchers

Christina Madison, M.S.E., Research Assistant, UWRF School Psychology Program
Beth Sowden, M.S.E., Research Assistant, UWRF School Psychology Program
Introduction

Disproportionate representation in specific disability categories occurs when the percentage of students in a program from a specific racial or ethnic group exceeds what would be expected based on the makeup of students in the system, or when placement rates between groups of students are compared. The state of Minnesota first responded to the concern of the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students in special education programs in 1998, where the first publication of the Reducing Bias Manual (A Vision for A Better Education) occurred.

The subtitle of the original guidelines, A Vision For a Better Education, was deliberately aspirational. Disproportionate representation has causes and effects that extend beyond the walls of individual classrooms or schools. A directed effort by educators, administrators, and collaboration with caregivers and community leaders is necessary to address the factors that contribute to disproportionate representation.

Special education programs are services based upon needs of student and categories of disabilities established by federal guidelines\(^1\). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA\(^2\)) established federal categories of educationally related disabilities. Public schools have the responsibility of meeting the needs of students identified as having a disability, and for developing interventions that support students in need of such services. Services include programs for students with learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, difficulties with managing emotions or behaviors, or autism spectrum disorders.

Since the original publication of the Reducing Bias manual disproportionate representation, nationally and within Minnesota, has remained a concern. The state has responded again to promote promising practices in 2013 and beyond with a renewal and revision of content focused on information and methods to support fair assessment of American Indian and African American students in public schools. A collaborative effort from professionals from the University of Wisconsin – River Falls, community consultants, parent representatives, staff from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), school district administrators, and professionals with expertise in the area of cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity worked to produce content that represents promising practice guidelines on the subject of supporting students from American Indian and African American backgrounds.

The guidelines contained within this document are designed to promote promising practices in general education services and special education decision-making about the needs of American Indian and African American students. A specific outcome of the information contained in these guidelines is the reduction of the overrepresentation in special education programs of American Indian and African American students. The guidelines are also designed to provide educators and families with knowledge of strategies about school environment issues that proactively contribute to supporting students while helping to reduce negative outcomes for American Indian and African American students.

\(^1\) http://www.ldinfo.com/categories.htm
\(^2\) http://idea.ed.gov/
It is important to support expectations for success and achievement of American Indian and African American students. Negative outcomes for American Indian and African American students occur when students are suspended or expelled from programs, or unnecessarily removed from traditional classroom settings. With removal or inappropriate special education placement, students lose access to traditional services that support their growth and development. The information contained in these guidelines identify factors associated with a positive school climate to support American Indian and African American students as they progress through their schooling in Minnesota public school districts.

The topics addressed by these guidelines include issues related to the identification of students in need of interventions, decision-making when specialized assessments are conducted, and discussion of educator attitudes about culture. The word assessment is commonly used to refer to a process of evaluating the needs of students. Assessment can be both formal and informal. As used within these guidelines, Assessment is generally defined as the collection and interpretation of information that forms the basis of good decisions about strategies, services, or interventions to benefit the individual student, or to support caregivers and families in their work with students. Assessment can also be used from the systems perspective with regard to accountability efforts, system appraisal, and data collection to inform good practice and make adjustments to support the needs of students.

A comprehensive perspective to address the educational, social, and emotional needs of American Indian and African American students is presented. The guidelines address educator awareness, knowledge, and issues related to collaboration with parents, families, and caregivers, particularly when cross-cultural communications and competence are necessary.

The strategies recommended within these guidelines can be used regardless of a student’s race, ethnicity, or primary language; however, they were particularly designed for settings where American Indian and African American students make up a significant percentage of the student population, and where their presence within special education programs exceeds what would be expected through statistical probability. Many aspects of the material on race and culture may be applied to a larger discussion of race and cultural identity of students within educational settings. This dialogue is important and sets the stage for learning, growth, development, and positive change.

**Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) & Special Education Services**

An expectation within public education is equal opportunity and support for all students, typically referred to as a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Historically concerns have been reported about the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students, and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education programs (Specific Data on the performance of American Indian and African American Students in Minnesota Schools is provided in the School Climate chapter).

American Indian and African American students are typically under-represented in programs for students identified as gifted. While special education and other alternative education settings are designed to provide interventions for students who have qualified for services, educators, administrators, and the public at-large have legitimate concerns when students are placed in
specialized programs for reasons other than an educational need. When placements occur in special education programs for reasons other than the student meeting actual eligibility requirements, the concept of an appropriate public education is invalid.

Issues related to diversity factors and cultural differences have a major impact on the special education process. In terms of referral and assessment, the aspects of diversity of most concern to educators are factors related to racial identity and cultural affiliation, communication patterns and practices, and socioeconomic factors.

Special education programs are designed to provide individualized and small group instruction based upon individual needs and specific disability categories recognized by the federal government and implemented through state and local education agencies. The goals of such services are to improve student academic achievement and functional performance while supporting the self-esteem, self-concept development, and holistic development of participants, typically with the expectation that maximizing independent functioning as a goal for all students. The goal for all students is to become self-regulated learners. While these goals are important, they are not consistently achieved for American Indian students and African American students when they are unnecessarily removed from the general education setting and placed in special programs.

Concerns about the special education process and negative outcomes for American Indian and African American students include lowered expectations about the ability of students to meet academic expectations, loss of access to the general K-12 education program and ability to meet progress standards, and reduced access to postsecondary opportunities. These negative consequences are important to avoid for all students, yet American Indian and African American students are particularly at-risk to inappropriate special education or alternative placements. Serious questions are raised about an appropriate public education when students are placed in programs for reasons other than the presence of an actual disability.

**Intended Benefits of Special Education Services**

According to federal regulation, the purpose of special education is to “ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.”

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Generally, special education services are designed to offer:

- Access to specialized services
- Specially designed individualized and small group instruction
- Individualized curriculum
- Specialized instruction in coping strategies and social skills
- Improved rates of learning and improved self-esteem
- Preparation for adult life, including instruction geared toward employment, independent living, and self-advocacy
- Greater family input on educational goals through the IEP process
- Access to general education curriculum with modifications

The services offered through special education placement often involve modification of the standard curriculum for students. Educators identify the where students can be challenged to grow without excessive frustration (zone of proximal development) and implement developmentally appropriate instruction. Circumstances where curriculum or social adjustments are needed are an opportunity for educators, working with the student and their caregivers, to engage in a process of modeling, coaching, skill-building (scaffolding) and use of strategic evaluations to support students in developing skills and acquiring knowledge to increase their chance of success.

A concern with prolonged exposure to special education curriculums substantially different from general education requirements is that students within special education programs are removed from curriculums that help them achieve success on state standards. For other students, post secondary choices such as college may not be achievable because they have been in programs lacking rigorous preparation to provide a foundation to achieve success at the college level. Access to a rigorous curriculum and equitable education is a requirement for all students within special education programs.

The Concept of Over-Representation

As stated by the Council for Exceptional Children, “over-representation in special education occurs when a group’s membership in the program is larger than the percentage of that group in the educational system or within a given disability category (e.g., learning disability, cognitive disability, emotional disturbance, etc.). Data consistently indicate American Indian and African American students are susceptible to over-representation (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 20115). Such population variance is rarely justifiable and is always cause for concern” (Addressing Over-representation, 2002, p.16).


There are many factors that contribute to disproportionate representation, including but not limited to issues such as social issues (poverty, racism, family stability), general education system issues (capacity of schools to adapt to changing student demographics), higher education issues (teacher recruitment and training, particularly among members of underrepresented populations), and special education system issues (screening and assessment practices). Special education identification and placement of students rests upon a complex system of referral, individualized assessment, and identification practices that are based upon statewide eligibility criteria. This takes place within the context of the public education system, staffed by individuals trained in institutes of higher education and supported by administrations.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has recommended that the Secretary of Education develop a standardized approach to define disproportionate representation to be used by all states. Within their most recent report the GAO expressed concern that disproportionate representation of racially and ethnically diverse students in special education was a concern. However, states were given flexibility in how they defined disproportionate representation. The GAO “found that the way some states defined overrepresentation made it unlikely that any districts would be identified and thus required to provide early intervening services”, therefore the need for a standardized definition of overrepresentation. The concern is that some settings report no disproportionate representation, however, such findings are due more to a poor definition than an absence of a problem. IDEA requires that districts identified with disproportionate representation set aside 15% of their IDEA funds to provide early intervention service for students who require academic or behavioral support.

Within IDEA three indicators are used to review information on disproportionate representation and to make determinations as to whether a district has overrepresentation. The three indicators are: (1) disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education due to inappropriate identification, (2) disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education in specific disability categories due to inappropriate identification, and (3) significant discrepancies in suspensions and expulsions. Based on this approach, up to seven different measurements are available to states to assess disproportionate representation.

### IDEA Performance Indicators

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In Minnesota, school districts are cited for overrepresentation when they meet the threshold for disproportionate representation for 3 consecutive years. Overrepresentation of specific American Indian and African American students in special education programs within a district can be viewed as a sign that forces involving errors or bias are operating in schools within the district to the degree that they significantly and negatively impact specific groups of students. Such forces need to be addressed. Such forces can include lack of educator knowledge about the impact of cultural differences, faulty intervention and assessment systems; faulty decision-making processes when students from diverse backgrounds are involved, or institutional racism.

Factors that Contribute to Disproportionate Representation

Many factors contribute to disproportionate identification and placement in special education of American Indian and African American students. Some factors are related to characteristics of the student, while other factors are related to the school setting and climate. Educators in some settings may not adjust their understanding of the student’s needs when diversity factors are present (language differences, differences in belief systems). Other factors that contribute to disproportionate representation are related to the school setting and involve systemic issues such as educator recruitment and preparation and how well educators are prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Instructional style preference of educators and learning style preferences of students are important to evaluate, as a mismatch can create opportunities for misunderstanding.

Special education assessment procedures can contribute to disproportionate placement. Traditional assessment processes contribute when they minimize or bypass quality Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 interventions, rely too heavily on scores from standardized tests (particularly tests of intelligence), do not take a holistic view of the individual student, focus on student weaknesses to the exclusion of strengths, and do not consider other variables that may cause the presenting problem. Howard (2006) described a temptation to blame the student for difficulties.

Concerns with Special Education Assessment:

- Referral processes that bypass or minimize quality Tier 1 (Universal Interventions), Tier 2 (Targeted Interventions), or Tier 3 (Intensive Interventions)
- Reliance on standardized tests (particularly tests of intelligence) that are inconsistent with district population
- Failure to take a holistic view of the individual student
- Focus on student weaknesses to the exclusion of strengths (Can’t Do versus Can Do)
- Blaming the child rather than consider other variables that may cause the presenting problem

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8 Howard, G. (2006) We can't teach what we don't know: white teachers, multiracial schools. Teachers College Record.
Impact on American Indian Students

Minnesota is the home of seven Anishinaabe reservations and four Dakota Communities. According to MDE data from 2008-2009, the statewide overall weighted risk ratio for American Indian students was the highest of all racial groups at about 1.7, with the average being 1 (this data suggests that American Indian students are almost twice as likely as their peers to be involved in special education programs; scores greater than 1 indicate over-representation). American Indian students were consistently rated at the highest identification rate for Specific Learning Disabilities, Developmental Cognitive Disabilities, and Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. This disproportionate representation is of concern as research shows that special education has limited exit strategies after students are placed, limited and less rigorous curriculum than the general classroom setting, limited access to academically able peers who serve as age-appropriate role models, consequences of reduced post-secondary opportunities, and racial separation from peers.

Impact on African American Students

In Minnesota, African-America students are 1.5 times more likely to be in special education programs compared to other racial groups (all special education disabilities). Of additional concern is the high rate of students within special education who were suspended or expelled for more than 10 days. African American students are three times more likely to be identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) when compared to their White Peers. Repeated discipline referrals of students can establish negative or low expectations about the student, and such events are a persistent occurrence for African American students (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011⁹).

Repeated use of discipline referrals and suspensions, without identifying the emotional and support needs of students or developing interventions, does not serve students, and does little to address meaningful interventions that enable the student to meet goals. An editorial from the Minnesota Star Tribune newspaper expressed alarm about the use of suspensions with black students, reporting that there was no national evidence that black students engaged in misbehavior at a rate higher than other students. However, black students were suspended more often than their peers, often for less-serious infractions than their peers¹⁰.

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¹⁰ http://m.startribune.com/opinion/?id=134938518
Commentary on Standardized Tests

Standardized tests of intelligence, achievement, adaptive behavior, or behavioral adjustment must be evaluated for use with students on a case-by-case basis. While appropriate for many students, standardized tests are not appropriate for all students. When standardized tests have content bias or technical limitations because of norming samples that are not sensitive to populations with a significant number of diverse students, evaluators must make decisions about the appropriateness of the instrument with their student population. Although standardized tests undergo rigorous review, it cannot be assumed that such instruments are free of bias.

Standardized tests may have greater validity for students who are more acculturated to the norms of the dominant culture and whose experiences are reflected in the content and norming samples of a given test. In determining whether a standardized test is appropriate for a given student, assessment teams need to consider whether a particular student’s life experiences are represented in the content of the instrument and whether he/she is similar to students included in the norming samples.

Standardized tests may have less validity for students who are members of a racial or diverse cultural group and/or who have not been exposed to a wide range of information and life experiences because of economic disadvantage. Inferences and interpretations from nationally standardized tests may also be less valid for those living in a home where another language or dialect is spoken or whose use of English is influenced by the cross-generational use of another language. Assessment teams must be vigilant to factors that weaken the reliability or validity of information gained from testing, particularly when placement decisions are considered. Any limitations about measures should be communicated to parents and caregivers when results of assessment are shared.

When inferences or interpretations drawn from standardized tests have limited validity for American Indian or African American students, educators should use a variety of strategies to reduce bias and increase fairness in the overall assessment process and to ensure that students are accurately identified as having a disability and appropriately placed in special education services. State guidelines require careful consideration of factors that could lead to bias in interpreting results from assessment.

Disproportionate representation in special education can result from failure to understand the cultural dynamics of American Indian or African American students. Other factors associated with the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students in special education or alternative services include concerns about bias in referral procedures, bias in assessment practices, or bias in how placement decisions are made about American Indian and African American students. These factors combine with inequities in opportunity based on socio-economic factors such as poverty, and with curriculums that are not culturally responsive (Sullivan et al., 2009). Often, the orientation in conducting evaluations of students is deficit based. It is important to approach understanding students and their needs through a focus on strengths of the student. Educators involved with assessment and evaluation teams must maintain a student-centered approach in each step of the evaluation and programming process.
Disproportional representation has causes and effects that extend beyond repercussions for the individual student, classroom, or school. Educators working towards a more equitable system are seeking ways to (a) make good decisions about assessment and eligibility for individual students, and (b) to advocate for an improved education system that meets the needs of all students.

**Test Taker Rights**

Persons who take tests have rights. Parents, caregivers and legal guardians have due process protections involving issues such as informed consent. As well, many professional organizations have collaborated on a set of fair testing practices to guide “professionals in fulfilling their obligation to provide and use tests that are fair to all test takers regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, linguistic background, or other personal characteristics” (Joint Committee on Testing Practices, p.3). The standards can be found at [http://www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/rights.aspx](http://www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/rights.aspx). Issues covered within the standards involve development of tests, selection of tests, reporting and interpreting results, and informing test takers. As test takers in school settings are mostly minors, informing their caregivers becomes a key element in communications about testing issues.

Within the guidelines a broad definition of tests is used, regardless of the mode of presentation (paper and pencil, computer-based tests, and performance tests. Although designed primarily for tests requiring formal or trained administration teachers are encouraged to use the guidelines as a method to help improve their testing practices with students.

**Worldview, Educator Awareness, and Cultural Competence**

Given the concern and documented evidence of overrepresentation of American Indian and African American students in special education programs, it is essential educators consider the impact of the student's culture within the process of developing interventions across the three tiers of service or through a system of support services for students used in their school settings. *Decisions that involve interventions, referral for assessment, placement in special education programs, or suspension/expulsion for an American Indian or African American student must consider the student’s culture, language, experience and worldview before changes are made in their programming.* These factors fall under the umbrella of exclusionary factors that may argue against a special education placement due to the influence of factors outside of the student’s, caregiver’s, or family’s control.

A person’s worldview involves consideration of the social, economic, and political climate surrounding the individual, combined with his or her family influence, individual characteristics, and cultural background. Other aspects of worldview include issues involving gender and sexuality (Flores, López, & De Leon, 2000). Educators who fail to consider their own worldview as well as the worldviews of their students can develop misperceptions about others, or have

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difficulty with communication when working with students and families whose worldview differs from theirs (Sattler, 1988\textsuperscript{13}).

Educator awareness of nonbiased strategies to assess the needs of American Indian and African American students, combined with understanding worldview, is a key to reducing problems with disproportionate representation. Educators representing a variety of disciplines have the ability to make a positive for students involving the screening, referral, and placement process at each stage where decisions are made. The application of proactive strategies by educators, informed by promising practices suggested by literature and research, is a means to make a positive impact on the achievement gap that exists between diverse students in Minnesota and their White Peers as well as a means to reduce disproportionate representation. Families, educators, and administrators should work collaboratively to enact policies and procedures that support fair assessment, and they must use measures to monitor their work with students on a regular basis.

As proposed by Corey, Corey, & Callanan, (2007\textsuperscript{14}) persons in professional development programs (e.g. teachers, administrators, special educators, school counselors, school psychologists), “come into training knowing only their own culture, which can lead to cultural tunnel vision, a perception of reality based on a very limited set of cultural experiences” (p. 114). Another method to express this view is to consider the cultural lens each person has, or, as stated by Guerrero and Leung, (2008\textsuperscript{15}), “everyone has a cultural lens that affects their world view” (p.19). Faulty vision or misperceptions about the ability, skills, or behavioral intent of African American or American Indian students contribute to erroneous judgment of those students, suggesting interventions that are not warranted or placement in services that are not appropriate.

All educators, professional support staff, and administrators must work from a culturally competent perspective. As part of profession training, education professionals in Minnesota have had diversity training as part of their licensure requirements. However, educators, program administrators and staff have a professional responsibility to continue to increase their knowledge of how race and culture, communication differences, and socioeconomic diversity influence special education assessment. A review of position statements from educator disciplines affirms this statement. A culturally competent perspective is one that identifies behaviors, attitudes and policies within a school system and among professionals to enable the setting to be responsive to the needs of students. Tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory can foster self-awareness and growth in this area (http://www.idiinventory.com/).

Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals to enable those involved to work effectively in cross–cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989\textsuperscript{16}). As stated by


Chambers (2012) “Teacher education programs must create early and frequent opportunities for pre-service teachers to honestly explore, discuss, and understand how their belief systems and ways of seeing the world may influence their classroom interactions. Culturally competent pedagogy begins with the cultural competence of the teacher”. While this statement emphasizes teachers, it should apply to all professional educators and administrators.

**Racial and Cultural Diversity**

Race and culture are the terms most often identified when discussing diversity. However, race and culture are hardly discrete, and it is a challenge to separate the notion of race from that of culture. These two terms are interrelated, but they are not synonymous. At its most basic level, the term “race” is used in the United States to refer to skin color and possibly to country of origin, often appearing as a category that must be checked on a form. For many people, the available choices do not begin to correspond to their own complex, multi-racial identity. An individual’s race and their culture may or may not correspond. Culture refers to a more complex web of values and behaviors. Culture includes the shared history or the stories people hear that shape their attitudes, beliefs and outlook toward the world. Culture is closely related to other aspects of diversity, communication, and socioeconomic status. For education in general and special education assessment in particular, culture is a more relevant concept than race.

It is helpful to remember that some aspects of culture are observable and some are not:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observable</th>
<th>Not Easily Observable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Spiritual beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>Values</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customs for greetings</td>
<td>Gender roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
<td>Attitudes toward education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious practices</td>
<td>Recognition of disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Attitudes toward people with disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessors should not make assumptions about a student’s cultural identity based only on aspects of culture that are easily observable. Culture is a complex pattern of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>assumptions</th>
<th>customs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>obligations</td>
<td>sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behaviors</td>
<td>traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>beliefs</td>
<td>time orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activity level</td>
<td>sentiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitudes</td>
<td>values</td>
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</tbody>
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While many American Indian and African American students have some characteristics that are common to their respective racial and cultural backgrounds, they will naturally vary according to their personal characteristics, environments, and personal experiences.

For the purposes of these guidelines, it is necessary to be mindful that students, their caregivers as well as educators are unique individuals who are also members of groups. Individual racial and cultural identity is a combination of personal characteristics and characteristics adopted as a result of group affiliation. These include:

**Personal Characteristics and History**: Physical appearance and attributes, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual attributes, personal history, and environmental experiences.

**Group Affiliations and History**: Family role and membership, affiliation with groups that share spiritual beliefs, experiences, history, interests, and environment.
Socioeconomic Diversity

Socioeconomic status is another aspect of diversity. Students enrolled in public schools in Minnesota come from homes that represent the upper and middle classes, the working poor, and families in multi-generational poverty.

Demographic information indicates that many members of cultural and racial minority groups in Minnesota are poor. Their socioeconomic status overlaps with other cultural characteristics and can compound the challenges these students face in school. Educators should be aware of the possibility of confusing socioeconomic issues with racial and cultural differences.

In summary:

- Socioeconomic differences overlap and interact with cultural and racial differences.
- Socioeconomic differences shape group affiliations and individual identities.
- Socioeconomic classes can be thought of as “cultures” in and of themselves.

Poverty

Poverty affects children in many other ways. Students growing up in poverty may not have the range of experience and knowledge that is expected in order for them to do well in school and on standardized tests. Students faced with serious economic problems may also experience a great deal of stress and anxiety. It is difficult for students to focus on lessons and learning when they are homeless or lack food and clothing. The struggle some families face in trying to provide for their children’s basic needs may result in very limited verbal communication among family members and limited language development in children. With these concerns expressed, it is important to avoid the assumptions that poverty means the student comes with deficits in their potential, ability, or motivation. A perspective that all students have potential serves the student better.

While it is important for those involved in the education system to respect a family’s privacy and dignity, gathering enough information about the child’s economic situation is important to the intervention and assessment process. Poverty is a factor that may influence a child’s experiential learning opportunities that may ultimately affect language and/or conceptual development. Children living in extreme poverty may not be able to demonstrate adequate academic skill development, and as a consequence, may not score as well as same age peers on standardized tests. In some situations, economic influences are the primary cause of a child’s underachievement and rule out eligibility for special education. For example, poverty would serve as an exclusionary factor for a child who learns at a normal rate but hasn’t had a wide range of experiences and has missed school frequently because of homelessness. On the other hand, poverty increases the risk of some disabilities and may be seen as a causative factor rather than an exclusionary factor. Lead exposure, which is an environmental factor linked to poverty, would not rule out eligibility for mental impairment or consideration for other health impairment
Universal Interventions

Teacher assistance teams are a common mechanism of peer and professional support available for the purpose of developing and monitoring data-based interventions used with students. Such teams should operate from a multidisciplinary perspective (classroom teachers, school psychologist, disability specialists, and administrative designees among members of the team) with caregiver involvement and consultation. Within the school setting, a range of building level interventions should be available to assist students when parents and teachers express concerns about a student’s academic, social, emotional, adaptive or behavioral skills. At every stage of developing strategies to support students, parents and caregivers should be informed and involved. Educators should be assisted in identifying strategies to benefit students prior to a decision for a referral for special education assessment.

Universal interventions under a Tier 1 format should be available to screen all students across various domains of development. Such efforts to identify the status of students should be considered a proactive means to support students, and to communicate with parents and caregivers about the status of students with data to support concerns.

When students demonstrate difficulty with acquiring academic information or with communicating with others, among other concerns, educators should not assume that the fault lies with the learner. Multiple factors can contribute to difficulty, and it is the responsibility of the team, working collaboratively with caregivers, to determine what combination of factors bests explains the difficulties shown by the student. Furthermore, apparent disinterest on behalf of the parent/caregiver should not be assumed. “Never judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins (Creech, 199518).

For example, for a culturally diverse student, some of the following factors could apply when the student has difficulty meeting expectations19:

- Gaps in learning (see mobility discussion within School Climate and also consider differences in curriculum from one school to another)
- Lack of opportunity to learn (unable to do homework due to other responsibilities or lack of resources assumed to be present by the school)
- Lack of knowledge of the expectations of the setting (raising hand before speaking, asking a question when unfamiliar with items)
- Lack of experience with standardized testing requirements (waiting for instructions, understanding that it is not a game where creativity is allowed
- Give up easily when confronted with a frustrating task in the presence of someone not familiar with (examiner)
- Given no connection between materials to be learned and their life circumstances (questions of relevancy).

19De Leon, J. (2002). Designing instruction for English language learners. Presentation to the Arkansas State Department of Education Special Task Force on Assessment and Instruction of ELLs, Little Rock, AR.
**Educators should also work to support identification of strengths for students and families.**

Administrative support within the school district for training on data collection and analysis, as well as support for training on cultural understanding is essential to developing a focused program that is respectful of the cultural characteristics of the student population that, if not addressed, could lead to errors in decision-making and the continuation of disproportionate representation.

**Do No Harm and Ethical Responsibilities of Educators**

In determining the needs of students in public schools, equitable opportunity, treatment, and outcomes are paramount for all learners. From an ethical perspective, professional educators and others who work with students are obligated to do no harm (Williams, Armistead, & Jacob, 200820). As such, to prevent harm to students action is required when overt injustices are present.

In some situations injustices may be covert, subtle, or difficult to detect. Nevertheless the failure to act in such situations is to do harm to students when inequity is found. With the subtle but persistent concern throughout the United States of the statistical over-representation of American Indian and African American students, as well as other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students in specific disability categories (e.g., programs for students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders, Learning Disabilities, or Cognitive Disabilities), action must be taken to reduce harm to students placed inappropriately. The persistence of over-representation requires action to ensure that American Indian and African American students receive fair treatment throughout their educational experiences.

Within the assessment or special education referral process, inadequate attention to procedures and decision-making rubrics can contribute to disproportionate placement in special education programs for American Indian and African American students. Problems can be encountered when standardized tests, not normed on a population similar to that found in the school district, are used. Other difficulties are encountered when there is a failure to focus on strengths of the student or strengths within his or her family. It is important to use a variety of strategies to promote a positive climate within the school, and to strengthen intervention, screening, and assessment processes, to reduce bias.

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Minnesota rules for educational services specifically address fair assessment and inclusion of caregivers and parents, two key issues for promoting equity in education. Those rules are as follow:

**Minnesota Rule for Efforts to Reduce Bias in Assessment**

Minnesota Rule 3525.2710 States\(^\text{21}\):

Each district shall ensure that:

1. tests and other evaluation materials used to evaluate a child under this part are selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis, and are provided and administered in the pupil's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so;

2. materials and procedures used to evaluate an English learner are selected and administered to ensure that they measure the extent to which the child has a disability and needs special education and related services, **rather than measure the child's English language skills**;

3. any standardized tests that are given to the child have been validated for the specific purpose for which they are used, are administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel, and are administered in accordance with any instructions provided by the producer of such tests;

4. the child is evaluated in all areas of suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities;

5. evaluation tools and strategies that provide relevant information that directly assists persons in determining the educational needs of the pupil are provided;

6. if an evaluation is not conducted under standard conditions, a description of the extent to which it varied from standard conditions must be included in the evaluation report;

7. tests and other evaluation materials include those tailored to evaluate specific areas of educational need and **not merely those that are designed to provide a single general intelligence quotient**.

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\(^{21}\) [https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=3525.2710](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=3525.2710)
What Can be Done to Address Disproportionate Representation?

A preponderance of research indicates a framework of evidence exists to reduce disproportionate representation within special education programs and to increase the academic achievement of American Indian and African American students (Fullan, 2003, Johnson, 2002, Ladson-Billings, 2006). Factors that will be discussed include, but are not limited to, understanding the role of the students’ native language and culture; recognizing and supporting the importance of the perspective of caregivers; understanding community values; implementing culturally responsive instruction; developing culturally relevant high standards, and promoting high expectations for American Indian and African American students. Stakeholders must work collaboratively to share information to enhance understanding of the needs of American Indian and African American students, while also providing methods to improve skills of educators to work cross-culturally.

Multiple factors contribute to EQUITY in education, from individual professionals operating from an ethical base that guides their work, through systemic dedication to honoring the culture, language, and background of all students. **Reduction in the disproportionate placement of American Indian and African American students can be achieved.** From the perspective of an individual educator throughout the system of a school district, respect for culture and language, and understanding of bias will be achieved. Change occurs when all of those touching the lives of American Indian and African American students engage in proactive actions to resolve inequities in education. **Positive change will occur when educators, working with parents and members from the community, share a vision of high expectations, achievement, and success for American Indian and African American students.**

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The developers of the revised Reducing Bias Manual have agreed to the following vision:

**Vision**

**A Vision for Minnesota Education:** A better education for American Indian and African American students is of a school community that embraces all learners and their needs, particularly American Indian and African American students, who have endured longstanding discrimination in the educational system and in society at large.

**A Vision for Minnesota Education:** Involves the elimination of bias throughout the spectrum of services such students encounter in schools, resulting in settings where students from both backgrounds feel respect for their culture, language, and traditions, and where their treatment in school settings supports their identity and development, while significantly reducing the impact of placement in services not appropriate to their needs, or inappropriate placement in services that restrict their access to general education.

**A Vision for Minnesota Education:** Involves joint involvement of educators, caregivers and advocates of American Indian and African American students working collaboratively to generate positive outcomes.

**Mission**

The mission of the workgroup, focused on the revision of the reducing bias manual, is to create a document and web-based resources containing a set of guidelines, standards, and resources to support fair assessment and appropriate educational decisions regarding American Indian and African American students. The revised manual and resources are intended to be a guide for educators, administrators, families, and communities.

**Outcomes:**

- Eliminate or reduce disproportionality in assessment/placement of American Indian and African American Students in special education programs.

- Reduce the rate of suspensions and expulsions for American Indian and African American students.

- Produce materials providing promising practices and strategies along the continuum of services (Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3, and Special Education) for American Indian and African American students.

- Provide training guidelines for educators.

- Create forms to support districts in assessing their progress and to show evidence of positive practice to the public (self-study).

- Create mechanisms to assess climate and make adaptations that support students.
• Develop sustainable training materials on school culture and climate that are adaptable over time.

• Provide discussion on assessment guidelines and promising practices models for special education evaluations, placement decisions, and intervention programming.

• Expand knowledge and use of positive practices related to cultural and linguistic diversity.

• Promote collaboration with parents and caregivers that promote success for American Indian and African American Students.
Introduction

“Now is the time!”… “How do we do it?” (Landsman, 2006). How do educators, administrators, and caregivers raise the student achievement of our American Indian and African American and students? How do educators, administrators, and caregivers use culturally responsive teaching in creating high expectations for students? How do educators, administrators, and caregivers come to understand, honor, and incorporate the ways in which family culture shapes student’s academic life? What can we do so that in classrooms the culture and climate reflect the diversity of the community? How can our systems unite to prepare each student to become a contributing community member?

In *The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach, Transforming Schools at Every Level*, Muhammad and Hollie (2012) argue that educators must have a “combination of both will and skill to ensure that students have the best opportunities for success in school and in life” p. 9. *Will* is defined as a certain attitude, reasoned choice or action. Educators who have the will to affect positive educational reforms typically self-identify as having the desire, commitment, and the will to make choices. These educators have been found not only to increase student achievement, but to also affect organizational reform (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000).

Creating effective schools that are fair to all students requires more than will; it requires specific skill to enact a vision and mission into reality. The reality is, teaching is both a science and an art that requires organizational skills and a refined set of professional skills. Educators and teaching professionals representing specialized areas can tailor their skills to the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As Goddard et al., (2000) point out, the collective will and skills of educators and staff contribute to the overall school culture, creating either a healthy or toxic school climate.

Cromwell (2002) describes a *healthy school culture* as one in which:

**Educators have an unwavering belief in the ability of all their students to achieve success, and they pass that belief on to others…they create policies, practices, and procedures that support their belief in the ability of every student.**

Likewise, Comwell (2002) also describes a toxic school culture as one in which:

Educators believe that student success is based on student’s level of concern, attentiveness, prior knowledge, and willingness to comply with the demands of the school, and they articulate that belief in overt and covert ways. In a toxic school culture, educators create policies and procedures and adopt practices that support their belief in the impossibility of universal achievement.

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Educators can use their will and skills to lead and transform their school’s culture to not only reduce the disproportionate representation of American Indians and African American students in Special Education, but to work collaboratively with parents, community members, and stakeholders to increase student success through culturally relevant instruction.

The Relationship of Climate to a Culturally Responsive Ecological Learning Community

In her book Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Geneva Gay (2010) states that “culture counts” and “is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is instruction, curriculum, administration or performance assessment (p. 8). Culture is embedded in all that we do, say, think, and believe, as well as how we teach and learn. Culturally relevant instruction makes sure that the curriculum, instruction, and environment are infused with the cultures of its community membership. Culturally relevant teaching empowers students, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by infusing culture within their environment (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally Responsive Teaching is designed to raise achievement levels, create equitable learning environments, and increase intrinsic motivation (McKinley, 2010). Therefore, education must be viewed as a process of human development reflective of the cultural and linguistic framework of our diverse students. “Schools are a vehicle for the transmission of culture. Our challenge is to ensure that education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic” (Assembly of First Nations, 2012) p. 68. The fundamental change in our assumptions and approach is to shift our goal from the concept of bringing in culture into education to making sure that education is integrated with culture as a new whole. For example, no longer would it be bringing in isolated cultural events to celebrate a “day” or month, such as Black History Month, but rather the entire culture, climate, environment, curriculum, instruction is integrated into the daily life and fabric of the school/classroom.

In The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer states that “good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness” as they weave connections between themselves and their students on the “loom of the heart” (1997 p. 11).

One such story tells the personal story of connectedness between a teacher and her students:

Black kids are outspoken, so I spend lots of “closet time” with them one-on-one. I do not put kids in the hall. I spend time with them at lunchtime and offer pep talks. I figure out something that they do well and commend them regularly. As a black person, I have an advantage. I share problems black people have if they don’t get their behavior together. We talk about relationships at home, family, and friends. What I find is that if you care, then kids will perform for you. They meet me one-half or three quarters of the way. My relationship with them is something they are looking for.
What is School Climate?

The topic of school climate has received much attention throughout the United States because of the importance of the environment and actions of educators and administrators in promoting students’ development, learning and achievement. The National School Climate Center defines school climate as “…the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.” Educators and administrators collaborate with caregivers to produce an environment that is inclusive, and which contributes to the success of all its participants. The climate of the school addresses factors such as positive interactions among students to reduce bully behavior, support for students to minimize acts of frustration and violence, and inclusivity initiatives to reduce feelings of alienation.

There is an emphasis in our school districts, school buildings and classrooms to improve education in order to help students successfully face the many challenges they will encounter in their lives. Research about the intentional focus on school climate factors demonstrates that it enhances academic achievement, reduces school drop-outs, increases graduation rates, and increases students’ appropriate school behaviors. Positive school climate helps students and school staff members feel safe, valued, respected and cared for. As a result, learning increases and teachers and staff members are more satisfied.

An engaging and inclusive school climate is essential for the positive development of learners. All students should be viewed from the perspective of promise and potential. Open communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships between caregivers, students and staff, helps promote positive learning. When students, staff and caregivers accept and appreciate the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, disability related, language related, socio-economic status and gender differences represented within a school district, schools and classrooms, all students and staff feel welcome and ready to learn and teach. In schools with a positive climate, students from diverse backgrounds and students with disabilities are treated equitably and teachers and parents collaborate to develop the best educational program for each child. In such settings assessment of student needs is conducted by well-trained, knowledgeable and sensitive professionals who understand the diversity and family issues of students with whom they work.

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Definition of School Climate

According to the National School Climate Council, the definition and multidimensional components of positive school climate include 27:

- “Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe;
- Members of the school community who are engaged and respected;
- Students, families and educators that work together to develop, and contribute to a shared school vision;
- Educators who model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction that can be gained from learning; and
- Members of the school community who contribute to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.”

Dimensions That Define School Climate

The National Association of Elementary School Principals outlined three dimensions which define school climate 28. They include the physical, social and academic dimensions shown below.

“The **physical dimension of school climate** includes:

- Appearances of the school building and its classrooms, aspects of appearance should address recognition of multiple cultures;
- School size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom;
- Order and organization of classrooms in the school;
- Availability of resources; and
- Safety and comfort.

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28 Reprinted with permission. Copyright 2007. National Association of Elementary School Principals. All rights reserved.
The social dimension of school climate includes:

- Quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers and staff;
- Equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff;
- How competition and social comparisons are managed among students;
- Degree to which students, teachers, staff and caregivers contribute to decision-making at the school, where educators advocate for the needs of students and students and caregivers advocate for themselves.

The academic dimension of school climate includes:

- Amount and quality of instruction
- Levels of teacher and administrative expectations for student achievement; and
- The quality of monitoring and reporting of student progress to students and parents. Assessment and data collection is used to inform educator practice to help educators reflect on what needs to change in their methodology to benefit students.

Although not included in their definition, parent and caregiver input needs to be included in each of the dimensions listed above.

Assessment of School Climate

Throughout the United States the achievement gap between students of color and white students remains. Compared to white students, students of color lag behind in their high school graduation rates, have larger incidences of dismissals from school, have larger numbers of absences from school and are more often placed in special education programs on an inappropriate basis (see data contained in this chapter).

As a result of the concern of achievement gaps between students from diverse backgrounds and their White Peers, many educational research organizations have developed methods and procedures to assess the school climate in districts, schools and classrooms. The National School Climate Center has written school climate standards that can be used in an assessment rubric. These standards will be used as an example of the multidimensional nature of a school climate assessment and can be considered by school districts to be Goal Statements.
Framework for Improving School Climate

According to the National School Climate Center, a non-profit organization, a framework for improving school climate can be organized around five research-based standards\(^{29}\). The five standards also include additional indicators and sub-indicators to further define the essential elements under each standard. The following standards and examples of indicators and sub-indicators are listed under each standard.

1. “The school community has a vision with a plan for promoting, developing and sustaining a positive school climate.”

   Schools gather and share reliable school climate data from all stakeholders, including students, staff and parents/guardians and use evidence based methods for continuous improvement.

   School policies and procedures develop and implement instructional improvement goals which are frequently assessed for their effectiveness.

2. The school community develops policies that promote (a) the development of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills and (b) has a comprehensive system to reduce barriers to learning and teaching

   School district’s vision and mission statements promote the “continuing development and sustainability of a comprehensive and cohesive system of learning supports.”

   Policies and procedures promote the use and monitoring of formal and informal opportunities, including recreational and extracurricular activities. Codes of conduct and fair enforcement or rules, mentoring, and informal interactions of students are developed and implemented to ensure the learning and teaching that foster mutual respect, caring, pro social and responsible behavior.

   Policies promote curriculum content, continued monitoring and standards for social, emotional, ethical and civic learning and are fully integrated into the classroom and school in ways that align with students’ prevailing cultures, circumstances and languages.

3. The school community’s needs are identified, prioritized and supported to (a) promote learning; (b) enhance teaching and learning, (c) reduce barriers to learning and teaching (d) sustain an appropriate structure that and builds capacity for meeting this standard.

   School practices encourage students to express their needs and desires with adults and other peers and provide opportunities for students to participate in developing and implementing school policies and procedures.

School staff members help students maximize their feelings of competence, self-determination and connectedness to others. Staff are trained to reduce the emphasis of social control and the use of extrinsic motivation strategies to promote positive social, emotional, ethical and civic learning.”

Healthy development and the prevention of negative behaviors are stressed. Staff responds as quickly as possible after the occurrence of a problem to provide for those whose serious, pervasive and chronic negative problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation.

School and classroom interventions and strategies improve instruction and behavior management for all students. School staff assists students and their families as through grade changes and other transitions to increase home and school connectedness, negotiate student and family access to special services and, increase community involvement and support through the use of volunteers and community resources.

Students are encouraged to accept leadership roles that help them increase their commitment to school which aids in their development.

Continuous professional development for staff members is provided to ensure the implementation of all of these standards.

The policies and procedures for providing effective leadership, improving instruction, supporting appropriate behavior and social development, and overall district and school government are integrated the school’s daily activities. If instruction is engaging, interesting, developmentally appropriate, respects the student’s culture, behavior management concerns are likely to diminish.

4. The school community creates and sustains an inclusive environment welcoming of all members, and members feel safe (socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically).

School leaders and staff members implement school-wide improvement efforts to welcome and support students, families, school staff members, and community members.

School leaders develop, assess, and evaluate the strategies designed to support people feeling welcomed, supported and safe in their schools and use that data to improve their policies, facilities, staff competencies and accountability. Evaluation is focused on increasing the quality of instruction.
5. “The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, with activities that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.”

Students and staff model culturally responsive behavior. Continuous learning is promoted so that knowledge, awareness, skills and the ability to identify, understand, and respect the unique beliefs, values, customs, languages and traditions of all members of the school community occurs.

Curriculum and instructional practices promote curiosity, inquiry into and celebration of diverse beliefs, customs, languages, and traditions of all members of the school community.”

Every student is connected to a caring and responsible adult in the school.”

Positive peer relationships are encouraged and students have many opportunities to provide service to others in meaningful ways, both in school and in the community.30

Smith, Ma, & Murray (2012)31 evaluated aspects of School Climate between high, mid, and low performing public schools. From their research they isolated dimensions that contributed to the success of students within the settings. The dimensions identified were also examined for the potential to promote and support equity in services to students and cultural competence among educators and staff. Issues of equity and cultural competence were considered to be factors important to sustaining a school environment was culturally responsive.

The factors identified by Smith et al (2012) included:

**Cultural Leadership**

- Supportive and efficient organizational structure
- Shared vision including equity components
- Culturally responsive learning community

**Physical Environment**

- Physical and emotional safety
- Culturally responsive learning environment
- Welcoming facilities

---


Psychosocial Environment

- Respectful and supportive relationships and communications on five levels involving staff to student, administrator to staff, staff to staff, student to student, and school to family
- Inclusion of cultural diversity
- Staff, family, and student connections

Academic (Teaching and Learning Environment)

- High expectations and rigor
- Culturally relevant instruction
- Culturally relevant support structures, including culturally relevant professional activities for educators and staff

Equity and Cultural Competence

- Teacher Quality
- Special Education Services
- Gifted and Advanced Education and Opportunities
- Bilingual Education
- Data on Discipline and Suspensions
- Equity in Achievement

Using the specific indicators from the five areas of cultural leadership, physical environment, psychosocial environment, academic teaching, and equity and cultural competence, Smith, Ma, & Murray (2012) found that high performing schools scored consistently higher across all domains than mid and low performing schools. It appeared that schools that performed within the high range attended to all aspects of quality indicators, student support, and staff preparation.

Lower performing schools on the other hand, had significant themes that were found with their results. These themes included deficit beliefs about students, lowered expectations about student attainment and lack of shared responsibility and accountability among staff. As well, curriculums in lower performing schools were less rigorous. Policies across all five dimensions measured were often inequitable, and disproportionality was found in discipline use and overrepresentation in special education programs.

Overall, the principles set forth by the National School Climate Association, factors suggested by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and research and assessments of schools conducted by Smith, Ma and Murray (2012) provides an overarching framework to guide local school districts in consideration of their school climate policy. It is possible to develop rubrics to conduct self-studies and identify avenues for change to strengthen services offered by schools, improve equity, and reduce overrepresentation. However, each individual school or

district must address the ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic heritage(s) represented within their settings to increase educational equity for diverse students (Nieto, 1999).

**Bioecological Model: Understanding the Complexity of the Whole Child**

Child development is impacted by both heredity and environment. What educators now understand is that heredity does not produce “finished traits” but rather interacts with environmental experience in determining developmental outcomes (Brofenbrenner & Ceci, 1994 p. 571\(^{33}\)). As mothers/fathers/caregivers know, their interaction with the child is connecting the child’s inner traits with the outer experiences in a continually growing, interactive process to encourage and build the child’s capacities.

Caregivers provide the initial essential processes of support and nurturance, and the environment is where the process takes place. Not only is environment the immediate setting, but in the broader sense includes structures of ethnicity, culture, subculture, social class, communication patterns, and other unique factors. These continual processes are found in caregiver/adult-child and child-child activities, language development, new knowledge development, problem solving, development of social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and the integration of culturally specific behaviors.

The interaction of the individual with their environment means that each individual’s actual genetic potential for growth may be expanded, given strong environmental processes. Throughout the lives of each person, strong and appropriate environmental support is extremely important. The environment has the capacity to provide positive intervention. Unfortunately, if not attended to, the environment also has the capacity to become a barrier to growth. Parents, educators, and community resources are all part of the processes that may positively impact the child’s acquisition of developmental competence (e.g., cognitive skills, learning, social and emotional learning).

The bioecological approach is represented in many ways to convey a child’s inner world (cognitive, emotional, and spiritual) and the child’s outer world (physical, social, behavioral). It is important to note that elements are dynamic, or may intersect with other components. The ecological research of the Center for Child and Family Well-Being expands upon Brofenbrenner’s model to include examination of the child’s well-being or whole child approach and several external factors and related resources. Of particular note is the inclusion of contemporary issues such as political systems and healthcare concerns.

It is important to know that many representations of a bioecological system are not inclusive of diversity, which should be a standard component of all systems. Each culture will have their unique factors that are not currently represented in any one given representation. Remember our goal is to ensure that education is integrated into culture. However, the concepts of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological model provide the basis for understanding the interrelationships and their impact upon a child’s development and learning. The following representations and links to web sites provide further depictions and information.

Figure 1 Center for Child and Family Well-Being (link to title)

Figure 2 The Ecological Perspective of development http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/human.development/ecological.htm (hyperlink)

Questions to Consider to Help Develop a Bioecological Understanding

Consider the ecological system of one of your diverse students in your setting. What components of the child’s system do you need to learn more about? What source(s) might provide the most valid information? How can this information help build upon the student’s background information? How can this information inform your instruction and understanding? How is parent/community involvement supported?

The bioecological model demonstrates the ever-expanding systems of the environment supporting a student and illustrates the interrelationships that impact the child/student and their family. The important concept to understand is when the relationship between the systems work collaboratively to support the child/student, his or her progress evolves more smoothly\(^\text{34}\). As an example, the systems that support an American Indian student include elders, spiritual beliefs, and support of extended caregivers. A culturally responsive school team reaches out to all of these potential support systems to provide services to the student. Although the bioecological model emphasizes the value of systems working together, such a model must also ensure that education is integrated into a culturally and linguistically appropriate system inclusive of our American Indian and African American students\(^\text{35}\).


Data on School Success Indicators

Many districts and schools use data to improve academic learning and appropriate classroom and school etiquette, and to determine appropriate responses to support students in their schools. Data about the performance of specific groups within the school setting can provide information about factors related to fairness and inclusivity, which are important school climate factors.

Data was obtained from national sources, Minnesota and the surrounding states of Wisconsin, Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota to illustrate the extent to which African American, American Indian and Caucasian students are successful in our public schools. This data review is useful to establish a baseline of performance and to identify places to direct improvement efforts.

According to the Center for Education Statistics, “between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of public school students who were white decreased from 67% to 54%...” while the data from the same period indicates an increase in the number of students of color. This report also states that Minnesota and 22 other states, primarily in the Midwest and West, will have a 6-20% increase in their school-age population by the year 2022. The growth of non-white students in Minnesota is expected to continue.

**MN Public School Student Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>2010-2011 Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>74.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>2.29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MN student total population data. Data retrieved from Minnesota Department of Education (September, 2012).
Graduation Rates\textsuperscript{39} (scroll over columns for percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation Rates</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American (Black)</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>56%\textsuperscript{40}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{41} Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). Data for Parents and Educators. Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp
The percentage of diverse students in the United States and Minnesota is increasing. Data on graduation rates consistently reveal lower graduation rates for African American and American Indian students compared to their White Peers. African American students have lower graduation rates than students with disabilities. This seems to be true in Minnesota as well as in most of our neighboring States, except North Dakota. In Minnesota, American Indian and African American students have the lowest graduation rates of any racial/ethnic group, including students getting free or reduced meals.
High School Dropout Rates

- Total Dropout Percentage: 7.4%
- American Indian: 12.4%
- African American: 8.0%
- Caucasian: 5.1%

Minnesota (2012)
- Total Dropout Percentage: 5.1%
- American Indian: 18.3%
- African American (Black): 9.3%
- Caucasian (White): 3.6%
- Special Education: 9.8%

It is alarming that, both nationally and in Minnesota, American Indian students have the largest dropout rate of any racial/ethnic group. The next highest dropout rate includes students with disabilities (in Minnesota) followed by African American students.

Academic Achievement in Reading, Grade 8: Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders (2011).

Data from National Center for Educational Statistics

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43 Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). *Data for Parents and Educators*. Retrieved from [http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)
Academic Achievement in Math, Grade 8 Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders (2011).

Data from National Center for Educational Statistics

Nationally and in Minnesota, African American students have the lowest reading achievement scores (grade 8) in reading. In math achievement (grade 8), African American students have the lowest scores, nationally, and one of the lowest scores in Minnesota. American Indian students also score well below their White Peers in reading and math. In Minnesota, they have the lowest math achievement scores of any racial/ethnic student group. This data confirms the fact that there is a very large achievement gap between white students and African American and American Indian students.

School Discipline Data

Dismissal from School: Percentage Rates

Minnesota Statute 121A.40 subdivision 2 defines dismissal from school as “the denial of the current educational program to any pupil, including exclusion, expulsion, and suspension. It does not include removal from class”. Nationally, approximately 50% of the student population is male and 50% female; however, males make up 74% of students expelled (2012). In Minnesota, 72% of students expelled are male (2011).

Out-of-School Suspensions, Exclusions, Expulsions

Data from Office of Civil Rights 48

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53% of Discipline Incidents Involved a Student with a Disability

Data from the Minnesota Department of Education

Discussion of Discipline Data

Although African American and black students comprise approximately 10% of the population in Minnesota, next to white students, they have the highest rate of out-of-school suspensions for both males and females. This percentage is followed by students receiving special education services. When analyzing all discipline incidents, Minnesota students with disabilities have the highest rate, followed by white and African American students. Since most discipline incidents involve male students, it can be safe to assume that African American males and those receiving special education services are disproportionately involved in discipline incidents.

American Indian students comprise approximately 2.3% of Minnesota’s student population; yet 6% are involved in discipline incidents. Therefore, it can be safe to conclude that American Indian students are also disproportionately involved in discipline incidents.

Information from our neighboring states of Iowa and Wisconsin reveals similar data.

**Discipline Data from Neighboring States**

![Iowa Discipline Data (2010-2011)](image)

Wisconsin Statewide (2010-2011) Suspensions from class

Suspensions from class

Caucasian: 2.74%
Hispanic: 6.55%
African American: 26.41%
Asian: 1.61%
American Indian: 9.62%

Wisconsin Statewide Data: Expulsions from School (2010-2011)

Expulsions

Caucasian: 0.07%
Hispanic: 0.15%
African American: 0.60%
Asian: 0.05%
American Indian: 0.16%
Performance Indicators: Students with Disabilities

U.S. Percentages of Students Receiving Special Education Services in 9th Grade by Race/Ethnicity (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Students</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%[^50]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nationally, American Indian and African American male and female students are over-represented in special education services. In Minnesota, American Indian students, comprising about 2.3% of the student population, are over-represented in DCD, SLD and E/BD disability categories. African American students, who comprise about 10% of the population, are over-represented in DCD, SLD and OHD disability categories. They are significantly over-represented in the E/BD category. White students seem to be over-represented in the ASD category.

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51 Minnesota Department of Education (retrieved September, 2012). *Schools, Districts and Teachers at a Glance*. Retrieved from website [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp)
Data collected from the Minnesota Department of Education Data Center for Parents and Educators. Data calculation was changed in March 2012 to reflect the latest graduation rate calculation requirements of the U.S. Department of Education. Four-year rate takes number of students who begin 9th grade, plus number of students moving into state, minus number of students moving out. Number of graduating students with regular diploma at the end of 12th grade is divided by number of potential graduates and turned into percentage for four-year rate.2

As seen in the total Minnesota graduation rates above, American Indian students have the lowest graduation rate of any racial/ethnic student group. American Indian students with disabilities also have the lowest graduation rate compared to other racial/ethnic student groups. These graduation percentages are closely followed by African American students in Minnesota and also those in Minnesota receiving special education services.

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52 2011 MARSS. Data retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)
Expulsions and Exclusions of Students with Disabilities by Disability Category
(2010-2011)

Percent of Total Number of Students Excluded from School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/Behavioral Disorder</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Disability</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Cognitive Disability, Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech or Language Impairment</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted previously students with disabilities, both nationally and in Minnesota, had one of the highest rates of discipline incidents. It appears that most of these students from Minnesota received special education services from SLD, E/BD and/or OHD programs. The SLD disability category had the highest expulsion and exclusion rate in Minnesota.

Case Example of Managing a Behavior Concern

(Digging deeper to explain why students from backgrounds different than the educators in a building can make all the difference in the world)

An elementary school in a very-affluent neighborhood of a large, Midwestern city comprised of students who were primarily white and middle- to upper-middle class also drew a certain number of students from a social economically distressed area of the city. Students who attended the school from the distressed area of the city were primarily African American. The district was also involved in desegregation program to improve racial balance in students attending the school. Unfortunately, Those kids from that area of the city were often looked upon with suspicion and fear from some staff, administrators, and caregivers of the more affluent students.

A fifth-grade girl from that area was referred for special education testing under the possible label of emotional-behavioral disturbance due to a situation that arose in the classroom. The student did not follow a classroom rule and was administered discipline in the format of the loss of recess for one week. According to the teacher, the student went berserk upon learning of the consequence for her behavior, leading the teacher to make the referral for assessment.

The school psychologist, puzzled as to why the student reacted the way she did, decided to investigate the situation further before proceeding with any form of assessment. Through his research, the school psychologist learned the student was being raised by a single mother who worked the 2:00 p.m.-midnight shift, meaning the girl was responsible for looking after herself and her younger brother after school, including doing the cooking, cleaning, and homework monitoring for both students. Additionally, the girl and her brother were instructed by their mother to go right from the school bus to their apartment, to lock the door, and not to go out for any reason due to the high-level of crime and gun violence in the neighborhood. Thus, by taking away the girl’s recess, the school took away the only unfettered, worry-free time the girl had to play outside during the day. With this new information, it was decided to apply another form of

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53 2011 MARSS. Data retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp
consequence to deal with the rule infraction and to reinstate the girl’s recess time. By digging deeper and being flexible in their approach to dealing with student discipline, the school become more sensitive to the needs and situations of individual students and to stop judging them based on impressions and biases about who they were and from whence they came.

Minnesota Post-Secondary Outcomes of Special Education Students by Race/Ethnicity

2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competitive Employment</th>
<th>Higher Ed.</th>
<th>Not Engaged</th>
<th>Other Employment</th>
<th>Other Postsecondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amer. Indian</td>
<td>32.73%</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
<td>5.45%</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>21.88%</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>29.63%</td>
<td>24.87%</td>
<td>31.22%</td>
<td>8.47%</td>
<td>5.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>34.18%</td>
<td>31.14%</td>
<td>18.64%</td>
<td>9.61%</td>
<td>6.43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In analyzing the data above, it appears that American Indian students who have graduated from high school have lower rates of becoming employed and have the lowest rate of attending an institution of higher learning. They have the highest rate of any other racial/ethnic group for not being engaged after graduation. However, this data does suggest that approximately 7½% do participate in some form of postsecondary activity.

After graduation, African American students have the lowest rate of competitive employment after high school and have the second highest rate of not being engaged. They also have low rates of attending an institution of higher learning but 5.8% do participate in other postsecondary activities.

**Additional Factors Affecting School Success for African American Youth**

There are additional factors that may account for the elevated figures in the above data related to African American youth. These include the location of the school (rural vs. urban); mobility challenges for these students and their families; family relationships and stressors; challenges related to poverty; school staff’s cultural competence; district/school staff’s competence of positive behavior supports, instructional strategies and special education assessment procedures and programming options; district/school resources; parent involvement; and positive community involvement. In addition, the positive and caring attitudes of all school staff members seem to be the factors that most influence academic achievement and appropriate behavior.

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54 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12 Minnesota Post Secondary Survey. Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)
Urban compared to Rural Schools and Diverse Student Populations

Approximately 30% of US schools are located in rural areas and 18% of students attend them. Both urban and rural school districts face challenges of student engagement in learning and academic success. Both urban and rural schools include diversity in their student populations but in different ways. The teaching force remains representative of majority groups. Teacher recruitment and retention is a problem in both types of schools. Student behavioral concerns, including drug and alcohol abuse, are found in both types of schools. Poverty is found in both rural and urban settings.

Indicators of positive school climate in both types of schools include the warm and caring relationship between teacher and student, establishing and expecting high expectations from teachers and students, students and teachers feeling safe in the school, discipline consistency, students having choice built into the learning environment and making learning relevant to students’ lives. When students feel good about themselves and their relationships within their schools they are happier and less prone to School-wide initiatives, including evaluation, self-reflection and systems of initiating change are necessary.

Effects of Poverty on School Success

According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau, poverty is defined as a family of two adults and two children (under 18 years of age) that earns less than $23,021. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2010-2011 20% of public school students attended a high-poverty school and 24% attended a low-poverty school. High poverty schools are those where more than 75% of the students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches, and mid-high poverty schools are those where 51-75% of students are eligible. Low poverty schools are defined as those where 25% or fewer are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches and mid-low poverty schools are defined as 26-50% of the students are eligible.

The Children’s Defense Fund reported that in 2013 in Minnesota, 15.4% of the children were considered poor and 6.4% of the children were living in extreme poverty. These children are more likely to have chronic absenteeism. Many of these children have to work or care for other family members making it difficult to attend school or they drop out of school before graduating. These students frequently perform below average on math and reading achievement tests. Children of color have the highest rates of poverty in Minnesota. In 2009, black children were six times more likely to be poor than white children and 40% of American Indian children in Minnesota are poor (see chart below).

56. US Census Bureau, 2011. Retrieved from Factors in Dropping Out: Poverty. Save Our Schools. saveourschoolsmarch@gmail.com
Minnesota Children in Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Minnesota Percentages of Students Living in Poverty by Location (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many African American families live in larger to medium cities. In Minnesota a significant number of African American families live below the poverty level. Many American Indian families live in rural or semi-rural areas, where the second most high percentage rates of poverty exist.

Effects of Student Mobility on School Success

High levels of student mobility are associated with greater risk for school drop-out, lower math and reading achievement levels, need for greater amounts of remedial education, higher risk for school behavior problems and increased social and psychological challenges. Repeated moves interrupt the learning process and weaken peer and school support systems. Students in these situations feel less safe and are not as content in school. Students who move more frequently, especially beyond third grade experience more detrimental effects.

Mobility may be a significant problem among particular subgroups, including families living below the poverty level, those experiencing homelessness, one-parent families, or families with no fully employed adult. Families living in large urban areas experience greater mobility challenges, particularly families of color. A study conducted by the National Survey of Children’s Health in 2007, found that “...children in poor families made up 43% of the frequent-mover group, although they comprised 18% of the total sample.”

School staff members also have challenges when highly mobile students are in their schools. Students who enter school mid-year need extra attention to help them adjust to the school’s routine, learn missed academic skills, learn new codes of behavior, develop new social relationships and most importantly, learn to trust teachers and other school staff members so they

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62 Murphy, David; Bandy, Tawana; Moore, Kristin, A. (January 2012). Frequent residential mobility and young children’s well-being. Trends Child Research Brief, Publication #2012-02. Washington, DC.
feel safe and respected. Students need to experience a sense of belonging or community within the context of school. Promoting a sense of belonging and community requires effort on the part of educators. In addition, teachers need to reach out to these parents to establish a positive working relationship.

**Summary of Data Involving American Indian Students**

Nationally, the population of American Indians in our country is about 1% and in Minnesota it is approximately 2.3%. In our neighboring states, American Indian students have one of the lower rates of graduation from high school but in Minnesota they have the lowest graduating rate of any racial ethnic group at only 45%. A factor contributing to the low graduation rate of American Indian students is the high rates of dropping out of school.

National data as well as Minnesota data disclose that American Indian youth have the highest dropout rate of any racial/ethnic group. Nationally, at 12.4% and in Minnesota at 18.3%. On academic proficiency tests in reading and math, American Indian students have one of the lower percentages among racial groups on performance results, both nationally and in Minnesota. U.S. data discloses that American Indian students have one of the higher rates of out-of-school suspensions but in Minnesota and its surrounding states, they have lower percentage rates of expulsions at 2% and one of the lowest rates of any disciplinary incidents at 6%.

American Indian youth are over-represented in special education programs. National figures show that they have the highest percentage rate in special education compared to other racial/ethnic groups, males at 27% and females at 19%. This is significant because American Indian students represent only 1% of the U.S. student population. In Minnesota, where they represent approximately 2% of the student population, they are over-represented in Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (4%), Specific Learning Disabilities (4%), Developmental Disorders (4.1%) and Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (6.3%). Post-Secondary information about American Indian youth who have graduated high school reveal they have one of the lowest

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64 Minnesota Department of Education. (September, 2012). *Schools, Districts and Teachers at a Glance*. Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp)


67 Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). *Data for Parents and Educators*. Retrieved from [http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)


70 Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). *Categorical breakdown of expulsions and exclusions 2010-2011 school year*.

71 Minnesota Department of Education. Discipline Data. Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)


73 Minnesota Department of Education (retrieved September, 2012). *Schools, Districts and Teachers at a Glance*. Retrieved from website [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp)
rates of obtaining competitive employment at 32.7%, the lowest rate in enrolling in higher education programs at 9% and the highest rate of not being engaged in any program at 45%\textsuperscript{74}.

Gilbert, in the Journal of American Indian Education, outlined several risk factors that may be associated with the low school achievement of American Indian youth, (2000\textsuperscript{75}). Many of the risk factors are issues that are beyond the control of the student, such as bias in testing, lack of educator training on diversity issues, or use of curriculums that do not involve the culture of the student. Many of the risk factors identified by Gilbert also apply to African American students.

- Stress associated with socioeconomic issues
- Learning style differences that are not identified
- Curriculums not sensitive to culture
- Lack of teacher and administrator training on diversity
- Lack of adequate funding for diversity initiatives
- Loss of student motivation when not connected to school
- Loss of parent motivation through conflict with educators
- Lack of understanding by teachers (and school staff members) of cultural differences
- Low student self-concept
- Testing bias

The establishment of a positive school climate can reverse the negative statistics associated with outcomes of education for American Indian students. Each American Indian student can successfully stay in school, graduate and choose to continue learning after graduation. Parents, teachers and students need to feel a sense of connectedness and trust in the educational process to guide students to a path of success. School staff may need to better understand the unique values, customs and traditions of each tribe represented in their district. Each tribe has its own customs, values and traditions that may be very different from other tribes. School staff needs to understand the Sovereign Nation concept and increase their knowledge of the history, language, stories, songs and chants of each tribal unit. American Indian youth are first taught that their identity comes from the tribe, not from the term American Indian or Native American. Staff development and education on this issue is needed to accomplish understanding the importance of this sense of identity for American Indian students.

\textsuperscript{74} 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12 Minnesota Post Secondary Survey. Retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp

\textsuperscript{75} Gilbert, W. Sakiestewa. (Spring 2000). Bridging the gap between high school and college. Journal of American Indian Education, vol
There are policies and procedures that should be reviewed to provide support for American Indian students. Each policy should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents, administrators and students, if appropriate. These components include:

- Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
- Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing Tribal stories and history in course content)
- Using research-based instructional strategies
- Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
- Teaching the culture, history, stories and language of the Tribe to the entire class, when appropriate
- Implementing data-based assessment systems
- Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to improve motivation for learning specific academic material
- Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class
- Using hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills

Students and parents are most receptive to teachers and school staff when a warm, caring relationship is established with each student and caregiver. Establishing a safe environment in the school and classroom has been attributed to higher gains in educational progress. Most tribes value harmony and balance, nonverbal communication and listening skills, rather than rapid and angry speech patterns. Activities and demonstrations, including sharing, cooperation, kindness and generosity are usually more appreciated than the accumulation of possessions and status using competition. Also, American Indian youth are taught the value of noninterference in their daily lives. These students often do not interfere in the struggles with other students unless a Tribal member is involved. Therefore the development and implementation of a school-wide disciplinary system should include a caring social aspect. In most American Indian families, the tribe and family are valued more than the individual.

One of the more difficult concepts that white teachers must learn is the concept of present time. Most tribes value the here and now and not the future or consequences that may occur later. This can be a challenge when discipline systems use positive or negative consequences which occur at a later time.

Parents from American Indian families can be strong assets to their children’s school and teachers. Establishing a social relationship with the parent, especially the mother enables the teacher to better understand the students. A parent orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year is one method to start establishing a trusting relationship. Parents can provide cultural, language, academic, social and recreational information about the student, which may help the teacher better plan an academic program. By inviting parents, Tribal elders, and other Tribal members to the classroom to speak to classes or assist with academics, art lessons and field trips, teachers, students and caregivers are unified. Parents and community members can be involved in choosing new textbooks, curriculum planning, and new teacher orientation.
workshops. When a caring relationship is established, it is easier for the teacher to help parents learn how to help their children at home with academic tasks and to help their children learn appropriate school behavior.

The school can also function as a community facility by opening the building for Tribal events and celebrations. Implementing after school activities for all members of the Tribe, including the development of a student-mentoring program involving Tribal elders, can be very successful. When school staff members attend American Indian cultural events trust develops and relationships grow stronger.

The use of trained Tribal members as cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful to staff as well as families who need assistance in understanding the various processes and procedures used by individual districts and schools. Trained cultural liaisons have the knowledge of Tribal customs, traditions and language and also understand and know district and school procedures.

Parents can be included on district and school committees that have a direct impact on their child’s education. As volunteers in the classroom, parents can help the teacher by working with small groups of students, reading stories to small groups as well as presenting their knowledge about Tribal customs, language, art and music to entire classrooms or to small groups of students.

Setting the Stage, an example of recognizing cultural components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(By learning about individual differences that may be culturally-based some students bring with them to the school setting, school personnel can become more aware of, sensitive to, and responsive to the needs of all students)</th>
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A third-grade girl in a small-town, rural Midwestern school district was referred for special education assessment under the possible category of emotional-behavioral disturbance due to her seeming inability to enter the school building in the morning and to get settled into her classroom and working within a reasonable amount of time, according to the teacher.

The girl was reported to take about 15-20 minutes from the time she entered to the school to put her belongings away and to get to her desk to work on various items before instruction began. She was observed to make social contact with a number of students and adults in the building that apparently slowed her ability to get down to the business of schooling. Described as a kind and loving student with a lot of potential, the teacher believed the girl was purposefully disobeying her and that she was unable to take redirection around transitions.

During the initial meeting to discuss the assessment process, the school psychologist wondered aloud as to whether what was actually being observed was a phenomenon described in the literature as setting the stage or nesting. Some students coming from collective cultures, cultures that value making social contact and that emphasize relationships over tasks, may find themselves in conflict with the norms of most U.S. schools that tend to be steeped in a cultural way of being that de-emphasizes social connections and that focuses on timeliness and independent work. Perhaps the student in question needed to make contact with various people.
before she could attend to the academic expectations laid out for her. It was decided to postpone
the assessment process and to implement an intervention that allowed the student to set the stage
in a manner that transitioned her more quickly to the classroom and to the work at-hand. Within
two weeks, the intervention proved successful and the special education assessment was
scrapped altogether.

Summary of Data Involving African American Students

The Center of Education Statistics states that the percentage of white students in 2010 was 54%
compared to 15% of black students in the United States. In Minnesota, during the 2010-2011
school year, the percentage of white students was 74.3% compared to 10% of black students.

The above data reveals that African American students have one of the lowest graduation rates
and highest school dropout rates in Minnesota as well as in our surrounding states. Nationally,
academic proficiency tests in reading also show that African American students obtain the lowest
scores of any racial/ethnic group of students. In Minnesota, African American students have the
lowest scores in reading and one of the lowest scores on math proficiency tests. A summary of
the discipline data reveals that nationally, African American students, particularly males, have
the highest rates of out-of-school suspension. Even though, African American students comprise
10% of Minnesota’s student population, they are involved in 41% of all school discipline
incidents. Neighboring states also show similar discipline results.

Nationally and in Minnesota, the data presented above reveals that African American students
receiving special education services are over-represented in special education programs. In
Minnesota, where 10% of our student population is African American, they comprise 23% of our
students receiving Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities services. African American students are
also over-represented in programs for Specific Learning Disabilities, Developmental Cognitive
Disabilities, Other Health Disabilities and Developmental Disabilities.

African American students receiving special education services have a lower high school
graduation rate. Those students enrolled in Specific Learning Disabilities and
Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities programs have very high rates of exclusion from school and
next to Caucasian students (who are in the majority), have the next highest rate of discipline
incidents. Since many African American students comprise a disproportionate number of
students in SLD and E/BD programs, we can assume that many of the behavioral incidents and
school consequences involve these students. Post-Secondary Outcome data of special education
students discloses that African American youth have the lowest percentage in obtaining
competitive employment after high school. They also have lower percentage rates in enrolling in
higher education programs and higher rates of not being engaged after high school.

There are additional factors that may account for the elevated figures in the above data related to African American youth. These factors include:

- Location of the school (rural vs. urban)
- Mobility challenges for these students and their families
- Family relationships and stressors (out of home concerns)
- Challenges related to poverty
- Degree of school staff’s cultural competence
- District/school staff’s competence in providing positive behavior supports
- Instructional strategies and special education assessment procedures and programming options
- District/school resources
- Degree of parent engagement
- Degree of positive community involvement.

In addition, the positive and caring attitudes of all school staff members seem to be the factors that most influence academic achievement and appropriate behavior.

School climate reforms will make a significant impact on school success of African American students. Teachers and administrators who expect and express high expectations of their students in a positive manner will see greater student gains and performance. Every student is a capable learner and can achieve, both academically and behaviorally to their highest potential, must be an intrinsic belief of every teacher and administrator. Poverty; family stressors; cultural, ethnic or racial backgrounds are not an excuse for a student’s underachievement or failing to hold high expectations for social skills.

Every staff member in the school building is responsible for every student. This implies the use of more creative methods to individualize instruction and provide additional support for academics, social skills, and self-regulation. Parent engagement strategies and programs are essential in students achieving to their potential. Parents must become an integral partner in the school and the district by being members of all significant curriculum committees, and participating on policy decision committees. Everyone in the school must feel welcome, safe, respected, and self-confident. Trained cultural liaison staff can have a direct positive impact on students, parents, teachers and administrators. Understanding other cultures will help all involved to establish trusting relationships that will help students in the learning process.
Making Adjustments, A Case Study Example

Students from a Trailer Park and Reading Scores

*No Excuses* – Whatever the circumstances, we are going to find a solution; *Collective efficacy* – we, as educational professionals, own the kiddos we work with and we can and will make a difference in their lives, academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

An elementary school in a small, rural, isolated district in a southern state consistently posted the lowest scores on the reading portion of the state-mandated testing year-after-year. A new principal, dismayed by what he observed in this regard, sought to find out what may be contributing to the situation. Through his investigation, he learned the majority of students with low reading scores came from a trailer park that overlooked the school. By digging deeper, the principal discovered the trailer park did not have electricity. Given that the majority of the school year fell during times of the year when sunlight was relatively low, coupled with the fact school did not let out until approximately 4:00, the students who lived in the trailer park were not completing their homework, including independent reading time, because they had no light by which to work.

One solution to address this matter instituted by the principal was a no-homework policy that stipulated no work was to be sent home to be completed. Instead, the school was to remain open well into the evening and homework help was made available to all students to allow them to complete work that need to be accomplished outside of school time, as well as to provide opportunities for students to engage in independent reading under plenty of light. Within a year of the implementation of this policy, reading scores started to go up. Within three years, the school’s reading scores were amongst the highest in the state. By taking a no-excuses approach and rallying the troops to take ownership of each child and by believing they could turn around the situation, academic improvement occurred for a group of children many considered beyond help.

The development of a positive school climate also recognizes the well being of all teachers and school staff members. Educators, administrators and staff members also need support and encouragement. Teachers should be proud of their teaching skills and remain open to new ideas on instructional and behavioral strategies. School climate is a perception and an attitude about schools and learning. Students, parents, teachers and administrators can work together to enable all students to learn in a warm, caring environment.
In her book *Raising Black Students’ Achievement Through Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Johnnie McKinley’s recounts the practices that led the Seattle School district to narrow the achievement gap between their black and white students. Based upon multiple researchers, the following five key factors provided the focus for the Seattle Schools in reducing the achievement gaps (Banks, et al., 2000; Ladson Billings, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

1. Constructive teacher attitudes and beliefs that nurture student motivation;
2. Positive interpersonal relationships that draw on the student-teacher social interactions;
3. Social activist approaches that address racism, social injustices, and disparate expectations, conditions, and opportunities to learn;
4. Establishment of a cultural context for learning based on students’ backgrounds; and
5. Effective and culturally responsive instructions and assessment.

**Tiers of Service**

To illustrate current practices in education, a focus on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is emphasized. MTSS ranges from the use of universal design interventions to strategies involving individual student focus. Many school systems are adapting Multi-tiered systems of support. A common model involves the use of three tiers, each with an increasing degree of support provided to students identified for support. In settings where a multi-tier system of support is not in place, use of intervention teams to develop strategies to support students is an option.

Within a Multi-tier system of support, using a three-tier model, Tier 1, involves processes and procedures that should be in place for all school districts, including those, which have significant numbers of American Indian and/or African American students. All strategies discussed can be considered part of an improved School Climate plan for the district as well as for each school building. There may be a mismatch of traditional teaching values and values held by the various ethnic, race and cultural groups found in the student body of the school. This may be particularly true if the teaching and administrative staff is comprised primarily of people from a different race, ethnic or cultural background.

Response to Intervention (RtI), a model of intervention involves the systematic use of data to enhance student learning, social-emotional well-being, and/or mental health (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). The goal of RtI is to optimize the potential for success in these areas for ALL students, including those students at risk but not necessarily eligible for special education services (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2006). Components of RtI consist of the provision of high-quality core instruction; universal screening; differentiated instruction or support based on student need; the implementation of increasingly-intensive, evidence-based interventions targeting areas of identified need; progress monitoring; and using the resulting data to make various educational decisions (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). RtI is comprised of multiple tiers of service delivery that are typically represented visually as a triangle (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: RtI Tiers from an Academic Perspective (source: www.sterncenter.org)
Tier 1

Tier 1 of any RtI initiative, also known as the universal level, involves quality core instruction to which all students are exposed. Universal assessment screenings in the academic, social-emotional, and/or mental health domains addressed in the general education classroom are conducted several times a year to learn how students are responding to these curricula. A way to think about these screenings is that they constitute the vital signs of learning “in that they can be used to reflect in a meaningful way whether children are at risk or not in their instructional programs” (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010, p. 78). Based on these screenings, which usually take place three times a year (e.g., fall, winter, spring), it is expected 80% of students should respond successfully to universal curriculum and instruction. This observation means approximately 20% of students do not respond successfully at the universal level, requiring some type of intervention to attend to their areas of need (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005). Tier 2 is the next level of instruction, intervention, and assessment where the needs of this 20% are addressed.

Tier 2

Tier 2 entails some type of targeted instruction or intervention for those students identified as following in the lower 20% through universal screening. This instruction or intervention is delivered in some type of small-group format, groups that flexible, fluid, and homogenous in nature, depending on baseline and progress monitoring data (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010) (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). Whereas assessment data at Tier 1 are used to make screening decisions, assessment data at Tier 2 are conducted to determine those prerequisite or other skills may need to be taught or augmented, as well as what instructional conditions may accelerate a student’s learning trajectory (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). The data are also used to establish homogenous skill groups as a means of matching intervention to student need. The assessments and interventions at Tier 2 also occur more frequently, usually every one to two weeks, so that a student’s progress, or lack thereof, can be monitored and the appropriate modifications to the intervention can be made as necessary. The ultimate goal is to return students receiving targeted instruction and intervention to the universal curriculum and developmentally appropriate instruction (i.e., Tier 1) as quickly as possible.

Tier 3

Even with all of the assessment and interventions taking place at Tier 2, approximately 2%-5% of students will still not respond and make adequate progress to return to Tier 1; as such, these students would be advanced to Tier 3 to receive intensive assessment and intervention in their identified areas of need above and beyond what can be provided at Tier 2 (VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). Given the intensive learning, behavioral, and/or mental health needs of students at Tier 3, instruction and interventions at this level are based on individual student need and they

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Baseline Assessment and Data.

Assessment with appropriate evaluation procedures and development of sound inferences about student needs form the basis of effective programmatic changes. Schools can conduct comprehensive surveys and checklists to determine student, staff, and community perceptions of various aspects of school climate (e.g., building and teacher quality, policies, supports, family engagement), including cultural awareness and knowledge of the staff.

Some examples of existing school climate surveys, which usually require permission to use, are The American School Climate Survey for Students and for Teachers (2006), The ASSC Climate Survey (2004), the School Safety Survey (2002) from PBIS Assessments.org and The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (2007).

Further, aggregated and disaggregated data by population on attendance rates, discipline referrals, tardiness, graduation rates, college acceptance, and test scores as well as staff attendance patterns and turnover provides further insight into trends and patterns that affect overall school climate, or that might be a product of the school climate. Once teams have initial data, developing systems and policies and utilizing resources to address concerns becomes the next step. Assessment tools can be used to collect data at regular intervals to measure intervention effectiveness and to inform additional school climate modifications.

The School Building and Staff

Efforts to reduce disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students require a systemic approach. A systemic approach involves continuous professional development focused on culturally relevant pedagogy, recognition and support of diverse learning styles, assessment of cultural ways of knowing, and involvement of community in special education programs. Resources are assessed, staff attitudes are addressed, and building functional relationships with caregivers is established as a specific strategy used by educators and administrators. The school becomes a community in which all who impact the child, both within and outside the school, work to facilitate the child’s positive adjustment.

A case study of a successful effort was documented in Chicago Providence-St. Mel school. This program demonstrated that directed efforts can lead to positive outcomes for students. Success was determined by high college acceptance and completion rates for African American students. Those involved studied everything from the artifacts in the building, staff behaviors and language, non-instructional periods, to classroom instruction. The people involved with the
school proved to be influential in African American student success. Teachers, the principal, and family members all contributed to the positive environment through engagement with the learning process. Most notably, this school had high expectations for every student, and provided support through relationships, time and material resources, and created a positive atmosphere. The school building itself was a finding of the study; it was in good repair, safe, and provided access to current technology and resources to support learning.

Results of baseline assessment may yield feedback on the condition of the building, visual appeal or cues, perceived safety, and access. It may seem obvious that if the building requires intensive updating or repair, school climate may be impacted negatively. Recognizing the limitations of school funding, extensive repairs may not be possible; however, cleanliness and grounds maintenance might be more manageable with existing resources and community buy-in. Access to the building before and after school for culturally meaningful extracurricular activities or tutoring can improve school climate. Culture should be integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning. Education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic.

While the physical condition and appearance of and within the building is important, school staff and volunteers affect school climate in a number of ways. Cultural competence in the form of attitudes toward students, teaching strategies selected, language used, and general behaviors factor into how students perceive their potential success and inclusion in the school community. Understanding and knowledge of one’s own identity is important to stimulate a willingness to learn about and subsequently accept other people’s cultures.

ACT Policy Report

A comprehensive checklist to address disproportionality is Culturally Responsive Practices in Schools. As a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) public document, the purpose is to reduce overrepresentation of racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse students in special education. It provides an example of factors educators and administrators can review to assess the impact of cultural factors on a student’s progress through school.

All faculty and staff should complete self-awareness and awareness of others activities, such as reflections on their cultural heritage or assessments of implicit biases. Boysen (2010) explains implicit bias as the unintentional actions and language we use that signal a bias around specific cultures or ideas. These implicit biases often result in microaggressions toward other cultures, which are statements, behaviors, or attitudes that demean or discriminate against another, frequently from implicit and unconscious biases (Sue et. al, 2007). An example of a microaggression would be attempting to welcome someone from another culture by offering a stereotypical food or activity when the person being welcomed may or may not like the food or identify with the assumed cultural group. Additional examples of microaggressions specific to any aspect of identity can be found at http://www.microaggressions.com/.

ACT Policy Report

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One effective and free tool for faculty and staff to assess their implicit bias is through Project Implicit Project Implicit Association Tool on Social Attitudes. The free website assessment tool can be used to get a glimpse of personal biases that persons are unaware they possess. Requiring that school staff and volunteers take several assessments each school year and then write a reflection of their results for group discussions can be helpful. Another example of a assessment tool on attitudes and beliefs is the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) http://mdbgroup.com/idi-background.html

Professional development focusing on the cultures of the school is another important step to improve universal school climate. This can be done in a number of ways. Reading groups or book clubs can facilitate greater understanding of a culture, depending on the books chosen for the project. Some books about African American students or American Indian culture are Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria\textsuperscript{82}, African American Students in Urban Schools, and God is Red, respectively. Other topic materials include stories on Freedom Riders and discussion of impact of slavery.

Cultural liaisons or community leaders can visit the school and provide training on customs, traditions, beliefs, and attitudes of particular groups. Training on sociopolitical or historical contexts, for African American or American Indian groups specifically, is also helpful. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in Columbus, Ohio provides numerous resources around the sociopolitical situation of race, looking at implicit bias and discriminatory practices.

**Systems and Policies**

In addition to the physical building and staff/school community cultural competence, school and district systems and policies must be examined and perhaps modified to reflect inclusive practices. Within a congruent framework or system, policies define expectations and consequences. Such policies can relate to feelings and practices around diversity in the school, bullying, discipline, academic standards, and many other aspects of education. It is important for building level leadership teams representing all groups or professionals and support staff to review all school policies and determine if they are meeting the needs of the school and of every student.

As of 2013, 22% of Minnesota schools have been involved in systematic training and implementation of school-wide PBIS sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Education. PBIS programs outline preventive and reactive interventions for the entire school to promote academic and social success for every student. Much like Response to Intervention (RtI), PBIS works with a pyramid idea, signaling universal practices for success as the base of the pyramid. One main idea behind PBIS is that all faculty and staff adhere to the same practices and expectations for students. However, it should be noted that these frameworks have yet to embed culturally responsive practices. Therefore, it is essential that critical elements of culturally responsive practices are included.

responsive teaching, classrooms, and social, emotional, and behavioral supports are included within this broader framework (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 1999; Concha Delgad Gaitran, 2006)

Curriculum factors are another systemic issue or policy that must be examined for representativeness and inclusion of school cultures. Are textbooks current and adequately representing various cultural groups, and are they meaningful to the students? Likewise, learning assessments such as assignments and tests should be reviewed and adjusted to be developmentally appropriate while continuing to challenge the student to grow and learn. Overall, what are the teaching strategies and grading practices like? Are they fair and inclusive? Are opportunities for learning presented equitably to all students? Further, how are parents or guardians involved in the student’s learning? How does the school accommodate work schedules, different family structures, and general needs of families?
The National School Climate Center defines school climate as the quality and character of school life. The quality and character of the school is judged on patterns of the experiences of all stakeholders (parents, staff, students and community representatives). In addition, school climate involves the systems that are in place within the school such as the organizational structure of the school, goals, norms, values, and interpersonal relationships. Given this definition, school climate speaks less to pep assemblies and t-shirt sales, and more to the ethos, or personality of the school. School climate cannot be determined based on a school’s location, consumer base, or presuppositions held by students and staff alike. Just as educators and administrators are required to use assessment data to drive instruction, educators and administrators must take the temperature of the school climate to reflect on student, staff, and parent experiences and whether those experiences are positive, not just for some, but for all.

Perhaps more than ever, an administrator’s understanding of the ingredients to a healthy school climate is imperative. School administrators can no longer afford to consider climate as a superfluous activity or a conversation to hold on a staff development day. Rather, school climate must be fostered on a continual basis, as it is the foundation of the school itself. In 1954, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Warren made the following statement:

In 1954, Chief Justice Warren made the following statement when providing his opinion of the historic case, Brown versus the Board of Education:

*Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be available to all on equal terms (347 US 483, 1954).*

Years later in 1975, the Supreme Court again provided wisdom when weighing in on Goss versus Lopez. The decision borne out of Goss versus Lopez was that school-age people are entitled to an education and this entitlement comes with the protection of the law. This access to education was deliberately called property right for learners and therefore, protected under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution (419 US 565, 1975). Given the “property right\(^{83}\)” status of school attendance, the consideration of school climate is vital. Theoretically, a toxic school climate can, unintentionally, exclude specific groups of people. An unhealthy school climate may limit student access to education and reduce student achievement. This exclusive school atmosphere and environment may increase the number of referrals and subsequent placement of students in special education programs. As a result, an unhealthy school climate may perpetuate the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and increase the rates of

suspension and exclusion. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan recently reminds us, “Education is the civil rights [issue] of our generation. The undeniable truth is that the everyday education experience for too many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise”.

Research to underscore this point is being collected at an increasing rate. Data within this manual and the report, *Closing the Achievement Gap*, cites that “formally assessing and addressing school climate as an essential component in any school’s effort towards successful, reform, achievement, and making a difference for underprivileged student groups (Shindler, Jones, Williams, Taylor & Cadenas, p.1). To that end, a study entitled, exploring the School Climate—Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second, measures eight dimensions of climate. Thereby determining that climate of a school is more than interpersonal relationships, although supportive interpersonal relationships are a critical component.

Dimensions of climate cited within the study are as follows: appearance and physical plant, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decision making, discipline environment, learning environment, attitude and culture, and school-community relations (Shindler, Jones, Williams, Taylor & Cadenas). Intentional behavior to create and maintain a positive school climate manifests itself into the collective vision matching behavior, collaborative rather than competitive staff relations, and learning experiences that elicit student growth.

If a school’s ultimate goal is student achievement, meaning all students work to reach their individual potential, those who work within the system will be best served with a no excuses for failure to meet the needs of students or no excuses to expect the nothing but the best from students. Approaches that raise expectations for student outcomes, particularly groups of students who have experienced disproportionate representation, increases the school’s propensity to become a community of accountability for all participants.

Choosing to improve school conditions means reflecting on our own biases, stereotypes, and educational practices. Furthermore, educators and school staff must be willing to engage in Courageous Conversations with their professional peers, caregivers, and the community at large. In all aspects of our profession, educators must be willing to stay engaged, experience discomfort and speak the truth (Singleton and Linton, 2006). With an approach of no excuses for inability to make change, school communities end blame of caregivers, close conversations that center on the futility of a lesson, and retire negative assumptions about student motivation (Carter,

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85 Shindler, J., Jones, A., Williams, A.D., Taylor, C., & Cadenas, H. Exploring the School Climate—Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second. Alliance for the Study of School Climate, California State University, Los Angeles www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate

86 Shindler, J., Jones, A., Williams, A.D., Taylor, C., & Cadenas, H. Exploring the School Climate—Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second. Alliance for the Study of School Climate, California State University, Los Angeles www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate

Although difficult, we cease to create insinuations that one’s task cannot be fulfilled based on the inaction of another educator. Educators, staff, administrators and caregivers do what is essential, rather than what is easy.

As administrators, we must be responsive to both student and teacher needs and lend support whenever possible. Inactivity on the part of an administrator can destroy school culture, no matter how healthy the climate. Support for staff may manifest itself in a teacher advisory group created to process challenging situations.

In revisiting Shindler’s study, three sub-components are defined that contribute to a high functioning school climate, or success psychology. The study cites that when students are able to view learning situations as opportunities to learn and grow, rather than a measure of their overall ability, students enjoy higher levels of academic achievement. Given these learning opportunities, adults within the educational system must be cognizant to avoid further victimization of learners by expecting less than one hundred percent.

A second indicator of success psychology is a student’s feelings of acceptance in a group. The overall feelings of acceptance lead to the probability that one will engage in activities as a part of the school community, therefore increasing self-esteem. Positive self-esteem also has been proven to increase student academic achievement. Promoting a connection for every student with at least one adult in the building is an important accomplishment to promote a welcoming school climate.

Finally, it is agreed that accountability and responsibility are key elements in what the research describes as personal empowerment. This empowerment leads to internal, rather than external motivation, contributing to a student’s appropriate demonstration of power. Again, research supports the correlation between high levels of intrinsic motivation and school achievement (Shindler, p 5).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education” (King, 1947). A healthy school climate will yield opportunities for growth, acceptance within a community, and student empowerment. Working to create a culture of unconditional, positive regard for all stakeholders brings us closer to delivering a free, appropriate public education for all students.

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Culturally responsive education (CRE) has been designed to raise achievement levels, create equitable learning environments, and increase intrinsic motivation (Assembly of First Nations\textsuperscript{89}). Therefore, education must be viewed as a process of human development reflective to the cultural and linguistic framework of our diverse students. “Schools are a vehicle for the transmission of culture. Our challenge is to ensure that education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic” (Assembly of First Nations\textsuperscript{90}).

The fundamental change in our assumptions about the value and relevance of cultural understanding is the shift from the concept of bringing culture into education to making sure that education is integrated with culture as a new whole. Culture is not an add-on; it is part of the identity of the students schools serve. For example, no longer would it be bringing in isolated cultural events to celebrate a “day” or month, such as Black History Month, but rather that the entire culture, climate, environment, curriculum, instruction is reflective of the culture of diverse groups throughout the school year.


School climate is affected by the type and availability of resources in the school. This could refer to teaching tools such as current textbooks, supplemental readings, and ready access to modern technologies such as iPads and working computers. Resources can also refer to the human capital within the school. For example, cultural liaisons can be invaluable in helping schools meet the needs of students in the schools. Cultural liaisons may be community leaders, religious officials, or experts in a specific culture. Screening and selecting liaisons must be deliberate and intentional so that you form relationships with people who will support a positive school climate. Family engagement and volunteerism positively impacts school climate, too. Further, providing supports to families who are in need promotes academic achievement and upholds the school community overall. As mentioned previously, access to the school building for before and after school activities such as tutoring is important. It builds a sense of community, and can be positive if the culture of the school is considered when creating or improving resources.

Other examples of schools with excellent records of highly successful African American youth [here](http://example.com). Additionally, the [University of Chicago](http://example.com) explores school success for specific groups, and provides many resources. Likewise, more information is located at the [Annenberg Institute](http://example.com).

### Other Resources


American Indian – Alaska Natives Today

Introduction

Among American Indians and Alaska Native students (AIAN) there are many cultures, beliefs, and religious practices. American Indians are identified through their tribal affiliation, which is a group of families who share ancestors and culture, and their nation, which is an organization of tribes. American Indians should not be viewed as a homogeneous group because their cultures are so varied. The 2010 U.S. census reported 2,932,248 American Indians and Alaska natives throughout the United States representing .9% of the US population\(^1\). In Minnesota the number of American Indians – Alaska Natives is estimated at 60,916. If considering families that identify as American Indian Alaska Native and another race, the number is estimated at 101,900. There are 550 federally recognized Native American Nations in the United States. The number of American Indian Alaska natives who are school age is estimated at 23,759 (representing 1.9% of the school age population in Minnesota\(^2\).

American Indians have some of the lowest incomes of all residents in Minnesota; many live well below the poverty level. Poverty is one factor that requires attention when assessing the American Indian student. Most students are capable of meeting academic performance standards. Economic stress, due to poverty, is factor that may interfere with their ability to focus on academic requirements (i.e. computer and internet access). A common misperception is that all American Indians receive direct financial benefit from tribal gaming enterprises. This varies from tribe to tribe.

Many American Indian adults did not have positive educational experiences themselves and consequently many do not trust the educational system to address their children’s needs. These educational experiences have been seen historically in the boarding schools, and in the current school practices and standards. Examples are racism, lack of culturally relevant curriculum, historical trauma, lack of understanding, and underrepresentation of American Indian teachers and support staff.

The predominant groups in Minnesota are the Anishinabe (Ojibwe or Chippewa) and the Dakota peoples. In addition, there are Ho-Chunk, Menomonie, and Oneida Indians from Wisconsin who live in Minnesota plus American Indians from tribes throughout the United States and Canada. American Indians from Canada are referred to as First Nations people.

American Indian students are identified and counted in various ways. The methods families identify themselves and how districts count American Indian students may be inconsistent. State and federal programs may require different criteria, and districts may have different processes

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and practices with regard to student count. It is important for school personnel to understand American Indian families identify themselves in ways different from school requirements.
Nationally, approximately 78 percent of American Indians live full time on reservations and trust lands which are often regarded as cultural, linguistic and spiritual centers of Indian nations. In Minnesota, there are seven Anishinabe or Ojibwe reservations and four Dakota communities:

**Anishinabe reservations:** Grand Portage, Bois Forte, Red Lake, White Earth, Leech Lake, Fond du Lac, and Mille Lacs.

**Dakota Communities:** Shakopee-Mdewakanton, Prairie Island, Lower Sioux, and Upper Sioux

The exact percentage of Minnesota Indians who live on these reservations is not known. A portion of the American Indian population moves back and forth between reservations and towns or cities outside of the reservation. This creates situations where American Indian students are moving frequently between different environments, causing some to experience loss of identity and other problems related to acculturation. Non-Indian special educators often have difficulties in perceiving and understanding the cultural identity of American Indians, whether they live in urban or rural settings.

**Understanding American Indian Cultural Identity & Culture of Today**

Understanding students' cultural identity is essential to building relationships and communicating with caregivers. If the student is not successful in school, educators may be uncertain about whether the lack of success is due to a cultural difference between school and home or if it is indicative of a disability. An awareness of the influence of race, culture, and language is important for educators and administrators.

In a discussion of cultural identity, a Minnesota Indian Home-School Liaison who participated in a focus group about special education services (Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 1996) stated that American Indian families are “on a continuum, ranging from those who follow a traditional lifestyle to those who are very acculturated.” As a result, values and beliefs may not match lifestyle, and individuals who may outwardly appear to be acculturated in terms of dress and employment may still maintain traditional spiritual beliefs and cultural values.

American Indian students have a wide variety of experiences. Some may participate in cultural activities while others do not. Some families may experience and live the values without attending cultural events. A student’s physical appearance does not indicate their level of participation or non-participation in cultural practices and beliefs.

Another important aspect of American Indian culture is the differing concepts of *disability* or *impairment*. These terms are not easily translated into American Indian languages or conceptual frameworks. Although persons with severe disabilities are recognized as different in Indian communities, a wide range of differences are still accepted, in general, as *normal*. Persons with disabilities were not historically excluded or shunned in American Indian communities as they were in many European cultures. Some parents of students receiving special education services may not agree with the services because of the labeling and how students are treated.
The following is a list of indicators, *Understanding American Indian Identity* was generated by a group of Indian Home-School Liaisons in Minnesota:

**Understanding American Indian Cultural Identity**

Indian communities need elders to build their knowledge and sense of identity because many families may be displaced or separated from one another.

Families may have expectations for their children that are different from the expectations of schools.

Some families choose not to follow any activities and/or beliefs related to American Indian culture.

Personal items and/or artifacts in the home may or may not indicate cultural identity, beliefs or practices (presence of cedar, sage, dream catchers, feathers, Indian artwork).

Students who are monolingual English speakers are influenced by their community's native language in such areas as response time, conversational rules, vocabulary, and syntax.

A student’s activities may be indicative of their cultural knowledge. Yet, other students may have a similar value of their cultural heritage but may not demonstrate it in overt ways.

A student’s knowledge may be indicative of cultural identity. Students may know and be able to articulate their family’s cultural participation and tribal affiliation.

Some Indian Children who are in non-Indian foster or adoptive homes may lose their cultural identity if the foster home does little to value the culture of the student.

**Understanding Tribal Identity**

All American Indian students have an affiliation with a specific tribe. The students may be actually tribally enrolled or the parent or grandparent may be tribally enrolled. Sometimes it is as remote as someone told me my great grandmother was Indian. Requirements for tribal enrollment vary from tribe to tribe. It is each tribe’s sovereign responsibility to establish these membership requirements. Educators should be aware that tribal identity is a political identification and is different from racial or cultural identities. Many American Indians do not consider themselves people of color or a racial minority, but identify only with their status as members of sovereign tribal nations.
American Indian Culture and/or Environmental Differences That May Affect Evaluation/Assessment Results

At the point of assessment and evaluation of American Indian students, it is important for educators and evaluation teams to remember that multiple issues may affect American Indian students. Examples include code switching, language loss, language influence, communication style differences, relational style preferences, and differences in traditions, mobility, poverty, racism, and health factors. Not all of these factors apply to each student, however, it is important to screen for the presence of any of these factors that could provide context to the student’s social, emotional, behavioral reactions, or response to their curriculum in public school settings.

As well, the overall culture of American Indian students, particularly when they are in settings where they make up a small portion of the student population, can be significantly different from their peers. The recognition and education on cultural differences is a benefit educators can offer families and students.

Intervention and assessment practices that integrate understanding of language, culture, and environment of an American Indian student are recommended. Many American Indian students are raised in homes where parents or grandparents language patterns are affected by language loss. As many cognitive abilities tests have a verbal language element, it is important to recognize how reliance on verbal language impacts the performance of an American Indian student, and how vital the issue of maintance of language is for American Indian families.

**Code Switching**

Code switching is a common language strategy observed in second-language learners. “Code switching occurs when an LEP child switches from one language to another language when conversing, usually between sentences” (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005, p. 74). Code switching is not considered an indicator of poor language skills, but viewed as a communicative strategy often used by bilingual students.

Language switching is a cognitive process that occurs naturally and spontaneously among persons who use multiple languages. Some American Indian students have a home language (L1), and are expected to operate in settings where they are expected to think, process and perform in Standard American English (L2). It is not easy for some students to turn off their home language when they transition from one setting to another (Cumming, 2013). In fact, this “phenomenon indicates that the L1 plays an integral role in L2 performance” (Cumming, 2013, p. 133). Allowing students to process information in their home language adds to their understanding of concepts.

Code switching is viewed as a skill to be utilized and capitalized on to maximize academic language and literacy learning. There are varying degrees of code-switching both linguistically and culturally. Some students are very adept at situational behavior while others are not. This may lead educators and other school staff to believe that students who are code switching are

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93 Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005, p. 74
confused and are less capable than students from dominant culture. Or, educators may miss the influence code switching may have on student performance. Even if a student’s first language is English and a tribal language is not spoken in the home these influences still exist.

**Communication styles**

American Indians may have communication styles that are different from the communication styles of teachers and the implicit or explicit communicative expectations in public schools. These communication style differences may cause misunderstandings if the cultural values behind them are not understood. Heit (1987) shared some general styles of appropriate communication in American Indian cultures, which may not be true for all American Indians, such as children not verbally expressing themselves in the presence of adults, allowing actions to speak instead of verbalizing knowledge, and not verbally disciplining or praising a child in public. Furthermore, it may be considered inappropriate to look at someone directly the whole time they are speaking or to compete for correct answers (Hait, 1987). These types of behaviors would be met with peer group disapproval. These general styles of communication can clearly contradict the typical communication practices and expectations in a school classroom, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness and competence.

**Some Characteristics of American Indian Culture and Communication Style**

American Indian and Alaska Native students have been subjected to forced changes in their culture and communication styles. Despite the pressures they have endured to assimilate and lose traditions, they have remained resilient. This resiliency has allowed for the maintenance of important and valued aspects of the culture.

The culture and values of American Indian are on a continuum. Some values will be seen in one family but not in another. The interpretation of a value can differ from family to family, community to community, and tribe to tribe. Because of forced assimilation, values and corresponding behaviors may have changed from the original intent in some areas.

Students raised in American Indian communities or families display communication traits that are sometimes viewed as disrespectful or non-compliant by teachers who are not familiar with American Indian culture. Some of the major areas of difference in communication style are in the areas of language development, eye contact, class participation, and latency of response. Each communication style is described below:

**Communication Style Factors:**

**Eye contact:** Some American Indian students will not make eye contact with the teacher when spoken to; this is a traditional way to show respect for teachers and others who offer to speak. These students are brought up to interact within a group rather than stand out in a crowd.

**Communication Style Preference Circular Communication:** AIAN students often have a preference for a circular communication style. Traditional public school settings operate on a linear communication style. A linear communication style is direct, brief, and focused only a
specific point of discussion. A circular communication style relies more on inference, use of non-verbal as well as verbal cues, and allows for discussion on issues indirectly related to the point.

**Class participation:** Some American Indian students do not volunteer or raise their hands to participate for fear of standing out or appearing to know more than their peers. If one student gives an incorrect response when called on by a teacher, other students may be reluctant to give the correct answer because they do not want their classmate to feel badly. Many American Indian students are not comfortable with individual praise.

**Group interactions:** Some American Indian students work well in cooperative groups and may prefer private recognition. Learning is enhanced when lessons presented in fable/story form and are consistent with traditional teaching methods.

**Latency of response:** Some American Indian students demonstrate latency or longer response time. An initial judgment by educators is that the student does not know the answer or that he/she has an information processing problem, however, it is possible for some American Indian students that they are using a reflective response style not dependent upon responding quickly. This may affect the results of timed assessments.

Other characteristics of tribal culture and communication style include the following (some similarities with other cultures can be found):

- Addressing elders with great respect.
- Valuing humor. Humor and teasing are used in many ways. Humor can demonstrate acceptance, or serve as a coping mechanism, or a way to be inclusive, or used as a teaching tool. Teasing is not considered mean or inappropriate, nor is it mean-spirited. It may be used as a form of engagement.
- Taking time to think before speaking. Understanding that words have power to heal and power to do harm.
- Speaking softly when responding.
- Feeling that it is improper and intrusive to ask *personal questions* of someone.
- Feeling comfortable with silence. Waiting until someone is finished speaking before responding. Pausing often to reflect while speaking. Expecting listeners to wait during pauses until the speaker is ready to continue.
- Waiting and listening when joining a group that is engaged in conversation, rather than starting to talk immediately.
- Valuing cooperation and avoiding competition, confrontation, and conflict.
- Not volunteering advice unless asked.
- Avoiding certain topics of conversation such as ceremonies, medicine, spirits, and dreams. Students may elect to share and staff are encouraged to be respectful.
- Communicating criticism and/or praise indirectly through another family or community member.
- Preferring to observe an activity or task repeatedly before attempting performance. American Indian students may be reluctant to display their performance skills on demand in either the classroom or in testing situations until mastered.
Health factors and school performance

American Indian students and families experience many of the health issues and risks that affect students and families in poverty. These health issues manifest themselves in physical, mental and emotional ways. Among AIANs, the risk factors for coronary heart disease are more prevalent. American Indians experience high rates of hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and diabetes (Liao, Bang, & Cosgrove, 2011). Behavioral risk factors are high with this population as well, with high rates of smoking, obesity, and sedentary lifestyles (Barnes, Adams, & Powell-Griner, 2010). Many AIANs have limited health literacy and cardiovascular health knowledge (Brega, et al., 2013).

Of particular importance for schools, American Indian children are disproportionately affected by obesity (Polhamus, Dalenius, Mackintosh, Smith, & Grummer-Strawn, 2011). Fortunately, physical activity level and diet are risk factors for obesity that can be modified. Since children spend much of their time in school, schools have the opportunity to positively impact physical activity and dietary habits (Brega, et al., 2013). Schools also have the opportunity to educate AIAN students about other health concerns like smoking and cardiovascular health and help them develop healthy lifestyle habits.

American Indian students with health issues may lose school time because of doctor or dental appointments. Many American Indian students are served through Indian health services and health providers may not be available in the immediate area. Their caregivers may have difficulty getting appointments and travel time to appointments can be extensive.

Drug and alcohol Concerns:

Alcohol and drug abuse has been an identified concern for AIAN youth for decades. Hawkins, E.H., Cummins, L.H. & Marlatt, G.A (2004) reviewed literature on the status of chemical use with American Indian and Alaskan Native Youth, the found that the prevalence of inhalant abuse, tobacco use, alcohol and marijuana, was a significant concern for AIAN youth. Regional and national data from the 1980s indicate that nearly all drug rates were higher for American Indian youth when compared to non-Indian youth (Okwumabua & Duryea, 1987). In 2001, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that American Indian youth were more likely to use alcohol and marijuana. American Indian youth are also significantly more likely to use methamphetamine and cocaine than the general population (Ramisetty-Mikler & Ebama, 2011) and start abusing substances at earlier ages (Nalls, Mullis, & Mullis, 2009).

Factors that contribute to abuse include cultural conflicts, peer pressure, the recreational value of substance abuse, and experiences in the larger society (Bagley, Angel, Dilworth-Anderson, Liu, & Schinke, 1995). Student’s school performance may suffer, and students may be misdiagnosed and mislabeled if substance abuse is not ruled out. As in the broader community, parents and or other family members may be involved with drugs or alcohol. If chemical use by caregivers is extensive, it can become an environmental factor that affects students performance.

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Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE)

In the U.S., there are racial and socioeconomic disparities in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) rates. American Indians and lower income groups have higher rates than Caucasian Americans and members of higher income groups (Abel, 1995; Centers for Disease Control, Prevention, 2002). FAS, which is entirely preventable, causes serious, incurable developmental and neurological problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The characteristic patterns of behavioral and cognitive abnormalities exhibited by children with FAS include poor executive functioning, lack of inhibition, increased activity levels, and motor and memory challenges (O’Connor, Kogan, & Findlay, 2002; Kodituwakku, Kalberg, & May, 2001). Lewis, Shipman, and May (2011) found that prenatal alcohol consumption, low socioeconomic status, and higher levels of psychological distress in mothers were associated with FAS diagnoses in children and believe that educating youth about pregnancy, depression, and drinking may increase early awareness and lead to the prevention of FAS. Students may be misdiagnosed and mislabeled as having an emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), attention deficit concern (ADHD), or cognitive concern (Developmental Disability) if FAS or FAE is not explored.

Mobility Rates/Homelessness

Homelessness, or lack of a regular and adequate nighttime residence, negatively impacts learning and assessment of children. Over 1.35 million children and youth experience homelessness each year in the United States (Burt, Aron, & Lee, 2001). Approximately 62% of these children and youth are of racial minority groups: 43% are African American, 15% are Hispanic American, and 4% are Native American or are member of other racial groups (Burt et al., 1999).

Many school-aged children who are homeless attend school sporadically and it is estimated that as many as 43% of school-aged children who are homeless do not attend school at all (Hall & Maza, 1990). Homeless students also have double the retention rate of their housed peers (Better Homes Fund, 1999).

For those homeless children who attend school, associated factors that impact their academic performance include fatigue and poor nutrition; poor concentration due to worrying (e.g. “Will I eat supper tonight?” or “Where will my family sleep?”); gaps in their school knowledge from missed days; and lack of daily preparedness, such as completing homework, resulting from not having necessary materials or a place to study (Noll & Watkins, 2003, p. 362).

Homeless individuals and families have high mobility rates, so it is important to use Tier 1 informal assessments to gather information about what a student knows and in what areas she/he needs additional support. Frequent moves can impact students emotionally, socially, mentally, and academically as they often have unrecognized educational needs, unmet educational needs, and lack of stable social relationships (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). American Indian families may move back and forth from reservations to urban areas and to smaller communities. The transition of moving from one American Indian community to another American Indian community can be stressful to the student. Research has shown that “at least half of the differences in achievement do appear to be related to the effect of mobility itself” (Rumberger & Larson, 1998, p. 3). Research indicates that student mobility can be both a symptom of
disengagement in school and an important risk factor for high school dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

When teaching homeless students, it is important to start where the child is in her/his development and move ahead, rather than starting where she/he would be expected to be given her/his age (Noll & Watkins, 2003). In assessing American Indian students who have experienced periods of homelessness, timely observation is important in determining the student’s background knowledge, strengths, and needs.

Some American Indian families may meet the definition of homelessness. However, members of the family may not view themselves as homeless when they are living with relatives. Historically, multigenerational families lived together in one household, and this practice has been maintained.

**Racism and Racial Identity Development**

A major developmental task for all adolescents is the establishment of identity (Erikson, 1968). Forming an identity is a psychosocial task that creates a sense of unity and cohesiveness for an individual (Allen & Majidi-Ahi, 1989). It provides meaning, direction, and purpose while also contributing to the development of competence and adaptive functioning (Allen & Majidi-Ahi, 1989). “While identity development is a complex task for all youths, it is particularly complicated for children and adolescents belonging to ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States” (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p. 290).

Many students may be negatively by lack of understanding as they progress through stages of racial identity development. All people pass through different stages of development as one realizes racism is a part of their life. Those who do not have support may have behaviors that are not conducive to a successful educational experience. According to Tatum (1977), people of color pass through the five stages of racial identity development which include: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. Students develop coping strategies, some unhealthy, to help them as they navigate through this developmental process.

Unfortunately, many American Indians continue to experience racism in U.S. society and in public schools. They experience both personal and institutional racism. Institutional racism can occur in districts without being intentional. If there are disparate negative impacts on specific groups of students, policies, practices and procedures should be examined for institutional racism. Gathering data and conducting self-studies through reviewing program participation of diverse groups and examining program participation of diverse students and discipline rates and referrals may help identify warning signs of institutional racism.

American Indian youth are exposed to contradictory messages from the broader society about the value and meaning of being American Indian. The few images of American Indians in mainstream media tend to be distorted and illustrate popular culture’s tendency to both romanticize and devalue American Indians, while lacking accurate knowledge about them (Newman, 2005). Racial stereotypes persist, like sports teams using images of American Indians as mascots. Chavers (2010) reported that AIANs still experience racism in both schools and
communities and its effects can be seen in the high drop out rates and low academic performance of AIAN youth.

Careful consideration of the student’s progress through racial identity development is a support schools and educators can offer students. For example, students who are in the oppositional stage of racial identity development may be misdiagnosed as having an emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), and appropriate support based on their true needs for support in racial identity may not be provided.

For American Indian students the development of cultural identity is complicated by tribal identity. Students may be officially enrolled in a specific tribe or may have a parent or grandparent that is enrolled in a specific tribe. The students’ knowledge may be limited to family teachings that indicate an ancestor belonged to a specific tribe or that tribal background may not be known. Gathering specific information from the student or their caregiver about tribal enrollment or affiliation helps with developing a comprehensive understanding of the student’s status. Students are on a wide continuum of tribal affiliation and ancestral knowledge.

American Indian students do not always have physical characteristics that readily identify them as American Indians. Appearance does not reflect cultural or tribal identity. Cultural, racial, and tribal identity can affect students’ performance and if available school personnel can involve appropriate cultural liaisons for assistance in supporting a student or in communicating with caregivers.

**Curriculum Concerns**

In Minnesota, there is a statutory requirement that requires that all content standards address the contributions of Minnesota tribes and communities as they are revised. While these revisions are occurring appropriate assessments are lacking. Therefore, there is little to no accountability to assure that appropriate instruction occurs. Unfortunately, school curriculums and U.S. History content standards can fail to promote critical thinking about American Indian-European American interactions in U.S. history (Anderson, 2012).

History textbooks have increasingly recognized the diversity among American Indians, yet the genocidal practices that decimated the American Indian populations are minimizes, and inaccuracies that Europeans did not discover America are not corrected. History pertaining to American Indians is typically a sidebar and is not portrayed as a central part of American history (Anderson, 2012). “There is a long-standing and fundamental disjuncture both in school curricula and in U.S. society generally between the documented historical record on American Indian affairs and how most European American would like to remember this history” (Anderson, 2012, p. 498). Furthermore, U.S. History curriculum has idealized prominent American Indians who support the favored narrative of racial reconciliation between European American and American Indians (McBeth, 2003). Some believe that “schooling has functioned, in general, to transmit the dominant social order, preserving the status quo” (Stanley, 2010, p. 17). Multicultural education should not perpetuate social inequalities, but instead value the contributions that various populations and races have made throughout history.
When students do not see themselves in the curriculum, schools may become less relevant to the student. Students may disengage and as a result school performance, attendance, and behavior may be affected.

**Cultural Values**

It is crucial for educators to be aware of the cultural values of American Indian and Alaska Native students in their schools. Cultural practices and expectations vary among the diverse populations of American Indians and Alaska Natives. How AIANs define success in life may differ from the definition of success that guides public education. “Economic interests and income may be one measure of success, but there may be other equally important measures of success, such as cultural connectedness, that drive individuals’ educational and professional goals” (Akee, Yazzie-Mintz, 2011, p. 122). Sometimes the cultural practices and expectations of American Indians are in stark contrast to the dominant cultural practices and expectations that often guide public schools. Educators who have questions or concerns about these issues should turn to respected elders in the local Indian community and available Indian education staff for help and information.

Respect is the overarching value in the American Indian community. “The belief system of the Anishinabe and Dakota place respect at the center of the value system. If a person respects the Creator, Mother Earth, elders, family and community, then the other values and their associated behaviors will follow”.

Some examples of Cultural Values of AIAN are as follows:

- **Noninterference**: Parents may choose not to interfere with choices made by students even when there are unintended outcomes. The purpose is to teach responsibility and to learn from the results of your actions.
- **Generosity**: It is an expectation to help family and community before self. Students are also expected to share in ways that may not support the dominant value of ownership.
- **Humility**: Students may not raise their hands or put themselves forward even if they know the answers.
- **Humor**: Teasing may be used to as a form of acceptance, coping mechanism, teasing oneself or others.
- **Cooperation**: Working together or in groups is valued.
- **Acceptance/Non-judgmental**: American Indian families have a strength-based view their children therefore families may be reluctant to accept the labeling of their children.

These are generalized behaviors that may not apply to all students in all situations. This may be due to cultural identity and/or code switching. When schools are conducting assessments it is required by state and federal law that a determination is made as to whether culture contributes to assessment results and understanding of the American Indian cultural values system will help to inform this response. Schools and assessment teams must be careful as values and their related behaviors may be misinterpreted.
Another example of where differences between cultural expectations of the American Indian/Alaska native student may differ from the culture of the school is in terms of how absences are viewed and treated. A student may feel pressure from the school due to absences for legitimate family and cultural events that contribute to their identity development and maturation. Absences from school may be due to events such as funerals, cultural events, or significant family events that may not fit expectations of non-Indian educators, as far as how much time is needed away from school.

An American Indian or Alaska native definition of caregivers, family, and extended family may extend well beyond the immediate family definition used by schools. Grandparents and other relatives may provide Caretaking for American Indian and Alaska Native students. A broad family support system of relatives, including family members and clan members is a value that contributes to the strong connections sought within the American Indian and Alaska Native Community. These bonds form the basis of family and community support, important to the success of students.

These specific examples illustrate the varied cultural values of tribes. The academic success of AIAN students is dependent on applying knowledge of these differences towards developing interventions in public schools.

**Family Stress**

As in all communities, environmental stressors involving family disruption can momentarily destabilize the American Indian student. The presence of nurturing caregivers in a youth’s life supports the development of resilience and well-being in youth. Parents and Caregivers often face challenges and stressors of their own which can hamper their ability to adequately support and guide their children. “American Indian parents may also be affected by intergenerational transmission of trauma and loss of traditional parenting practices, as a result of forced boarding school and/or relocation” (Goodkind, LaNoue, Lee, Freeland, & Freund, 2012, p. 469).

A concern about the function of some families exists in the Indian community in the same way as other communities. Problems with family stability are sometimes demonstrated by drug and alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, and family violence. This can lead to out-of-home placement in foster homes for American Indian students at higher rates than students from other backgrounds. Often their placement is in non-native homes in spite of the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act. This exacerbates the cultural conflict the student may be experiencing. Schools can design interventions to involve parents, the tribal community, Indian Education staff, and other community resources to support American Indian students working through family concerns. In this way both their development and academic performance can be supported.
Learning Modalities Of American Indian Alaska Native Students

One factor that may affect school performance of American Indians and Alaska Natives is that their learning styles may not be accommodated in schools (Read, a). Read (a) found that American Indians differed significantly from their peers on several learning style preferences. American Indian students expressed a preference for lower lighting, the presence of an authority figure, visual learning, and late morning learning. Late morning learning was preferred over early morning learning as students were more alert and attentive later in the morning than the first hours of the school day. These preferences may reflect different cultural values and traditions and should be accommodated by educators.

Summary of Learning Style Preferences for American Indian Alaska Native Students

- Preference for lower lighting
- Preference for the presence of an authority figure
- Preference for visual learning
- Preference for late morning learning

The preference for the presence of an authority figure may reflect the tradition of respect for elders (Light & Martin, 1985). American Indian students also showed less persistence and less responsibility/conformity when their interactions were observed (Read, a). What appeared to be a lack of persistence could have been a period of reflection and a preference for needing time to think and consider prior to completing an assignment (Swisher & Deyhle, 1989).

Some American Indian students may also not persist in their schoolwork because they do not consider the content to be relevant or consistent with their values (U.S. Department of Education, 1991; Dunn & Griggs, 1995; Sanders, 1987) or because they perceive limited post-school opportunities (Ogbu, 1978). The lower level of responsibility/conformity observed in American Indian students from Read’s (a) study may reflect subculture norms that emphasize equitable group standards over individual success (Dumont & Wax, 1969). Read’s (a) work also illustrated that there are as many within group differences as between group differences, so it is important for educators to identify the learning styles of their students rather than adopt a uniform approach to all AIAN students.

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIANs) also differ from the general population in perceptual style preference (auditory, visual, and tactile/kinesthetic) (Read, b). While the majority of the general population has a dominant perceptual style preference, the majority of AIANs had no strong preference (Read, b). For learning to occur and AIAN achievement to improve, teaching must incorporate a variety of perceptual methods (Read, b). “Of primary importance is that teachers learn to integrate a variety of modalities so that the learner who has no strong preference is afforded an equal opportunity to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information” (Read, b, p. 7).

Furthermore, based on a review of research, theories, and models of the learning styles of AIAN students, Pewewardy (2002) concluded that AIAN learning styles were generally “characterized
by factors of social/affective emphasis, harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication” (p. 22).

Assessment teams can support AIAN students by working to identify the learning and perceptual styles of their students, within the overall school climate of embracing student diversity. Educators must use a wide variety of instructional strategies to address the many learning styles in their classroom. New concept or difficult concepts must be taught using auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile modalities. Other strategies include differentiation, as well as flexible and/or cooperative grouping.

**School Readiness and Poverty**

Hibel, Faircloth, and Farkas (2008) found that “the strongest predictor of special education placement is a student’s academic readiness on entering kindergarten as measured by the student’s pre-reading and pre-mathematics scores” (p. 498). This is a concerning topic given that American Indian and Alaska Native students are overrepresented in special education programs and classes. These students are more likely than any other racial or ethnic minority group to receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2007).

While the Minnesota legislature and the federal government have added resources to early childhood and all-day kindergarten programs, schools must continue to pay particular attention to student performance in early childhood programs and towards identifying children through preschool screening efforts. Hibel et al. (2008) advocate for the development of early intervention services that are culturally and linguistically relevant for American Indian and Alaska Native children.

**Historical Trauma**

American Indians and Alaska Natives have experienced a series of traumatic events over successive generations. These traumatic events included “community massacres, genocidal policies, pandemics from the introduction of new diseases, forced relocation, forced removal of children through Indian boarding school policies, and prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices” (Stannard, 1992; Thorton, 1987). This historical trauma has enduring, compounding consequences for AIAN families and communities and impacts identity, as well as individual and familial health, including mental health (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Brave Heart and her collaborators have studied the impact of historical trauma on the Lakota tribe. They found that their historical trauma responses included survivor guilt, anger, depression, unresolved mourning, feeling numb in response to traumatic events, intrusive thoughts and dreams, rumination over the past and lost ancestors, and fantasies about saving lost ancestors (Brave Heart, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Research has shown that AIAN people may tend to minimize or trivialize their own problems given the historical trauma of their ancestors (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006).
Historical trauma may also play a part in AIAN family violence. It has been suggested that all the AIAN parents who grew up in boarding schools were not only deprived of traditional parent role models and learning healthy child-rearing practices from the previous generation, but they instead learned new negative behaviors (Horejsi, Craig Heavy Runner, & Pablo, 1992). These types of government policies conveyed the message that AIAN families cannot raise children and this message has been internalized by parents and children “who may begin to doubt themselves, their own culture, and their traditional ways of parenting” (Evans-Campbell, 2008, p. 327). AIAN parents who attended boarding schools where they were mistreated and subjected to racism and prejudice may pass these negative perceptions of education on to their children. While they want their children to have an excellent education, their own schooling experiences cause them to be leery of even setting foot on school grounds (Chavers, 2010).

Sometimes educators do not understand the continuing impact of historical trauma due to lack of training and professional development. Attitudes may range from a general lack of understanding and awareness to an attitude of well, get over it. This dismissal of the significance of the impact on American Indian Alaska Native families creates more cultural conflict, has a detrimental impact on racial identity development, and perpetuates a misperception that American Indian families do not value education.

**Language**

American Indian culture relies on the oral traditions of the elders for the preservation of storytelling, events, the different ceremonies, songs, dances, legends, creation, and history of the people. Maintaining the language means cultural survival for the younger generation. One common misperception is that American Indian languages had no written form prior to European contact. This is not true. Maya, Olmec, and Zapotec languages spoken in Mexico and Central America were written languages based on hieroglyphic recording. Other written forms included picture writing in which each picture stood for an idea in the language. The Anishinabe (Ojibwe) people of Minnesota used a combination of picture writing with other devices to make maps, send messages, and record information about songs, ceremonies, and historical events. The Dakota used a similar picture writing system to communicate information.

Language variation is one of the most significant differences among American Indian tribes. From over 300 distinct languages spoken by tribes north of Mexico, 150 to 200 of these languages survive today. Each tribe speaks a different native language. Groups of languages, however, are historically related and have been grouped in 18 language families. In Minnesota, Dakota is a dialect of a single language which includes three dialects: Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota. The Dakota communities of Minnesota use the Dakota dialect. The Nakota dialect is used by the Yankton and Yanktonai and can also be heard on the Sisseton Reservation of South Dakota, while the Lakota dialect is spoken by tribal members who live at Pine Ridge in the same state.

Ojibwe (Ojibwemowin) is a single language with many dialects. As stated within the Ojibwe People’s Dictionary, “speakers of Ojibwe consider their language to be precise, descriptive, and visual, and feel that it is among the greatest treasures of their cultural heritage.” Ojibwe is part

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95 [http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/](http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/)
of the Algonkian language family. The Eastern branch of the Algonkian language family includes languages such as Abnaki Narragansett, Delaware and several others. The Western branch includes Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Gros Ventre, and Sutaio. The Central branch, of which Ojibwe is a part, also includes languages such as Cree, Potawatomi, Menominee, and many others. Ojibwe is a highly complex and very descriptive language. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Ojibwe is one of the hardest languages in the world for non-native speakers to learn. The language includes over distinct pronunciation and verb forms 96.

Both Ojibwe and Dakota:

- are extremely complex in terms of grammar, morphology, and phonology;
- have a strong oral tradition for transmitting information from one generation to the next;
- had systems of written communication prior to contact with Europeans; and
- are currently being restored as living languages using phonetic writing systems;

Language Loss

AIANs have experienced catastrophic language loss. Linguists estimate that there were approximately 300 to 500 Native languages spoken by the peoples native to what is now the United States and Canada before European contact (Krauss 1998; McCarty & Watahomigie 2003; Zepeida & Hill, 1992). Fortunately, more than 200 of those languages remain, but only 34 are still being naturally acquired as a first language by children (Krauss 1998). “It is language that carries the nature and character of who we are and how we relate with one another . . . and to all things we experience in life,” a Pueblo leader relates; “[o]nce we’ve lost that, we have lost everything” (Suina, 2004, p. 300).

Language Loss is one example of historical trauma that AIAN people have experienced. Language loss occurs when proficiency in a native language is lost over time (voluntarily or involuntarily), but speakers of that language do not become fully proficient in another language. Historical trauma, sometimes referred to as multi-generational trauma, is a shared experience for AIAN where the negative impact of displacement from their land and homes, forced assimilation to a different culture and beliefs, boarding school placement, and language suppression and language loss, extends across generations (Native American Center for Excellence 97). Language Loss is one outcome of historical trauma for AIAN, where an important part of their cultural history and identity was de-valued and suppressed. Language loss was hastened by U.S. government policies for the repression of Indian cultures and languages and forced assimilation to the dominant society.

The loss of language was partly a result of federal government policies that forced American Indian children to attend government and mission run boarding schools. The major goal of the boarding schools became the total assimilation of American Indians into American culture and the eradication of distinct American Indian cultures 98. One method of eradicating American Indian cultures took the form of eliminating use of Indian languages.

96 http://www.native-languages.org/ojibwe.htm
97 http://nace.samhsa.gov/HistoricalTrauma.aspx
98 http://etc.umn.edu/resources/briefhistory.htm Brief History of American Indian Education
These quotations from the 19th century illustrate the U.S. government’s systematic efforts to repress the use of Indian languages and to substitute the use of English (St. Clair & Leap, 1982):

…”you will please inform the authorities of this school that the English language only must be taught the Indian youth placed there for educational and industrial training…”

“The only way the Indian children can be taught successfully…is to take them entirely away from their parents so that they will not hear their native tongue spoken.”

In many, if not most of the boarding schools, American Indian children were forbidden to speak their own language, and when caught speaking their language, they were severely punished by boarding school authorities. As a result of the English only policies of boarding schools and other influences, almost 150 American Indian languages were lost. This assault on American Indian languages is bitterly remembered in American Indian communities today. American Indian students still feel the effects of the boarding schools. These effects have shaped the family’s and community’s attitude towards education, language development, and cultural identity. Families themselves may not be fully aware of this influence.

Due to the English only policies, some Indians did not speak either their native language or English well. This affected the way American Indian parents spoke with their children and resulted in a pattern of language loss across several generations. Most American Indian students in Minnesota now speak English as their only language or primary language but may still be impacted by cross-generational language loss as well as by residual native language influence.

Language Revitalization

Analysis has shown that many English varieties characteristically found in American Indian and Alaska Native speech communities contain phonological and grammatical rules that in no way replicate the conventions of standard or vernacular English. In some surprising ways, however, the rules appear to parallel the grammatical details of the ancestral Indian language of the speaker’s home community. This language-specific grammatical uniqueness means that there are as many different forms of Indian English as there are different Indian languages and language traditions. Indian English speakers acknowledge this fact frequently, for example, when they identify a person’s tribal affiliation merely by calling attention to some specific features in the person’s spoken English.

The variations of English used by different communities are thought to be associated to the different approaches used by boarding schools, where often the setting was over-crowded. This was combined with lack of access to models that accurately spoke English. American Indians in the various boarding school settings began to supplement the English they were taught with local dialect, hence the variations among the different tribes. Remnants of the ancestral language remain for each group, even though recent generations may not have used the ancestral
language. Language revitalization seeks to isolate the remnants of the ancestral language and rebuild the language.

**Language Influence and Non-standard English**

American Indians and Alaska Native students and their families can use a variety of non-standard English dialects; sometimes referred to as *Rez English*. The dialects and grammatical forms developed have a local origin, are influenced by the original tribal language across different reservations, and are modified across time through generational changes. This language influence is thought to affect deep structure (thinking patterns) of language as well as surface features (morphology, syntax, phonology).

An impact of the integration of the ancestral languages over time with American English led to loss of home language and development of non-standard English as two languages were combined. Non-standard English involves grammar and verb forms, and other aspects of verbal communication, that is inconsistent with traditional English. American Indian students in boarding schools, because of language confusion, were judged as less educated or less intelligent than their White peers at a time they were struggling with language confusion. Other students raised in traditional American Indian settings displayed communication traits that were often viewed as disrespectful or noncompliant by educators not familiar with American Indian culture. Negative judgments are still made today when educators fail to consider that AIAN students are similar to bi-lingual students, where adjustments to understanding the impact of a student using two languages are made. A point of focus on this issue is the need to review the performance of AIAN students on state assessments where foundational English language skills are assessed, such as reading assessments.

**Current Status of Ojibwe and Dakota Languages**

Today, immersion schools, and elementary and high schools are offering courses in tribal languages. Communities and tribes are offering immersion and culture camps. Computer applications, technology, books, quiz bowls, community circles (language tables), websites, newspapers, and radio stations are being supported by tribes, institutions and grass roots efforts to strengthen understanding of the rich cultural heritage of American Indian Alaska Native students. There is state and federal funding that supports language revitalization efforts through activities which include teacher training. Many more American Indian languages are being transcribed into written forms. These languages are being taught at tribal schools, American Indian alternative schools, a number of public schools in Minnesota, tribal community colleges and some major universities in the United States and Canada. In Minnesota, American Indian languages are accepted as second languages in universities.

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Converting spoken languages into written form is not an easy process. Some languages, such as Ojibwe, include several dialects. Deciding which dialect to record and teach is often a difficult choice. In addition, sounds exist in Indian languages that have no comparable sound value in English and vice versa. The community of native language speakers cannot always agree on what kind of written recording method best captures these sound differences. Some prefer recording in syllabary, others in accordance with the international phonetic system, and still others prefer the double vowel system.

Health Factors That Impact Language Development of American Indian And Alaska Native Students

The rate of otitis media (ear infections) is higher in American Indian reservation communities than in the population as a whole. Otitis media during early childhood can affect language development, whether or not it results in permanent hearing loss. AIAN students with recurrent ear infections may experience delays in acquiring language, or miss opportunities to learn due to absences from school due to fever or pain associated with ear infections. One study found 63% of children of American Indian mothers had experienced an ear infection by the time they were 6 months old. The mothers also had histories of ear infections and other upper respiratory concerns. The authors of the study stated “Racial and ethnic differences in OM incidence may arise from disparities in socioeconomic status, access to and use of health care, and variations in the prevalence of environmental and genetic risk factors”101.

Working With American Indian Families

Many school districts have Indian Education programs that are staffed in a variety of ways. There may be tutors, advocates, cultural specialist or Indian Home School Liaisons. Many Indian Home-School Liaisons in Minnesota conduct home or family visits. Home and family visits are important as a means to build a relationship between home and school. There are many purposes for these visits; liaisons report that they conduct home visits to check in with the student or address family needs. Indian Home-School Liaisons also help families with a variety of other needs by connecting them with community resources which help to build good relations with families. If preferred by the family IEP meetings can be held in the home.

School personnel are advised to review Tips for Successful Visits and Meetings with American Indian Families which contains recommendations generated by a group of Minnesota's Indian Home School Liaisons.

## Suggestions for Successful Visits and Meetings with American Indian Families

- At the beginning of the year, establish a relationship with the family with positive phone calls and notes.
- As you are building a relationship, visit the home as needed. As a relationship is established, the family will feel more comfortable visiting the school.
- Set up the visit ahead of time by phone or in writing. State purpose of home visit. If the family does not have a phone, send a note home with the student and also mail a letter to the home.
- Give parents a choice of meeting places: the school, their home, or a neutral place such as a coffee shop, community center, or tribal center.
- Be aware of transportation issues if you are trying to visit with a family at school or at a community center.
- On the first family visit, include someone who already has a relationship with the family (i.e. Indian Home-School Liaison).
- You may not be invited inside when you go to a home. Be prepared with paperwork and pen.
- Begin every visit or meeting by visiting with the family socially.
- Be willing to accept refreshments if offered when visiting the home. If possible offer refreshments to the parents when meeting in school or other locations.
- When needed assist caregivers with completion of paperwork.
- If appropriate interact with the children while in the home; this will help to establish rapport and build a relationship with the parents.
- If taking notes, ask for permission or explain the purpose of taking notes.
- Accept the family and their home as they are, refraining from making judgments based on neatness, or style of dress
- Listen and observe carefully for cues from family that indicate understanding of meeting when visiting homes. Be careful of cultural mores in which family politely agrees with all discussion.
- Refrain from using acronyms or explain meaning
- Provide follow-up phone call or visit to answer questions.
- Consider issues such as access to telephones, transportation, or computer/internet.
- Be aware that in some homes grandparents, aunts, uncles or other family members are the responsible caregivers.

To support the relationship between family and schools, special education teams are advised to be particularly sensitive when discussing educational needs of the student. Start with a positive statement about the child and provide an example of what services can do for the child or family to improve learning outcomes. Be respectful of the family particularly in a large group (do not confront in any group setting). If American Indian families perceive disrespect they may be reluctant to attend and follow-up meetings.
Team members should also take time to build a relationship with families without being overly assertive. Ask parents what the team can do to help them. Making personal contacts with parents in the community also helps to build a relationship, create trust, and break down the barriers between the system and American Indian families. For students who are in foster care, school personnel can try to establish a relationship with extended family members when possible as well as with the foster parents. To build relationships, schools should invite families to non-academic activities.

Families may be very cautious about revealing sensitive information because of privacy concerns. Share information about sensitive topics with other team members on a need to know basis. Sometimes, information needs to be discussed at team meetings but only necessary information should be recorded in detail on the Assessment/Evaluation Summary Report or a similar document. If needed, brief notes can be included in the record such as the fact that a student is seeing a private counselor or that the family is involved with county social services without giving details.

In working with American Indian or Alaska native families, teamwork and consensus are important. The emphasis is on process rather than product. Establishing harmonious, trusting relationships may take priority over completing paperwork or following an agenda. American Indian families report that IEP meetings are rushed and feel they are not heard. Whenever possible team members should stay for the entire meeting to listen and discuss concerns and/or questions from the parents. Often parents are more comfortable asking questions and providing information on a one to one basis.

*Once an assessment has begun it is critical to carefully consider exclusionary cultural and environmental factors that have the potential to lead to mistakenly identifying the student as EBD or LD.*

**Resources:**

For those wishing to review more in resources on American Indian Education and Development, an extensive list of information on culture and languages of different groups can be found at:

[http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~cmmr/Native_American.html](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~cmmr/Native_American.html)

A review of American Indian Education Issues can be found at:

[http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/Ind_Ed.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/Ind_Ed.html)

US Census Bureau Information on American Indian and Alaska Native Populations:

[http://www.census.gov/aian/](http://www.census.gov/aian/)

Resources for American Indian Heritage Month (November):

Parents, teachers and students need to feel a sense of connectedness, trust and safety. School staff can work to better understand the unique values, customs and traditions of each tribe represented in their district. Each tribe has its own customs, values and traditions that may be very different from other tribes. The Sovereign Nation concept is important for educators to understand, as well as knowledge of the history, language, stories, songs and chants of each tribal unit. American Indian youth are first taught that their identity comes from the tribe not from the term, American Indian or Native American. Staff development is needed to accomplish this goal.

Policies and procedures should be addressed to increase fairness in services for American Indian student. Each policy should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents and students, if appropriate. Aspects of policy and procedures include:

- Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
- Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing Tribal stories and history in course content)
- Using research-based instructional strategies
- Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
- Teaching the culture, history, stories and language of the Tribe to the entire class, when appropriate
- Implementing data-based assessment systems
- Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to show a need for learning specific academic material
- Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class
- Using hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills

Students and parents are most receptive to teachers and school staff when a warm, caring relationship is established with each student and parent. Establishing a safe environment in the school and classroom has been attributed to higher gains in educational progress. Most tribes value harmony and balance, nonverbal communication and listening skills, rather than rapid and angry speech patterns. Activities and demonstrations, including sharing, cooperation, kindness and generosity are usually more appreciated than the accumulation of possessions and status using competition. Also American Indian youth are taught the value of noninterference in their daily lives. These students often do not interfere in the struggles with other students unless a Tribal member is involved. Therefore the development and implementation of a school-wide disciplinary system should include a caring social aspect. In most American Indian families, the tribe and family are valued more than the individual.

One of the more difficult concepts that white teachers must learn when working with American Indian Alaska Native students is the concept of present time. Most tribes value here and now and not the future or consequences that may occur later. This can be a challenge when discipline systems use positive or negative consequences that are deferred to a later time. Use of restitution...
programs that provide an opportunity for correcting mistakes in the here and now would be more consistent.

Parents from American Indian families can be strong assets to their children’s school and teachers. Establishing a social relationship with the parent, especially the mother enables the teacher to better understand the students. A parent orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year is one method to start establishing a trusting relationship. Parents and caregivers can provide cultural, language, academic, social and recreational information about the student that may help the teacher better plan an academic program. By inviting parents, Tribal elders and other Tribal members to the classroom to speak to classes, assist with academics, art lessons, field trips and after school activities, teachers and students can greatly benefit from their involvement. Parents and community members should be involved in choosing new textbooks, curriculum planning and new teacher orientation workshops. When a caring relationship is established, it is easier for the teacher to help parents learn how to help their children at home with academic tasks and to help their children learn appropriate school behavior.

The school can also function as a community facility by opening the building for Tribal events and celebrations. Implementing after school activities for all members of the Tribe, including the development of a student mentoring program involving Tribal elders, can be a useful strategy. When school staff members attend Tribal “pow-wows”, community Tribal meetings, sporting events, etc., trust further develops between.

**Tier 2 Interventions for American Indian Students and their Families**

The use of trained Tribal members as cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful to staff as well as families who need assistance in understanding the various processes and procedures used by individual districts and schools. Trained cultural liaisons have the knowledge of Tribal customs, traditions and language and also understand and know district and school procedures.

Parents can be included on district and school committees that have a direct impact on their child’s education. As volunteers in the classroom, parents can help the teacher by working with small groups of students, reading stories to small groups as well as presenting their knowledge about Tribal customs, language, art and music to entire classrooms or to small groups of students.

**Tier 3 Interventions for American Indian Students and their Families**

It is important that students and their families understand the reasons for needed additional individualized academic, social and/or behavioral support in the classroom. Cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful explaining the reasons for the need for individual student support and engaging the parents in the planning, implementation and evaluation of these services. The process of assessment for special education service and programming also can be included in this section. Again, it is important that parents and students (if appropriate) be included in this process.
Conclusion

Many school districts have strong Indian education programs. Tribes have made education a priority and a variety of language revitalization efforts are in place. Resources to help educators and parents are available. It is critical that teachers and educators understand issues of language, language loss, and language development on school performance of American Indian students. Since most America Indian students today speak English as their first language but still maintain some form of a second language, some educators often do not take those factors into consideration in assessment. Many American Indian educators believe these language issues are the primary factors in the disproportionality of placements of American Indian students in special education.

In conclusion, American Indians today face a number of cultural and environmental issues that contribute to their disproportionate representation in special education. However, we must also consider the strengths inherent in the culture and the resiliency of American Indian students and families that allow the American Indian student to be successful.
Reducing Bias in Assessment of African American Students

Parents and caregivers of African American students share the hope of an education for their child that maximizes their child’s potential, and which provides skills for success in life. Within the framework of the purpose of schools to provide an education that fosters life-long learning, promotes independence, identity development (including racial), and which leads to attainment of fundamental academic skills, caregivers hope that their child operates in a setting where they are protected and nurtured. Cultural identity and racial pride are important for African American families.

Public schools have the essential task of providing students with skills to be successful individuals capable of functional independence, and capable of contributing to society at large. Schools are charged with the task of providing students with a foundation of academic knowledge, and are also responsible for helping students develop life skills to socialize with others and manage themselves in a society that contains persons from diverse backgrounds. An expectation for success for all students is essential. From information gathered from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), standards students are expected to meet will help students master “knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness” (Parents Know, MDE102).

When students experience difficulty with aspects of their education, a mechanism of a prevention and intervention system operates in schools to support the needs of all students. A screening and intervention system is utilized when students show signs of struggling to meet academic demands or experience problems with adjustment within the context of school. In most settings this intervention system is conducted in a collaborative fashion involving parents and caregivers. Preventative services and initial interventions for students fall under the broad domain of Tier 1 services, designed to promote the success for all students within the general education population.

Despite the application of well-designed research-based interventions, conducted with fidelity, some students may continue to struggle and fall behind their peers with regards to their academic, social, or ability to manage their behaviors. Specially designed interventions, within a Multi-Tiered System of support, are applied to assist students who require modifications in teaching strategies or in how information is presented, so that African American students in need of modifications are supported to achieve success. Modifications in teaching strategies are an example of Tier 1 universal strategies.

More intensive strategies may be introduced under the broad domains of Tier 2 services. Tier 3 services may be utilized for those students who require focused and intensive interventions at the individual level. However, some students may continue to struggle despite focused interventions designed to remediate difficulties they have encountered. Based on lack of success with well-designed interventions, or following up on parent request for services, a comprehensive evaluation is utilized to identify the needs and status of students and to determine if special-education services, under one of the broad disability categories, is appropriate for the student.

102 http://www.parentsknow.state.mn.us/parentsknow/gradek_12/topicsAZ/PKDEV_000437
An evaluation is initialized when students show signs of difficulty meeting specific expectations associated with academic skills, functional skills, communication skills, or when their social or behavioral performance shows the potential to negatively impact their acquisition of academic skills, or in establishing age-appropriate relationships with others. However, although well intended, the mechanism of referral and evaluation for developmental, academic, and social concerns does not provide the intended positive consequences for all students. The concern of unintended negative consequences associated with the referral or evaluation process is particularly detrimental to many African American students (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Part of the difficulty stems from the inability of some educators to utilize multiple modes of presenting information, use of inappropriate questioning techniques to support student thinking, or failure to include the student’s culture as an asset to learning.

The referral and evaluation of students who are not from the majority culture is an important and sensitive issue for educational systems. Some systems may not perceive of diversity as a gift to be celebrated, but rather take a perspective of neutrality so as not to be seen as promoting one group over another. Such an approach may diminish the rich heritage and differences among all students in a school.

A White middle class value system, defined as economic security through home ownership and caregiver level of education with a 4 year-college degree (Class Matters), is imposed on students who come from diverse backgrounds. While this definition may be consistent with a large number of students in schools in Minnesota, in urban centers and suburban settings the student population may be discrepant from this model. This issue is important because African American students, particularly, experience negative impact of disproportionate representation in special education programs. The issue is sensitive because factors that contribute to disproportionality involve issues of race, culture, social-economic status, educator stereotyping about students and their families, and factors associated with the climate of the school (HYPERLINK SCHOOL CLIMATE). Unfortunately, the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs and discipline policies that remove them from the traditional classroom settings remain a persistent problem.

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104 http://www.classmatters.org/working_definitions2.php
Education Gaps

Any approaches to addressing the needs of African American students must recognize a number of systemic factors that contribute to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. As described by the African American Leadership Forum (AALF\textsuperscript{105}). Minnesota is facing a crisis where the education of African American students lags behind that of their White Peers. As proposed by the AALF, working with the Education and Life-Long Learning Work group (ELL), the achievement gap and other difficulties encountered by African American students can be attributed to 5 gaps. The areas where there are gaps in development, intervention, treatment, or services for African American students fall within the areas of (1) preparation, (2) belief systems, (3) time for learning, (4) teaching strategies and methods, and (5) leadership issues impacting the focus of services for African American students.

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<th>The 5 Education Gaps</th>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief Systems</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>Teaching</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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School preparation involves the presence of basic skills to enter school. Exposure to language and literacy skills, such as amount of reading and vocabulary skill development at home, establish a foundation of skills to meet the initial demands of the school setting. Factors such as poverty or stress within the home setting can interfere with the focus on the development of basic

readiness skills. For those African American learners who are in homes stressed by poverty or other factors, their development of baseline skills to enter schools may be altered.

The belief gap relates to establishing and maintaining belief in the capability of African American learners to achieve and learn, and to ultimately defeat the achievement gap and allow African American students to achieve success at the same rates as other learners. Belief in student success and capability is an aspect of school climate, where successes are championed and opportunity for reaching goals are provided.

In circumstances where students have fallen behind their peers it is critical to provide strategies that anticipate learning trajectories for students. Collecting data that assess rate of learning or rate of skill acquisition and comparing those rates to expected outcomes for grade levels helps establish meaningful goals and interventions for students. When a student has fallen behind their peers it is not acceptable to ignore questions about where they are and where they should be.

All students deserve educators who care about them and their success. Some school districts are troubled by staff turnover and changes. Programs such those for students with emotional or behavioral disorders often have staff changes from year to year, yet students in such programs would benefit from strong teachers and stability with staff. Teacher student relationships and teacher caregiver relationships are essential to school success, yet it cannot be assumed that all teachers are prepared to work cross-culturally, and in some settings staff changes contribute to the instability some African American students experience in their education.

School leaders such as principals and special education directors can promote expectations of staff to assess their skills and knowledge to work cross-culturally. Administrators can set the tone of the climate of the school that is welcoming of diversity. Monitoring staff changes within programs, particularly within programs that provide intensive services, is an important task.

Data, Statistics, and Disproportionality

A persistent concern throughout the United States is the statistical over-representation of African American and other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students in specific disability categories (programs for students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD), Learning Disabilities (LD), or Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (CD). As well as concern for over-representation of African American students in specific disability categories, concern exists for under-representation in programs such as those for students identified as gifted or talented. The persistence of these findings requires action to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds receive fair treatment throughout their educational experience.

Multiple factors contribute to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, or in referrals of students to other services. In some circumstances, failure to understand the cultural dynamics of African American students is found. Other factors associated with the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education services or services other than the traditional classroom setting, include concerns about bias in referral processes, assessment practices, and placement decisions. These factors combine with
inequities in opportunity based on socio-economic factors such as poverty, and with curriculums that are not culturally responsive (Sullivan et al., 2009).  

Particularly distressing is research in the area of emotional and behavioral disorders. Recent findings suggest “many school personnel, regardless of their ethnicity, combined their belief in ED (emotional disorder) as an intrinsic condition with firmly held stereotypes of African American families in poverty (Hart, Cramer, Klingner, & Sturges, 2010, p. 159). In other words, assumptions are made by some educators or professionals that when an African American learner shows concerns with managing emotions, feelings, or behavior, the problem exists solely within the child. Such quick assumptions by some educators show a lack of empathy for students and fail to understand that some of their responses could be attributed to prior negative experiences. External causes or situational factors that might provoke the behavior are not examined. Important environmental, language, cultural, and social factors that contribute to the child or student’s reactions or response to services are excluded in attempts to understand the student’s behavior.

The federal government requires states to monitor disproportionate representation. Although not required by the federal government, it is important for educational systems to attend to issues related to underrepresentation. Under-representation for African American students occurs when students are misplaced and served under the primary categories of emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), Learning Disability (LD), and Cognitive Disabilities (CD), when other categories such as Other Health Impaired (OHD) might serve the student better. A specific example would be a student who is categorized by the school as meeting the criteria for an Emotional or Behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), when their concerns and symptoms may be more accurately addressed by practices typically utilized for students with an autism spectrum disorder or possible other health impairment.

Disproportionate representation of African American students can involve over-representation in some programs and under-representation in others. Donna Ford stated “concerns over recruiting and retaining minority students in gifted education programs has persisted for several decades (1998, p.4). It is important for school systems, educators, and parents to be vigilant about promoting services for African American students who show promise across a wide range of domains: intellectually, socially, within music and the arts, the sciences and math, or through creative means, as examples.

Ford (1998) identified several factors that could contribute to the failure to promote under-represented students for gifted education. Such factors include recruitment issues, personnel training, and retention issues. Definitions of giftedness vary, which contributes to confusion about identifying factors for gifted students, thus making recruitment efforts inconsistent. Instruments used to identify students often have a white middle class orientation, thus students from diverse backgrounds may not perform in a pattern similar to the standardization group on which the assessment was based.

Sullivan et al., 2009
Hart, Cramer, Klingner, & Sturges, 2010, p. 159
Educators may lack common training on identifying signs of giftedness for African American students, relying on their own expectations and experience base to guide them. However, given the significant difference in some settings between the backgrounds of educators and those of their students, failures to identify potential gifted students among African American populations may be higher than for other groups. The 2011 U.S. Department of Education Condition of Education Report concluded that the student population within public schools would continue to diversify along racial, ethnic, and linguistic factors, yet the demographics of school educators remain relatively stable at 85% white and 75% female. Differences in attitudes, experiences, beliefs and expectations can occur between professional educators and the diverse student population they are expected to serve.

**Learning Characteristics of African American Students**

Nine learning characteristics that may be a foundation of learning of African American students are proposed by Boykin (1994) and Boykin, Tyler and Miller (2005). Some educators may misinterpret these factors if their background is significantly different from the student’s. These characteristics likely underscore differences in understanding of disability.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nine Learning Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Spirituality (positive outcomes attributed to higher power)</td>
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<td>• Harmony (perceptive of connection between people and environment)</td>
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<td>• Affect (expressing emotion)</td>
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<td>• Communalism (prefer working cooperatively)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Movement (prefer active learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Verve (psychological facet of movement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Expressive individualism (enjoy unique self-expression)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Verbal Expression and verbal directness (prefer verbal communication, enjoy debating and bluntness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social time orientation (track events, not time passing)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Finally, once African American students are identified for gifted or advanced programs, retaining them may be a challenge if African American students experience separation from peers and support systems.

**History**

The culture of African Americans has been shaped by their history in the United States as well as by the transmission of African traditions across time and distance. African Americans are not a homogeneous group. Most definitions of African Americans include a descendant of slaves component, or that one ancestor was born in America. The term Black is often used but actually refers to a much broader group of students where it includes students who would be immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL), typically from African countries.

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Information on ELL programs can be found at:

http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EngLearn/

There are cultural variations within African American populations related to religious beliefs, geographic location, educational background, immigration status and socioeconomic status as well as other factors. Educators working with families must work to understand the needs of the student and family they are working with, rather than generalize expectations based on limited understanding of a few factors.

As an example of working to understand the characteristics of a family, the following are several recommendations for education staff suggested Lynch & Hanson (2004). 111

Methods to Foster Relationships with African American families:

- Capitalize on kinship bonds. Focus on family strengths rather than on weaknesses in developing and implementing interventions. If extended family members are primary caregivers include them in the intervention.
- Utilize informal support networks such as the church, neighbors, or friends whenever possible.
- Address family members formally, using titles and last names, until given permission to be more relaxed.
- Assess resources in the African American community in your area and develop relationships with those resources (extend invitations to join committees).
- Assess the effects of poverty on families and determine which issues are related to culture and which are related to socioeconomic status.
- Avoid generalizing about students from African American families based on the behavior or lifestyles of a few.

African American Caregivers/Parents/Guardians Involvement

Within any process where decisions are made about student services, parent and caregiver involvement is essential. Caregiver involvement is a broad term inclusive of several types of participation. Caregiver involvement is important for all families. However, African American caregivers and parents often report more conflict with educators about communication and involvement than other ethnic or cultural groups. It is important to for educators to understand the parent/caregiver’s history with school. Educators can shift the paradigm used to view caregivers through developing mutual respect for their views, getting to know caregivers, and including them in the process rather than blaming caregivers or treating them with little respect.

Caregivers of African American students can be invited to participate and support their child in many ways. Some examples of participation include attending school activities, supporting their child with homework, communicating information about the status of the child to school staff, modeling behavior and values associated with development, and advocating for schools.

From a historical perspective, educational services acts such as IDEA and state education guidelines have supported parent and caregiver involvement [http://nichy.org/laws/idea](http://nichy.org/laws/idea). For example, IDEA states that the public agency works to ensure that one or both parents of a child where there are concerns about a potential disability attend IEP meetings. Other aspects of this expectation include proper notice, scheduling meetings at mutually agreed upon times and places, and providing information so that parents understand the purpose of the meeting. Multiple means to communicate with parents should also be utilized, including telephone, email, and in person connections and communications. Parents and caregivers should be contacted when students are progressing adequately or when the student surpasses general expectations. Waiting to respond only when a student has difficulty contributes to a stressed relationship between educators and caregivers.

The diversity available in many school settings provides an opportunity for broad perspectives and discussion on issues, and prepares students to work in multi-cultural settings. Within such settings parent and caregiver communication and collaboration with educators is an important relationship used to bridge the gap between home culture and the culture in the student’s school or community. Strong relationships between caregivers and educators are an aspect of Tier 1 (Universal) Services, where parents and caregivers have knowledge of their child’s services, and are active contributors to services implemented, and are actively engaged in the school community.

Research has shown when parents are involved in their child’s education, the children have better attendance rates, earn higher grades, and achieve higher graduation rates than their peers where parent involvement is lacking (Darch, Miao, & Shippen 2004\textsuperscript{112}). Other research indicates that children whose parents are involved in their education show greater degrees of motivation towards achievement in school and a stronger desire to work harder than children of uninvolved parents (Lopez, 2001).

The involvement of caregivers is achieved when parents take initiative to be involved in services for their children, and when educators in the schools support the initiative of parents and caregivers. Some school settings are not inviting, therefore it is incumbent upon the school to encourage and secure caregiver involvement, starting with effective communication. Educators and administrators as well can work to make the school setting inviting and inclusive of parents and caregivers, and work to proactively engage and involve parents and caregivers. Often school staff control access to the school setting. Caregivers hope to feel included and supported, and seek guidance from school personnel about ways they can be involved. Parents and caregivers are the expert on their child, and can be expected to contribute knowledge of family history, developmental history, social history, and medical history of their child.

Students benefit from the support they receive from their caregivers both in and outside of the home environment. Research supports that parents also benefit from being more involved in their child’s education. Domina discussed the benefits experienced by parents of diverse children (2005\textsuperscript{113}). Parents involved in schools become more familiar with the educators who work with their child. If the environment is inclusive and inviting, parents and caregivers develop

\textsuperscript{112} Darch, Miao, & Shippen 2004
\textsuperscript{113} Domina (2005)
knowledge of the school’s climate and culture. Once parents become familiar with teachers, specialists, and administrators in the setting they can build relationships with them. A strong relationship contributes to parents feeling at ease with raising questions about the progress of their child, which will help parents and caregivers advocate for appropriate supports for their child (Turney & Kao, 2009114). They also are better able to understand the range of services offered by schools, and the reasons for such services.

Schools have a climate, culture, and language, both within the general and special education setting. It is important for educators to assist parents in understanding the dynamics of the school, particularly in terms of the language used in schools to communicate about students and their development (Epstein, 2001115). Many educators (classroom teachers, school counselors, specialists in disability areas, school psychologists) complete professional training programs where they develop professional language. The language of the profession, often referred to as jargon, can create a barrier between effective communication between educators and staff if adjustments are not made to communicate in a manner that does not rely on professional training to understand.

Parent interest in supporting their child's educational growth and seeking ways to help is supported by a survey completed by the National Family and Parenting Institute (2001), where the majority of parents reported an interest in supporting their child’s education through obtaining information about child development. In order for such information to be exchanged, communication must exist between the home and the school. A variety of methods can be utilized to foster communication between home and school. Conversely, a variety of factors can hinder communication between school and home. It is a mistake to assume that parents of African American students are uninterested in their child's education when, from the school's perspective, African American parents or caregivers are not visibly engaged in support demonstrated by a physical presence at the student’s school.

To bridge the communication gap, schools must actively engage in outreach to parents and caregivers. Proactive methods to communicate through letters, Friday folders and notebooks with information about their child's progress, or an occasional telephone call to the home are examples of methods to communicate with families. With the availability of e-mail between home and school, and the use of the Internet to allow parents to have access to their child's current grades and progress monitoring, multiple means to communicate are possible. However, it is important to be mindful of a potential for a digital divide where some parents may not have easy access to the internet, or access to computers in the home. Consistent with other discussions about supporting parents and caregivers, educators must be careful not to assume that every family has access to the electronic means and methods of communication. However, if educational or professional language (jargon) is used or associated with these means of communication, and the family is unfamiliar with the language, a communication barrier can still exist (Lazar and Slostad, 1999116). It is not just the availability of multiple means of communication; it is that the message is received and is clear to the caregiver.

114 Turney & Kao, 2009
115 Epstein, 2001
116 Lazar and Slostad, 1999
In addition to examining the multiple means of communication for clarity of message, it is also important to identify other barriers that might interfere between communications from school to home with African American families. Issues of professionals engaging in active resistance to communication with parents and caregiver must be addressed and identified. Some educators may resist communication with parents and caregivers as a means to avoid conflict. Others may do so because they fear a loss of control over their classroom environment, or educational setting (Lazar and Slostad, 1999117). Still, others may resist overtures to parents and guardians due to concerns about lack of time in their daily schedule for communication with parents and caregivers.

Educator and administrator preparation programs can provide to new generations of professionals on methods to support parent and caregiver involvement from a cross-cultural perspective. Some new educators may not feel completely confident in communicating with parents, and may need support from mentors and supervisors to ensure that they develop their skills and expertise with communicating with caregivers, particularly when cross-cultural communication is required. Educator preparation programs can help candidates develop cultural competence through course work that is intentional and which addresses cultural competence and culturally responsive education.

In addition to concerns regarding communication between parents and the school, differences in beliefs and differences in expectations about service delivery and responsibility for problem solving are often involved with conflict between home and school. African American parents may have different belief systems from school personnel about how concerns about their child should be resolved, and also differ in their beliefs about who has responsibility for resolving difficulties.

Some parents focus on resolving emotional or behavioral difficulties experienced by their child with religious leaders through their church, or with respected elders within their family (Katz and Pinkerton (2003)118). Conversely, many educational institutions may suggest professional resources such as mental health services as an option for resolving emotional or behavioral difficulties. As a group, African American families under-utilize mental health services. This may be due to historically utilizing other resources such as family members or religious leaders for support in resolving problems. Finally, financial barriers may also impact the ability to seek out mental health services, which may require insurance and financial costs that exceed the family’s ability to pay.

For many parents of African American students referred for concerns about educational progress, there may be a stigma about the meaning of special education. Caregivers and parents of African American students may not understand the language associated with interventions and assessment. Because of historical factors associated with concern about the meaningfulness of intelligence testing diverse populations, parents of African American students may be suspicious and guarded about the use of such measures with their children (Larry P. vs Riles119). If communication is not clear and understandable, suspicion about the meaningfulness of

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117 Lazar and Slostad, 1999
118 Katz and Pinkerton (2003)
119 Larry P. vs Riles
interventions is crystallized and resistance develops. This resistance is a combination of rejection of poor information, unclear information about the purposes and use of test scores, and families working to protect the esteem of themselves and their children.

In addition to differing perspectives of resources that may hinder the effectiveness of parent/caregiver involvement in the child’s school development, scheduling conflicts are another common factor that contributes to stress between expectations of home and school. Several factors contribute to difficulties with scheduling, including caregiver work schedules that may not allow access to meetings during the workday, availability of transportation for the caregiver, cost of transportation, or financial cost of missing work and the need for daycare or supervision for other children in the home (Minke, 2006120).

Suggestions to Support Involvement of African American Caregivers

The National Parent Teacher Association suggested several ways to support parent involvement121. One aspect of parent involvement is to make sure collaborations are ongoing and two-way. Methods to support ongoing communication include offering periodic workshops to parents on topics on various ways to support children, or workshops about types of services offered within the schools. Other means to support ongoing communication include documentation and review of efforts for outreach through parent-teacher communication logs. Identifying cultural liaisons and supporting their work in communicating with families can also be an avenue to build bridges between school and home. Calling or sending notes home when students do something well or have good days, or completed an achievement, builds bridges.

It is important for educators to identify to African American parents and caregivers ways outside of the classroom that they may be involved in supporting their child's education. Examples of such involvement include reading to their children at home, leading family conversations about school, providing support for homework, and monitoring the child’s progress. Definitions of parent involvement that are restricted to the caregiver being present in the school, or in the child's classroom, are limited.

A key aspect in developing proactive parent involvement is the cultural competence of the educator (Ortiz, Flanagan, and Dynda 2007122). Educators who work to understand the culture and climate of their school, their own cultural background, and who work to develop an understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of the students within their system are role models for other educators.

Various definitions of parental involvement exist. It has been defined as a partnership between home, school, and community to support a child’s education and as the active ongoing participation of parents or guardians in the education of their child (Trotman, 2001). Parental involvement can also take a variety of forms, including providing learning opportunities at home, attending conferences, and helping out in the classroom. Educators must understand that parents vary in skill and comfort level when it comes to school involvement and that both the child and the school will benefit from parent involvement.

120 Minke, 2006
121 http://www.pta.org/
122 Ortiz, Flanagan, and Dynda 2007
Unfortunately, educators do not always perceive parent involvement positively. Some educators may be territorial and may become frustrated when it is difficult to reach parents. On the other hand, parents may feel that they are only contacted when there is a problem or concern about their student’s achievement or interpersonal skills. It is important to meaningful parent involvement by establishing positive rapport and communication with parents.

Parental involvement in education is important because parents are not only considered the primary educators of their child, but they can also serve as decision-makers and advocates for their child’s education. Parental involvement and empowerment positively impact outcomes in urban schools. When parents are involved, there is a positive impact on academic achievement and cognitive development, as well as behavior (National Parent Teacher Association123). This positive impact on behavior is particularly important because African American students are more likely than any other ethnic group to be suspended, expelled, or placed in serious emotional disturbances (SED) special education classrooms.

Legislation exists that legally mandates that educators partner with parents. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act emphasizes parent-school-community partnerships and promotes parent involvement in education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004124) also stresses collaboration between parents and educators, specifically in regards to educational goals and objectives for students with disabilities.

Many factors affect low urban parental involvement, including socioeconomic status/family structure, parent schedules, parents’ educational level, and administrator and teacher expectations. The majority of low-income urban children come from single parent, female-headed households. Some educators may have the perception that parents and caregivers from low-incomes homes do not value education. When parents are not able to make meetings or activities, some educators may conclude that the caregiver does not care about the child’s education. Outreach to such caregivers may be limited and urban parents become alienated from schools and do not see any opportunity to be involved. Parents may also feel that they do not have adequate skills or knowledge to partner with educators. Scheduling of opportunities to be involved with the school may become an additional barrier for parents who have employment with no flexibility to leave for day-based functions, or caregivers who have younger children at home with no childcare support, or for those who believe that teaching is the job of the teacher.

Unfortunately, some educators make assumptions about caregiver’s level of education and assume that only caregivers with a degree in higher education invest in their child’s education. Parents who lack a four-year degree may be treated in subtle ways that reinforce separation between home and school. These same parents may have had past negative educational experiences. For these reasons, it can be difficult to build a collaborative partnership.

When educators have low expectations of parental involvement, the potential for a self-fulfilling prophecy exists. These low expectations based on race, socioeconomic status, or gender, are also sometimes applied to the student. When parents are involved, they can help educators understand

123 http://www.pta.org/
124 www.ideagov.com
and appreciate their family’s values and culture, keep expectations for their child high, and ensure the child’s educational needs are met effectively.

There are various ways to increase parental involvement. Trotman offered several recommendations (2001):

**Ways to Increase Parental Involvement**

1. Remind caregivers and parents that they are their child’s primary educator and encourage them to become active in their child’s education or remain active if they already are.
2. Work as a team (administrators, teachers, and parents) to ensure that students receive a quality education and that the child understands the importance and value of education.
3. Identify factors that hinder parent involvement by conducting a case history of the family and develop a strategy to address barriers identified.
4. Establish positive rapport with parents through positive communications (communicate successes!)
5. Empower parents and respect their decision-making authority as part of a team-oriented approach. Empowerment is shown by supporting decisions made by caregivers when service options have been explained to them.
6. Develop a network of parents supporting parents.
7. Maintain high expectations of caregivers and parents and avoid a judgmental perspective about caregivers.

It is the responsibility of educators to aggressively seek, support, and maintain parental involvement. The development of school-wide programs will increase parent involvement and positively impact the success of students. Urban African American parent involvement is essential to the improvement of the academic performance of low-income urban African American children. When systems fail to involve caregivers and parents, outcomes are less likely to be positive. Parents experience alienation when they perceive negative attitudes among educators, or when they feel their opportunities to participate are restricted. Urban parents have high expectations for their children. Socioeconomic factors can explain the challenges to their ability to participate in school activities for their children. Educators and parents must collaborate and work together to enhance the success and achievement of students.

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Recommendations for School Systems

School systems have the capacity to provide support and training for educators, administrators, and other school staff to work effectively with African American parents. Training should be directed at methods to increase cultural competence for working with diverse populations. Cultural competence involves understanding the dynamics of groups that have a different experience and history than one’s own (see discussion of Worldview under Introduction to the Reducing Bias Manual), as well as understanding one’s own history and perception about others. Cultural competence means understanding one’s own identity and cultural heritage and how it interacts with others.

Recommendations:

1. Create a parent involvement policy and assess it for cultural sensitivity (TIER 1 Service).
2. Create a Parent Involvement Committee involving educators, administrators, caregivers and liaisons.
3. Insure that any parent involvement policy has multiple means of ways parents and caregivers can be involved.
4. Monitor parent involvement, collect data about percentage of parents/families that regularly participate, identify those parents who are regularly absent and develop strategies for outreach to those families.
5. Survey families on needs (childcare, meeting times) and engage in discussions about barriers they may identify.

Inclusion of parents and caregivers through all levels of tiers of educational services insures that collaboration and communication occur between home and school, and that caretakers have the information they need to support their children. Moreover, with good communication and cooperation with school staff, parents and caregivers are in a better position to make decisions about their children when they feel that their questions have been heard, and when they feel they have clear answers to their questions.

Through the establishment of good communication and an atmosphere of collaboration, parents feel included. Moreover, through communication between home and school, and intentional efforts by staff to understand the family, parents and caregivers feel empowered in their ability to maintain their role as their child's advocate. Through open communication, respect for differences among families, and trust, barriers of suspicion and mistrust are reduced between caregivers and educators, and the focus of achieving success for the child is retained.

Language Issues and Communication Styles

Some, but by no means all, African Americans speak a variation of Standard English that is referred to in the literature by several names such as Black English, Ebonics, African American English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). African American English reflects the complex racial and economic history of African Americans, including their origins in western Africa as well as more recent migrations from the rural south to the urban north. The term African American English, or AAE, will be used in these guidelines.
African American English evolved over time from contact and convergence among various languages. AAE and standard English have influenced each other over time. Some words used in Standard American English are derived from western African languages, such as “OK” which is derived from “wa kay.” In Minnesota, youth can be observed using vocabulary and expressions from African American English in communications with others. An important aspect of the language use is the connection to a sense of cultural identity.

A review of recent literature on the topic of Ebonics in schools revealed that many educational barriers remain for African American students who use Ebonics or African American English. AAE continues to be overlooked and misunderstood by educators, which negatively impacts student identity and school engagement. Failure to recognize the use of AAE by students contributes to inadequate instruction, particularly in regards to literacy. Other problematic outcomes when AAE is not recognized include inappropriate referral, assessment, and placement in special education for African American students. Furthermore, the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students continues (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009).

AAE shares many similarities with General American English (GAE, also called Standard American English [SAE]), there are important differences between the two that have serious implications for educating AAE-speaking students. The linguistic differences between AAE and GAE, such as tense morphology, “can give rise to subtle misinterpretations that may go unnoticed by speakers of either AAE or SAE and therefore result in only partial understanding, a phenomenon referred to as pseudo-comprehension” (Stewart, unpublished remarks, cited in Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 366).

Often classroom context, familiar routines, and non-linguistic cues provide the AAE-speaking student with additional information to guide responses and behavior and may mask the fact that the student may not be interpreting speech correctly (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012). Since teachers often interact and observe students in the classroom- an environment abundant with non-linguistic cues, they may not identify the student’s dialect as a factor impacting learning. “Thus appropriate language-based interventions may not be offered to students who are otherwise quite capable of learning. This lack of appropriate language-based intervention for students who speak non-mainstream varieties of English, therefore, may unnecessarily impede academic success.” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 378).

In addition to questions about the learner’s ability to interpret context clues, it is important to consider the student’s use of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). BICS involves social language necessary to communicate with others within specific settings. The social language used and required in the school setting can be different than the social language used at home. Some African American students may feel rejection or may question their ability when they perceive that their social language is not accepted within the school setting. The important factor is helping students understand that they are capable of using both AAE and Standard English. Where African American students need support is in understanding when to transition

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126 Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009
127 Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 366
128 Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012
129 Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 378
from one form of speech (AAE) to another form of speech (SAE).

As well as considering the student’s level of social language, it is also important to determine the level of language skills needed for success on academic tasks, referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cues for language skills are typically not present in formal tests and assessments when stakes might be high (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012). Within the broader educational setting the student has access to cues and other models for communicating information, particularly verbal. Those cues may be the language used by their peers. Within a formal standardized assessment situation, broader supports are limited or non-existent, as there are no peers in an individualized testing setting, and examiners are often restricted in providing cues.

Beyer and Hudson Kam (2012) conducted a study on 1st and 2nd grade AAE- and GAE-speakers that “found that while all children correctly interpreted shared forms, only the SAE-speakers, not the AAE-speakers, successfully interpreted SAE tense morphology” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 365). Their findings suggest, “mere exposure to SAE is insufficient to support the complete learning of these specific SAE morphemes” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 377). In other words, African American students benefitted from specific instruction on tenses. Simply hearing tenses used by other speakers was not sufficient to benefit their understanding. Overlooking the differences between AAE and GAE causes AAE-speaking students to spend a substantial amount of time with dual processing of morphemes, which can create a disadvantage during crucial educational stages.

African American English is sometimes misperceived. “When a dialect is associated with a traditionally stigmatized and marginalized group, the dialect tends to be viewed negatively” (Cheatham, Armstrong, & Milagros Santos, 2009, p. 5). Furthermore, “individuals’ perceptions of nonstandard dialects have deep historical and social roots and can be difficult to change” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3130).

Dialects have strong connections to culture and play an important role in the formation of children’s identities. AAE, for example, cannot be understood without considering African Americans’ history of enslavement, oppression, and past and present discrimination (Hilliard, 2002, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009). This is important to consider in the context of a classroom, where students have a dual audience of teachers and peers. Students may choose to use AAE to establish group affiliation and create meaning (Cheatham et al., 2009). Language becomes a method to crystalize identity and culture. When educators adopt the approach of correcting the dialect of an AAE-speaking student and forcing students to use GAE, they are devaluing and rejecting not only that student’s speech, but also their identity as an African American (Cheatham et al., 2009). “Consequently, these children may silence themselves or resist or withdraw from school (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 4).”

Some lessons from bilingualism can be applied to bidialectals. Similar to bilingual students, bidialectical students can experience a negative socioemotional impact when they perceive their first language spoken in the home is replaced a second language. As well, it may be more confusing for students when their first language is taken at a time in development when language

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130 Cheatham, Armstrong, & Milagros Santos, 2009
fluency is crucial for learning and critical thinking skills (Lambert, 1977, and Han, 2010, cited in Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013\textsuperscript{131}).

Overlooking and misunderstanding AAE in education results in the inadequate instruction of AAE-speakers. Of particular concern is the potential negative impact on literacy. Students who speak a non-standard dialect such as AAE may have additional challenges when it comes to literacy, such as making sound-symbol associations, because the representation of sounds is different from their dialect (Cheatham et al., 2009). “Although there are numerous studies that legitimize AAVE as a linguistic system, many practitioners continue to struggle with the successful implementation of instructional strategies that support the literacy learning of AAVE-speaking students in their classrooms” (Cooks & Ball, 2009, p. 140).

Assessment of African American students is impacted by dialect. According to Wheeler, Cartwright, and Swords (2012), “assessment manuals do not explain what counts as dialect features or how dialect can affect decoding. Without specific guidelines and specific knowledge of their students’ dialect patterns, …teachers will be unable to factor dialect into reading assessment” (p. 418). Assessors are left to their own judgment as to what is a dialect, and with an increase in subjectivity by assessors there is an increase in errors. If educators cannot separate dialect influence from a decoding error in GAE, students are not assessed accurately, and opportunities to determine instructional strategies or interventions that will help them be successful are missed (Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords, 2012\textsuperscript{132}). “This distinction—dialect influence versus reading error—carries profound implications not only for the child’s current reading placement, but for his or her longer trajectory in school, and even for his or her later adult life… Simply put: Considering dialect can transform reading assessment and intervention” (Wheeler et al., p. 424).

Considering dialect would also likely transform the referral, assessment, and identification of AAE-speaking students for special education services. Regrettably, “children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in special education programs (Skiba et al., 2008, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3), and children who speak nonstandard dialects are often misdiagnosed as having a disability” (Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford, 2004, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3). When it comes to fair and accurate assessment, one challenge facing educators is that traditional assessment strategies do not distinguish between typical AAE and disordered GAE and AAE (Pearson et al., 2013). Moreover, many, if not all, standardized assessments do not accept AAE responses and have not been normed on AAE-speaking students (Gopaul-McNicol, Reid, & Wisdom, 1998, cited in Grant et al., 2009\textsuperscript{133}).

For ethical and legal reasons, “assessors should not use an assessment on a population for which it is not normed” (Grant et al., 2009, p. 120). Overrepresentation is a complicated issue with no single solution, but it is clear that traditional assessment approaches often fail some AAE-speaking students. Evaluators and those making placement decisions about African American students need to understand how their performance on standardized tests is influenced by language spoken at home and cultural orientation of the student.

\textsuperscript{131} Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013
\textsuperscript{132} Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords, 2012
\textsuperscript{133} Grant et al., 2009, p. 120
Addressing the issue of over-representation, as well as the achievement gap between African American and White students will require changes in approach and practice within educational systems. Recent literature provides recommendations for staff development, school climate change, instruction, and assessment in relation to AAE. It is crucial for educators to develop linguistic and cultural sensitivity. Unfortunately, negative perceptions can be deeply rooted and not easily changed. “The widespread stigma means that a large number of people are not predisposed to see advantages in AAE. Most people learning about AAE are not just learning something new: They are being asked to accept something new” (Pearson et al., 2013, p. 36). To serve AAE-speaking students, educators must not only understand language diversity, but they must also develop linguistic awareness of their own attitudes about language (Pearson et al., 2013).

Many educators will need to be informed of the value of accommodating more than one language variety in the classroom (Pearson et al., 2013). This knowledge is not sufficient, though. Linguistic awareness must also be increased, or underlying attitudes will continue to impede success. “Since expectations and language patterns are so strongly implicated in practices by which teachers can unwittingly undermine their own educational goals, it will be important for culturally responsive teaching to begin by cultivating positive attitudes about language diversity as a cultural asset, not a deficit” (Hoover, 1990, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 38). Furthermore, staff may need direction and guidance “in discussing the social and political motivations for misunderstandings” about different dialects (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10). Training may also be necessary to specifically address “the negative consequences of stereotyping on the basis of faulty definitions of ‘correct’ speech” (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10).

To create a school climate that is accepting of linguistic diversity, it is important to address language diversity with students, staff, and parents. “Schools and programs can work with staff and parents to develop a policy on language diversity that responds to local concerns and local norms” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10). Since some people may not recognize the value of linguistic diversity, it is important to identify the positive outcomes associated with linguistically diverse students who can use GAE in school, community, and eventually work (Cheatham et al., 2009). Educators must be careful not to make assumptions about students or families and instead take steps to learn about students, families, and communities “to determine the extent to which they adhere to particular dialect characteristics” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p 9).

Instructional recommendations include direct instruction and intervention with AAE-speaking students, dialect-sensitive literacy instruction, creating innovative learning environments, helping children expand their sociolinguistic and language use awareness, and communicating classroom spoken language expectations clearly. The results of a study by Beyer and Hudson Kam (2012) “support the notion that like English language learners, young AAE-speaking children could benefit from direct instruction” (p. 378). Beyer and Hudson Kam go on to state, “since performance in school is highly dependent on competence in SAE, any student whose home language background is different should receive language-based intervention” (p. 378). A useful tool that can be developed and implemented by schools is a home language survey134.

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134 http://www.wsalem.k12.wi.us/District/studentregistration/HOME%20LANGUAGE%20SURVEY.pdf
Instructional recommendations to support AAE-speaking students

- Dialect-sensitive literacy instruction
- Direct instruction on tenses and morphemes
- Direct instruction on understanding environmental cues for language
- Creation of innovative learning environments that allow for use of AAE
- Help children expand their sociolinguistic and language use awareness
- Communicate classroom spoken language expectations clearly.

Elements of a **home language survey** used with caregivers include questions such as:

- What language do you use with your child?
- When did the child first acquire language?
- What language does the child use with siblings? Peers?

Pearson, Conner, and Jackson (2013) advocate for dialect-sensitive literacy instruction that includes dialect-sensitive reading curricula. Creating innovative learning environments may also help AAE-speaking students succeed. Cooks and Ball (2009) propose “reflective optimism, teacher efficacy, and generativity as tools for addressing the perplexing challenges that many teachers are facing and the critical role of teachers' generative thinking in the establishment of innovative learning environments for AAVE-speaking students” (p. 140). In this way, educators can “advance knowledge concerning the implementation of effective pedagogical practices in classrooms that serve students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (Cooks & Ball, 2009, p. 140).

Educators can also help children develop their own sociolinguistic and language use awareness. Cheatham, Armstrong, and Milagros Santos (2009) provide some examples for teachers, including developing “thematic units based on aspects of language diversity and include the use of books that contain dialects” (p. 8). Teachers can also conduct age-appropriate discussion on the use of different dialects in different settings and for different audiences (Cheatham et al., 2009). “Children should be provided with opportunities to take control of their language choices as they interact in different social situations with others who speak in diverse dialects” (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).

It is important to address code switching with AAE-speaking students. Code-switching refers to the ability to change linguistic codes, or manner of speaking, based upon the situation and speaking partners. Some African American students may use AAE while among group members but use standard language with members of other racial groups. Godley and Escher (2012) recommend having classroom conversations that address the complexity of code-switching while acknowledging multiple points of view on dialect choices. It is important for student perspectives to be heard.

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135 Pearson, Conner, and Jackson (2013)
136 Cooks and Ball (2009)
137 Godley and Escher (2012)
Educators can incorporate techniques to address code switching in the classroom. For example, they can facilitate “children’s creation of a standard and nonstandard dialect dictionary, allow all children to try out SAE in puppet shows, and read books to children that contain nonstandard dialects” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9). Code-switching is a skill that requires development. According to a study of AAE-speaking student perspectives by Godley and Escher (2012), students believe that classroom should be a safe place to practice code-switching and GAE without fear of judgment. Godley and Escher (2012) found that teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the use of language in the classroom are different. Godley and Escher (2012) advocate for transparency in classroom language expectations. “It is unfair to hold students to expectations for spoken language that are never explicitly shared in the classroom” (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 712).  

Godley and Escher (2012) provided action steps educators could take to prepare AAE-students for success. They recommend (1) discussing code-switching at the beginning of the year with students and create explicit, shared expectations for language use in the classroom; (2) not expecting bidialectal students to speak GAE all of the time; (3) providing appropriate opportunities for students to practice GAE, explaining the purpose, and creating a nonjudgmental environment; (4) using authentic language and dialect examples for discussions about the complexity of language; (5) acknowledging the presence of linguistic prejudice in society; and (6) using literature to spark discussion about issues of linguistic prejudice and language variation. Educators must change their approach in relation to AAE-speaking students. “Rather than being forbidden or ignored, children’s dialects are resources from which to expand their language repertoires” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3).  

**Godley and Escher (2012) Steps to Prepare AAE-students for success:**

- Discuss code-switching at the beginning of the year with students and create explicit, shared expectations for language use in the classroom
- Provide Opportunities to speak both AAE and GAE
- Provide appropriate opportunities for students to practice GAE, explaining the purpose, and creating a nonjudgmental environment
- Use authentic language and dialect examples for discussions about the complexity of language
- Acknowledge the presence of linguistic prejudice in society and discuss with students
- Use literature to spark discussion about issues of linguistic prejudice and language differences.
Recommendations for accurate and fair assessment of AAE-speaking students include incorporating a variety of methods in assessment, using alternative assessments, and practicing dialect-sensitive assessment. According to Cheatham et al. (2009), advocate for the use of a variety of assessment methods to supplement or take the place of standardized tests. “Children who speak nonstandard dialects of English can be assessed informally, incorporating the assessor’s knowledge of dialects as well as observations and family interviews” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9). Some literature recommends alternative assessments for AAE-speaking students, like curriculum-based assessment, contextualized (or situated) assessment, and ecological assessment (Gopaul-McNicol, Reid, & Wisdom, 1998, cited in Grant et al., 2009).

One dialect-sensitive option for assessments “has been to modify their scoring so that appropriate dialect responses would be accepted. However, this practice invalidates the test’s standardization, and then results can only be used descriptively” (Wyatt, 2002, p. 427, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 34). This strategy is consistent with the approach of testing the limits, where the assessors presents selected items in a different form to determine if the student has an understanding of the concept tested. Testing the limits is done as a means to separate confusion with the instructions from understanding the concept examined.

Pearson et al. (2013) surveyed educational programs and based on the information gathered, they offer three program models for culturally responsive teaching. The three program models are:

1. Programs that harness the power of high expectations. They present new and challenging materials, not remedial exercises that focus on making up a deficiency.

2. Programs that appreciate linguistic diversity. They use multicultural materials in curricula that resonate with the children’s own experience and are designed to engage the students and motivate them to learn.

3. Programs that develop different kinds of linguistic awareness, especially dialect awareness. They give children tools to increase their awareness of what systematic changes are being asked of them when they learn the mainstream dialect (Pearson et al., 2013, p. 39).

All three of the program models recognize the importance of children learning GAE, but that goal does not outweigh all other learning objectives. “Model 1 programs do not single out language at all, but neither do they let it interfere or be a roadblock. For Models 2 and 3, GAE is added to children’s knowledge of AAE—it does not replace it” (Pearson et al., 2013, p. 39).

While there continues to be a variety of concerns for AAE-speaking students in schools, there are actions that can be taken to improve the experiences and outcomes of AAE-speaking students. Educators must make thoughtful and purposeful changes to their approach and practice to better serve these students. Changes at a systemic level can help ensure a long-term commitment to the success of AAE-speaking students. Those who are responsible for monitoring the success of

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139 Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013
students should not be satisfied until African American students are no longer grossly overrepresented in regards to special education, and the achievement gap is closed.

**Understanding Own Bias**

As proposed by Corey, Corey, & Callanan, (2007) persons in professional development programs (teachers, counselors, school psychologists), “come into training knowing only their own culture, which can lead to cultural tunnel vision, a perception of reality based on a very limited set of cultural experiences” (p. 114). Another method to express this view is to consider the cultural lens each person has, as stated by Guerrero & Leung, (2008), “everyone has a cultural lens that affects their world view (p.19). Faulty vision or misperceptions about the ability, skills, or behavioral intent of African American students contribute to erroneous judgment of those students, suggesting interventions that are not warranted or placement in services that are not appropriate.

All educators, professional support staff, and administrators must work from a culturally competent perspective. A culturally competent perspective is one that identifies behaviors, attitudes and policies within a school system and among professionals to enable the setting to be responsive to the needs of students. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals to enable those involved to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989).

Educators recognize ethnicity, race, and culture as important factors in formulating their understanding of a child. Most professional training programs have specific guidelines or position papers that provide a framework for services to diverse populations. The American Psychological Association (APA), for example, states that psychologists assess how their own experiences influence their behaviors, while seeking to minimize prejudices or bias. Within the APA guidelines, emphasis is placed on the examiner recognizing the client’s background, belief systems, and language.

Educators and administrators need to develop an understanding of the process of acculturation, for the diverse students they work with, and their own process of identity formation and views of culture. Sattler (1998) defined acculturation as “a process of cultural change that occurs in individuals when two cultures meet; it leads the individuals to adopt elements of another culture, such as values and social behaviors” (p. 264). Acculturation may be an issue when a child from a traditional African American family seeks to work, socialize, or live within the majority culture.

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140 Corey, Corey, & Callanan, (2007)
Factors which impact acculturation

- History of experience (brought against will [African Americans] or conquered (Native Americans)
- Length of experience in country
- Degree of ties and identification with native culture
- Make-up of neighborhood (integrated versus segregated), those in isolated neighborhoods are more likely to retain traditional beliefs and customs than those living in diverse neighborhoods
- Strength of language and customs (those with well-developed customs and beliefs will have a more difficult time “crossing cultures”).

Understanding Cultural Adaptation

The issue of cultural adaptation can be placed on a continuum, ranging from Traditionalism to Biculturalism (Sattler, 1998142). **Traditionalism**: the practices of a culture are adhered to. **Transitional Period**: old and new cultures are used, with some individuals struggling with identity issues as they compare values of home culture and new culture. **Marginality**: struggle continues for the individual, where they may experience isolation from both cultures due to uncertainty about where they should be. **Assimilation**: person may embrace the new culture while rejecting the old. **Biculturalism**: person is able to integrate the traditional and new by following positive aspects of both, while maintaining a sense of identity.

Those involved in the assessment of diverse children need to be sensitive to cultural development and consider stages of acculturation. Issues such as lack of identification with majority culture values might account for differences in tests scores. A child from a family that maintains strong identification with traditional culture, such as an African American family that reads black fairy tales or folk stories, may have a strong literature base, but not score as well on tests that assume a majority culture focus of experience, with questions drawn from folk stories more common to White literature.

Members of evaluation teams must use sound professional judgment based upon a review of comprehensive information about a child when recommending services and change of placement for students. Such decisions should also be based on sound data and incorporation of collaboration with caregivers. Turnbull and Turnbull, (1998) stated that professional judgment is an important aspect of services to children, and will remain so. Professionals need to demonstrate that they are using sound practices in their decision-making about services and interventions for students. The ethical and professional guidelines provide structure to the services they provide. *Professionals will always need to attend to and be held accountable to issues of validity, reliability, or appropriateness of methods used with their populations.*

**Testing of Limits**: testing of limits has been a longstanding practice associated with evaluation of students. Evaluators have the flexibility to administer an item from a test in a manner different from the standardized format to test a hypothesis about a child’s performance, or to gather

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additional information about response style that may be helpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of the child.

Use of Curriculum-Based Assessment: Devising tests that are based upon what the child has been exposed to in their setting is a foundation of curriculum-based assessment. Although more consistent with the students actual curriculum based assessment approaches still require adherence to issues of validity and reliability.

Stress for Some African American Students

Child welfare data from the Minnesota Department of Human Services indicates that African American Children are five times more likely than students of other races to be in out of home care. The reasons for out of home placement vary, but potentially include exposure to domestic violence, homelessness due to poverty (the child is removed for protection and provision of basic needs such as shelter), or limitations to the caregiver’s ability to provide support through problems such as chemical addiction. It is important for educators to recognize the support needs of children in out of home placement, while recognizing that family stress may momentarily interfere with academic focus. Assisting the student through developing social support networks becomes a goal.

Cultural liaison/Cultural broker

A cultural liaison is a person who has experience, expertise, or training in issues related to services for diverse populations. The broker may be a member of a specific cultural group, or a person who otherwise has training in working with diverse populations. Cultural brokers are available in some school districts to support families through the special-education process, or to assist in mediating conflicts between families and educators. They are hired as a means of outreach and collaboration with families. Cultural liaisons provide support to caregivers through clarifying questions and consulting with educators on issues related to the evaluation process, and on issues related to diversity. They also work to help other school staff understand the impact of culturally specific behaviors so that fair assessments are conducted.

Cultural brokers work directly with caregivers and can provide direct student support. Direct support with students may involve organizing assignments or monitoring completion of homework assignments. With caregivers, the role of the cultural liaison is to work as guides through the assessment process for families from diverse backgrounds. Cultural liaisons attend child study conferences and conduct home visit to communicate information about a student's need to caregivers. They may also work directly with students, such as with assisting students with organization of materials and monitoring the student’s completion of assignments. A cultural liaison may work with students and caregivers in school, home and community settings.
Position Description Cultural Liaison

A review of position descriptions for cultural liaisons emphasize attainment of a Bachelor's degree in either education or a behavioral science (psychology, social work, counseling) or a related field, and some experience providing outreach services to diverse populations through public relations work, training, and/or supervised experience.

Cultural brokers are expected to have knowledge of diversity and cultural issues and knowledge of community resources so that they can provide families with information about community resources to support the family. A successful cultural liaison has strong interpersonal communication and organizational skills.

Responsibilities of a Cultural Liaison/Broker:

Specific responsibilities of cultural brokers are set by the position description created by the school district. Examples of elements that are associated with a cultural liaison position include:

<table>
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<th>Responsibilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitate meetings between students, parents and school staff from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to facilitate communication and assist in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meet individually with students to gather information about needs or concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide direct assistance to students experiencing a variety of academic, social and/or emotional concerns; work with students of color and monitor their academic progress, behavioral adjustment and attendance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serve as a role model and mentor for students; encourage good attendance and promote and support achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serve on school committees representing caregivers and/or students of color; represent the views of diverse families; explain the goals and objectives of the school in culturally sensitive language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assist families in overcoming barriers to attendance at parent - teacher conferences; help identify barriers and suggest methods to overcome barriers; attend conferences to assist parents to communicate with school staff when necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support educators in interactions with culturally diverse students and their families.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consult with administrators to develop strategies to include families in the implementation of school behavior and social skills programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consult with administrators and/or the district volunteer coordinator to recruit, train, and schedule tutors and volunteers from diverse communities that mirror the school's student population.</td>
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Consult with parents and seek their suggestions on methods to make the school an inviting place; assess environment for respect for diversity and inclusivity.

Develop resources on after school and community-based programs to meet the academic, cultural and social needs of the school’s diverse student body. Work with the administrators to develop team-building and leadership opportunities for students of color and facilitate leadership development opportunities for culturally diverse families.

Refer students and/or their families to appropriate social service agencies or community groups.

One Caregiver’s Experience: African American Case Study 1

**Background:**

One African American parent spoke of her experience with her two sons in an urban school district. The students were a second-grade student, and a fourth-grade student. The young boys attended different schools within the same district. As they progressed through school, the parent developed concerns about specific skills, such as their ability to stay focused on tasks, follow through on requests, or complete activities once they started them. The lack of development in these areas made it difficult for the boys to learn from typical activities for their ages. In addition to concerns about their ability to acquire academic material, social concerns developed due to the frequency of their off-task behavior.

As the parent began to communicate her concerns about her sons to classroom teachers and administrators associated with the schools the boys attended, she noted that her experience with her children varied greatly from the two settings her children were placed. In one setting, the parent felt school staff listened to her concerns about her child and were responsive to her concerns, while in the other setting from her perspective school staff either ignored her concerns or failed to validate her concerns about the needs of her son.

**Experience with the referral process:**

Actions related to the referral process was one domain where the parent reported significant differences between the settings her sons were placed. When she made a formal request for an evaluation, the reactions she received from the schools differed. For her son in second grade, within a few days of making her request she received information about due process and the timeline for processing the evaluation for her son, complete with a targeted date of an assessment conference, within the timeframe according to state guidelines. An administrator followed up with a personal telephone call to find out if she had any specific questions about the evaluation process, and asked if she understood or had any questions about how the referral process would unfold.

In the second school setting for her older son, the reaction she received was much different. Initially educators spoke with her about her request for a referral. From her perspective it was clear that school staff did not support her request for an evaluation, and they made specific suggestions that she should withdraw her request for an evaluation. She stated she felt confused.
by their suggestions that she withdraw her request, as she thought she was within her rights as a parent to make the request based on her concerns about her child’s academic and social skill development.

Despite her stated concerns that her son had failed to make progress after several months of the current school year, together with minimal academic skill development in reading from prior exposure to education, she believed that a continued lack of intervention would leave her son further behind and impair his ability to gain any enjoyment out of the act of reading. Reading had become a significant struggle for him, and she was concerned that he was developing a resistance to looking at books and attempting to read because reading was difficult for him. The parent believed that school staff minimized her concerns about her son's lack of progress, despite their own academic evidence based on grade reports and state testing results that placed the student well below his peers as far as reading ability.

The parent persisted with pursuing her request, but did not get an official letter to begin the process until another three weeks had passed; time where her son continued to operate in school without meaningful interventions. One educator told the parent the school hesitated because they did not want to “label” her son. The parent's reaction was that she understood that labeling is a sensitive issue, yet her concern was about accessing services so that her son could get help, and less about the use of a label. As well, she was concerned that her son was already being labeled as a bad kid as a result of behavioral reactions related to frustration with reading, and off task behavior when he was confused in school. More than concerns about his reading ability, school staff (classroom teacher and administrator) stated concerned about her son’s behavior. However a possible links to reading frustration and off task behavior were rejected by the teacher and administrator.

**Differences in Definition of the Problem:**

Despite feeling support in one setting for the referral requests, in both settings the parent and school staff disagreed about the central issue regarding the needs of her sons. The parent had a clear understanding that her children were not meeting academic goals. However teachers and administrators responsible for discipline in her son's schools suggested that her son's issues were primarily behavioral.

The parent reported that she struggled with the perception that she had bad kids. She acknowledged that her boys had challenges with off-task behavior, but she considered her son's challenges as more attentional than behavioral. As well, given their frustrations with learning to read, it was reasonable to consider that some of their off task behavior were related to frustrations with decoding content and understanding information. She sought an outside opinion and an investigation from an outside assessment documented evidence of both young boys meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
Resistance:
Following the diagnosis of ADHD for her children, the parent educated herself on the meaning of the diagnosis, including books on the subject and resources from Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD). She conducted her own review of information on the Internet so that she could become a better advocate for her kids. She found material that discussed school based interventions and she sought to share interventions she found with educators at school.

Despite evidence from an assessment that documented ADHD, the parent was met with resistance from school staff who seemed to be unwilling to consider attentional problems as a factor in her sons' behavioral difficulties at school. The parent was aware that services under a category of health impairment were an option, as opposed to services under the category of emotional or behavioral disorder. From a labeling perspective, the question was about which category was a more accurate representation of the needs of the children. It is possible that a student with ADHD can be served under services for Other Health Impaired (OHI) or EBD, so long as they meet the criteria for the specific category of service and have an educational need. However, negative connotations for EBD are stronger than for OHI.

The parent reported her dismay that school staff were uninterested in the information she gathered to help her be a better parent to her children, or the modifications suggested to increase the chances for school success. The parent asserted that "I feel it didn't matter what I suggested, the teachers were not willing to allow me to educate them on issues". The parent stated her respect for the knowledge educators had for the areas they were responsible for, but she did not feel that most school staff reciprocated their respect for information she could share about what might help her sons.

Methods to Support Parents:
As she reflected on her own experience, the parent discussed ideas to support other parents who have a background similar to hers:

- Develop a network of parents who have been through the assessment process and who can provide mentorship to other parents who are new to special-education assessment procedures.

- Investigate parent concerns with the same degree of value that teacher based reports are responded to: school staff should be receptive to the idea that although parent concerns may be different than those expressed by a teacher, they are important.

- Use components of active listening where restating the concern to the parent is used to assess accurate perception of the caregiver's perspective.

- Understand that resistance from parents and caregivers can be a natural protective reaction when concerns are raised their child. It is important to recognize that parents and caregivers can be vulnerable to feelings such as loss of hope when educators express concerns about their child's development. Some of this resistance occurs when potential
labels are used to describe the condition, and caregivers understand that many labels have negative connotations associated with them, as well as the potential for reduced expectations about the child.

Policies and procedures should be addressed to increase fairness in services for African American students. Policies developed within a district that focus on reducing overrepresentation should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents and students, if appropriate. Aspects of policy and procedures include:

- Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
- Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing African American stories, traditions, and history in course content)
- Using evidenced-informed instructional strategies and interventions
- Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
- Implementing data-based assessment systems
- Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to show a need for learning specific academic material
- Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class (textbooks, materials represent a variety of cultures)
- Using hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills

**Conclusion: Moving to the Future:**

Many factors contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. Solutions to overrepresentation in special education programs, or in suspensions/expulsions from school require dedicated efforts from educators and administrators working collaboratively with parents and caregivers to identify interventions and services that benefit students without reliance on services that remove and separate students from their peers.

The culture of African-American students is broad, encompassing degrees of use of African American English and cultural identification. Educators and administrators who operate from a culturally competent perspective support the culture of African American families.

- Ford summarizes previous research regarding educators’ response to overrepresentation. Educators must “(a) neither ignore nor negate cultural differences, (b) not misunderstand cultural differences, and (c) not penalize children for their cultural differences” (Ford, 2012, p. 400).
- Ford cited previous research regarding the various ways to measure overrepresentation, and she suggested the field forms consensus on how to measure overrepresentation.
- The bias and unfairness in testing must be addressed regarding how they contribute to overrepresentation, accommodations must be addressed, and differences in outcomes between various minority populations must be determined.
• Special educators need to “examine the pipeline to special education, which often begins with suspensions and expulsions, primarily among Black and Hispanic males” (Ford, 2012, p. 402).
• Prevention should be emphasized (family collaboration, early childhood programs) to prevent developmental issues from requiring special education services.
• Special educators must acknowledge the impact that overrepresentation has on our nation’s place in the world, as it leads to fewer students being appropriately prepared for college.
• An emphasis on data of teacher referral rates by race/ethnicity/gender may help understand overrepresentation, and strategies to prepare culturally competent educators may be helpful.

Formal preparation in “culture and cultural similarities and differences (Ford, 2012, p. 403) is necessary for special educators to reduce referrals and overrepresentation.
Caregiver, Family, and Community Engagement for Diverse Learners

Educators, scholars, policy makers, and parents themselves share a widespread belief that when caregivers, parents, and educational teams work collaboratively, students benefit (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 2011; Henderson, 2002; Tyson, 2009). Likewise, research confirms positive relationships between parent engagement and student outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005). However, relatively few schools have parent engagement plans. The purpose of this section is to examine how educators can enhance and sustain parent engagement in pursuit of learning and achievement that result in reducing bias in the education and disproportionality of American Indian and African American children in special education programs.

Historically, the school system in the United States has produced less success for students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and for students identified with disabilities different from the American macro culture (Bank, 1997). Further, the education of American Indian and African American students lags far behind those of other U.S. ethnic groups such as Whites and Asian Americans as reflected by test scores, grades, urban high school graduation rates, and rates of disciplinary action (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000).

As schools work to improve outcomes for American Indian and African American students it is important to recognize the strengths and cultural heritage of both groups. “Indigenous Americans come from cultures rich in traditional knowledge, survival, resilience, and healing”, where they are “living in two worlds”, that of their traditional or tribal culture and that of the dominant culture (Dauphinais, Charley, Robinson-Zanartu, Melroe, & Bass, 2009, p1). American Indian families are bicultural, seeking to retain their language, traditions, and spirituality.

The “Black community is a collection of African roots that embraces community atmospheres, spirituality as an integral part of all life domains, and interactive communication and learning (Chandler, A’Avant, & Graves (2008, p.1). The black community is broad and diverse within the group; educators must be careful about sweeping generalizations. African Americans have contributed to the development of the United States through advocacy and social justice, and contributions in science and education.

Our nation’s public school student demographics demonstrate increased diversity in cultural, racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball & Farr, 2003; Banks 2001; Cooper, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES, 2008]). However, the growth in diversity among student demographics has not been matched with growth in diversity among educators and administrators, where their numbers have remained constant. The potential for cultural discontinuity rises when there are vast differences in backgrounds between those seeking services and those providing services. There is urgency for school leaders responsible for building fostering positive change to develop effective plans for engaging diverse learners, their parents and caregivers, and fostering successful collaborative relationships with community members.

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The foundation for enhancing parent engagement is built on the principles that educational settings view caregivers as true partners in the educational process. Educators and administrators work to proactively address known conflicts and challenges that are inherent in home-school relations. For example, there can be competing priorities of caregivers and educators. Each has an orientation they bring to the relationships. As well, value and belief differences exist. Other factors that are found that contribute to the need for dialogue between educators and caregivers include differences in communication styles and differences in culture and socioeconomic status. On any of these issues conflict can occur, and it becomes possible for educators and administrators to marginalize caregivers of American Indian students or African American students. When parents experience exclusion, their engagement with the school is inhibited (Auerbach, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Olivos, 2006; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

The development of cross-cultural communication skills is an intentional process for educators and administrators in public school settings. Effective education of students who are diverse involves understanding differences associated with the diverse families and their interaction with school settings. An expected benefit of effective cross-cultural communication is increased understanding between school professionals and caregivers about services for individual students. As well, due to the interpersonal aspects of communication, factors such as respect and trust are also outcome of effective connections between school staff and caregivers. As educators, administrators, and caregivers work collaboratively to address factors related to disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students in special education, manners of communication styles, use of professional language that can keep families at a distance (jargon), and understanding differences become important.

Recent education reform efforts have mandated parent engagement as a key component of school reform. Additionally, school-community relations courses as well as Standard 4 of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) requires an educational leader to demonstrate knowledge, possess dispositions and perform in ways to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members. Additionally, educational leaders should respond to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilize community resources to work in ways to support the school. Yet, the role of school leaders in engaging parents of diverse communities is underdeveloped in the literature and in leadership preparation programs.

Current literature often uses the terms parent involvement and parent engagement interchangeably. However, in this section, a distinction is made between the term parent involvement and parent engagement. Larry Feralazzo (2009) differentiates between the two terms in the following manner: When educational settings simply seek to involve parents they are often leading from the self-interest and agendas of the institution or organization. However, when educational settings engage parents they are leading with the parents’ self-interests and parent perspective regarding the education of their child to include creating structures that promote parent partnerships. That being said, simply involving parents can be typically viewed as expecting only service from parents such as attendance at school conference or volunteering to help out for field trips or class celebrations without granting parents any power or authority within the school community. In contrast, engaging parents requires educational settings to fully
embracing parents as key partners in the educational process. Engaging with parents and families in and out of the classroom provides a way for school leaders and staff to complete the picture of who students are by capturing the personal story that cannot be fully captured in the students’ school records, in anecdotal notes of teachers, or in the face that students present in the educational environment.

As stated by Guerrero and Leung (2008) \(^{145}\) "every student and family member is shaped and influenced by his/her environment and experiences (p.19)". The experience of each family shapes their communication styles, expectations, and beliefs. As educators and administrators consider culturally responsive practice, it is important to confront issues that create stress when cross-cultural communication occurs. Due to data that shows that positive outcome of education (high school graduation rates, performance on state standards testing) for many American Indian and African American is less than that of their White Peers, some negative assumptions have developed about American Indian and African American students. Educators and administrators must challenge these assumptions wherever they are found.

Some educators assume that American Indian or African American caregivers don’t value education in the manner of white middle class peers. The same assumption exists about families in poverty; that the value of education is not perceived as important. Yet Gorski (2008) \(^{146}\) reported that parents who are in low income settings, a setting for many American Indian and African American families, value education to a degree similar to wealthy parents. Factors related to poverty or need to maintain income is associated with less likelihood to attend school functions.

A Framework for Implementing Engagement of Caregivers

Virtually all caregivers and parents care about their child's education, but caregivers of American Indian and students of color and often show their support behind the scenes in ways that go unrecognized by schools (Auerbach, 2001, 2006, 2007; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). Building a partnership with both students and their parents is not always easy, but is essential to positive educational outcomes. Parent engagement is a key component of a healthy school climate. It is necessary for educational settings to adopt a vision for the outcomes and sustainability of their parent engagement initiatives to inform policy and practice for equitable school reform and leadership preparation.

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Educators and Staff Can:

- Commit to personal contact
- Educate themselves on cultural values of families
- Plan for meaningful, two-way communication
- Intentionally reach out in to the community
- Repeatedly invite families’ participation
- Evaluate their setting for inclusivity
- Create an intentionally welcoming environment for families in the school
- Support families’ needs for transportation, child care, translation

School administrators and leaders can:

- Adopt a vision of proactive caregiver support policies, procedures and actions that reduce disproportionate representation, share such a vision with their staff, and create an action plan to further the vision within their setting.
- Implement School-wide Staff Development on cross-cultural competencies
- Model and maintain high expectations of achievement and success for all learners
- Take time to build relationships and trust with Staff, Caregivers, Parents and Community-based organizations
- Reach out and proactively solicit input from under-represented families on the education of their children
- Teach families how to support students academically
- Identify and utilize the assets that parents and the community possess
- Utilize traditional means (letters, notes home) and technology (social media, email, text messaging, blogs) to connect with caregivers and families
- Create structures that give parent power and authority in the school community
- Promote positive interactions with caregivers (build on learner successes and communicate successes with families)
State Statute for Parent Involvement

124D.8955 Parent and Family Involvement Policy

(a) In order to promote and support student achievement, a local school board is encouraged to formally adopt and implement a parent and family involvement policy that promotes and supports:

(1) communication between home and school that is regular, two-way, and meaningful;
(2) parenting skills;
(3) parents and caregivers who play an integral role in assisting student learning and learn about fostering students' academic success and learning at home and school;
(4) welcoming parents in the school and seeking their support and assistance;
(5) partnerships with parents in the decisions that affect children and families in the schools; and
(6) providing community resources to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

(b) A school board that implements a parent and family involvement policy under paragraph (a) must convene an advisory committee composed of an equal number of resident parents who are not district employees and school staff to make recommendations to the board on developing and evaluating the board's parent and family involvement policy. If possible, the advisory committee must represent the diversity of the district. The advisory committee must consider the district's demographic diversity and barriers to parent involvement when developing its recommendations. The advisory committee must present its recommendations to the board for board consideration.

(c) The board must consider best practices when implementing this policy.

(d) The board periodically must review this policy to determine whether it is aligned with the most current research findings on parent involvement policies and practices and how effective the policy is in supporting increased student achievement.

(e) Nothing in this section obligates a school district to exceed any parent or family involvement requirement under federal law.

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147 https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=124D.895
Assessment & Intervention of School Based Challenges

Traditionally, assessing the needs of students with significant challenges in schools has involved a comprehensive evaluation of student-focused factors, resulting in the reporting of results that reflect a *snapshot in time*. For most American Schools, this has been the case since 1975, when Public Law 94-142 was passed (Education of All Handicapped Children Act; now codified as IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). In the model of comprehensive evaluations used after the adoption of Public Law 94-142, school assessment professionals collected data about students struggling in school, often heavily emphasizing the use of nationally normed standardized tests.

Evaluations, although defined as comprehensive, were focused primarily on suspected challenges or weaknesses within the student. Evaluation results often pointed to the student as the primary source or cause for challenging circumstances (i.e., resulting in a special education classification and *label* for the student). This approach had a significant weakness in that it assumed that any academic difficulty or behaviors of concern originated with the student or learner. Often, important environmental or social factors that contribute to concerns were minimized or excluded. While a true disability is one possible reason for evaluation results showing low ability, achievement concerns, or social struggles, or other needs, the evaluated student’s external experiences and cultural characteristics may highly influence evaluation conclusions as well. Such variables need to be incorporated into any assessment strategy in order to ensure a fair and comprehensive picture of student progress. Failure to consider culture and ecology can be a factor contributing to the over identification of American Indian and African students in special education programs or their involvement in high rates of suspension and expulsion.

The first edition of the *Reducing Bias in Special Education Assessment for American Indian and African American Students* (1998) was written with the traditional evaluation system as a guiding structure. At the time, nearly all schools in Minnesota and across the country utilized a *refer-test-place* structure for evaluating students with academic, behavioral, and other challenges. While many school professionals agree that certain aspects of and tools used in that model remain valuable, the current edition of the *Reducing Bias* manual has adopted a broader definition of assessment; one that does not limit data collection to a single event, limited techniques, or a small set of data collection over a brief time period.

Assessment teams should consider the broader context of the environment of the child, rather than using a limited focus on a suspected problem with the child. In more contemporary approaches evaluators adopt a more truly comprehensive assessment lens. Assessment must be part of a continuum of services where preventative practices are in place, and evidence-informed interventions are used to remediate concerns. With this broader approach in mind, comprehensive evaluations should seldom be the first point of entry for developing strategies to address a concern about a student. *Reducing bias in assessment must emphasize prevention, evaluation of system-wide variables such as school climate, and improved understanding of student cultural variables, each of which can contribute to academic success and social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment.*

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148 (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter, 2003)
Consider the following broader-based assessment example:

Michael is an African American student in the 3rd grade at a school that incorporates Response to Intervention practices into every day practice. While in kindergarten, Michael’s teachers recognized he had difficulty with verbal communication and early literacy skills. He appeared to be well behind his peers in those areas. As his kindergarten year progressed, Michael began to demonstrate behavioral challenges, perhaps due to his communication and social struggles. Michael’s school collected curriculum-based benchmark data and, ultimately, recommended him for a small group literacy intervention. Michael made some progress as far as reduction of behavioral concerns as there was greater understanding of his needs. He responded well to some of the interventions he received, but still showed significant reading delays by the time he reached 3rd grade. Fortunately, extensive benchmarking, monitoring of his progress, observational data, and parent input data had been collected over the three previous academic years, providing a solid foundation of understanding his needs. Although concerns were still evident about reading challenges, it was also evident that he demonstrated the ability to make gains in other areas such as social and other academic areas. The team had a truer picture of his needs and his strengths.

Given cases like Michael’s, it is critical to incorporate a more comprehensive definition of assessment and intervention; one that does not imply a wait to fail model in which a single evaluation occurs after the challenging circumstances have persisted. In this case, nondiscriminatory assessment was not just about choosing the most appropriate test for a special education evaluation. Michael was found to be eligible for special education services, but only after he experienced evidence-informed universal instruction, extensive prevention and early intervention efforts, analysis of school-wide data results, identification of his strengths and positive supports, and consideration of his level of acculturation.

This edition of the Reducing Bias manual offers a definition of assessment that reflects ongoing data collection and related comprehensive intervention practices for all students. Beyond student-focused test data, assessment should explore the learner’s relationships, community, history of instruction, strengths and exceptions to the challenges, and/or cultural patterns that can impact learning. Extrinsic and intrinsic factors should be considered. The words of Sam Ortiz help highlight the assessment goals of this chapter:

The initial step in nondiscriminatory assessment is also the most important: conduct the assessment with the express purpose of linking the results to intervention. It is important to recognize that even after the assessment has been completed, the examinee is not suddenly or magically going to be “cured” of his or her learning problems merely because a diagnosis or label has been applied. Therefore, the role of assessment should not be viewed as one that is limited to identification or classification only, rather it should be extended to inform appropriate instructional interventions, modifications, and program development (Ortiz, 2008 –best practices in non-discriminatory assessment ppt.)
High quality assessment and intervention of student challenges assumes systematic prevention efforts are in place. Data collection must address broader systems, including classroom-wide or school-wide trends. Ideally, a school’s climate or environment will be reflective of the student population, where diversity in cultures is respected and recognized as a positive influence on learning and motivation. When a student struggles to meet expectations in school, an assessment of the situation must include a analysis of the school’s environment and ecology as individual and environmental factors can interact in the development of a child’s struggles and strengths (Brofenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

Fair assessment practices include collection of data over time and from multiple sources of data that are linked to instruction or intervention. School assessment professionals maintain a broader view of how and why student challenges occur – not just a focus on compartmentalized student performance data. Fair assessment practices assume student struggles can be influenced by cultural or linguistic differences between the student and the dominant school culture and climate. To assist educators and families focused on reducing bias in school-based assessment and intervention, a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) involving assessment and intervention is supported in this resource.

Examples of multi-tiered models that could serve as excellent structures for serving American Indian and African American students include Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS) (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012; Tobin and Vincent, 2011; Utley and Obiakor, 2012). Multi-tiered strategies ensure a process where prevention and early intervention are critical components and evaluation of school-wide academic and behavioral trends are included. For general information on RtI and PBS, see Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005), Sprick, Booher and Garrison (2009) and Hulac, Terrell, Vining, and Bernstein (2011).
Multi-Tiered System of Support Model

An example of a multi-tiered model for schools advocated by this Reducing Bias resource will address the following:

- **Tier 1.** Universal instruction and experiences (all students receive/experience)
  - Prevention and early intervention
  - Positive school climate
  - School-wide data collection/assessment
  - Staff self-reflect on potential bias, vulnerability

- **Tier 2.** Focused assessment, instruction, or intervention
  - Gather specific data on student acculturation, family, learning ecology
  - Small group interventions

- **Tier 3.** Targeted assessment and intervention.
  - Individualized assessment techniques lead to instructional recommendations, clear consideration of student acculturation, qualitative interpretations of data, and building on student strengths.

Understanding bias in assessment

IDEA 2004 mandated that assessment teams select and administer assessment techniques that eliminate cultural discrimination. Therefore it is necessary for educators and parents to understand the potential process of how bias might occur in evaluations of students and how fair assessment practices can be increased. The goal of the Reducing Bias manual is to assist educators, parents, and other school professionals as they assess the needs of American Indian and African American students with fair methods, resources, and strategies. However, bias is not simply about race or ethnicity. Before proceeding with a discussion of reducing bias practices, evaluators assessing student needs in schools must understand how bias in assessment and comprehensive evaluations has been defined, measured, and interpreted in the literature.

As it applies to assessment or evaluations in schools, most available research investigations have defined bias as being related to the possibility of inappropriate test item content, inconsistent or poorly defined factors measured in tests, and to differences in the accuracy of using cognitive ability tests to predict academic achievement for various groups (Ortiz, 2008). However, current available data fail to show a clear test bias against culturally diverse individuals when cognitive ability and other tests are used (Reynolds and Livingston, 2011). As examples, low scores on an intelligence test predict low achievement equally well for all racial and ethnic groups, and individual test items in modern tests do not typically favor one group over another in a consistent way.

Racial and ethnic differences in test scores do exist. These differences between groups do not necessarily indicate a test construction problem or test bias per se. Ecological experiences of individual students involving factors such as poverty, multiple transitions, family disruption, or

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experience of racism, may change the way the student approaches the testing process and ultimately, the results of the test. The learning ecology must be evaluated carefully and comprehensively, as low test scores may not always indicate low ability or disability.

The Reducing Bias resource asserts that nationally standardized tests, particularly those with a norm sample dissimilar to the population found in a school, should be used cautiously or not at all. When used, such tests should always be combined with multiple sources of data when used with American Indian and African American students. While psychometric bias has not been clearly evident in the literature, the issue of fairness in test use is complex and continues to be debated and researched in the educational literature. A comprehensive discussion of test bias can be found in Reynolds and Livingston (2011).

*Educators and others interested in assessment should not assume that bias does not exist or never occurs in educational testing and assessment, even with well-constructed standardized assessments and nonverbal tools.* Indeed, unfair practices and outcomes occur frequently when evaluators choose assessment techniques or tests without considering a student’s level of acculturation, regardless of race or ethnicity. Ortiz and Dynda (2005) defined acculturation as “an individual’s general acquisition and learning of the cultural elements of the society in which he or she is being raised (p. 548).” Ortiz (2008) clarified this notion when stating that educators “…must be sensitive to the fact that important differences exist with respect to child-rearing practices, expectations and aspirations, language experiences, and availability of and involvement in information and formal learning experiences…(p. 666-667).”

Considering a student’s level or acculturation, Ortiz and Dynda summarized potential cultural bias in assessment as “…a function of the match between an individual’s cultural background and experiences and that of his or her age or grade-related peers who comprise the norm sample or comparison group (p. 549).” Indeed, the assessment results of students with unique acculturation or distinct life experiences may be impacted by their motivation, priorities, and trust of the process, as much as their true skills and abilities.

**Methods to Increase Fair Assessment Practices**

**Be fully aware of student acculturation.** Instead of simply focusing on racial differences in assessment results, a more specific focus on a student’s level of acculturation is necessary when assessing performance and needs. As such, it is the knowledge of a student’s experience in the typically white middle class American culture – more so than race or ethnicity - that best guides choice of assessment techniques and practices. Clearly, race, ethnicity, and acculturation are often connected. Many American Indian and African American school students are acculturated in a manner different from the majority of test norm sample participants. Typically, nationally standardized tests use students from white, middle class backgrounds to represent the norm. Students who come from low-income settings are typically excluded from the standardization group.

Ortiz and Dynda (2005) posited that “Because individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds rarely have levels of acculturation comparable to the mainstream, such bias is likely to operate in

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nearly every case where testing is conducted” (p. 549). However, it would be inappropriate to assume that all students of American Indian or African American are, by nature, significantly different than the norm (or the test standardization sample). Educators are encouraged to view all students through the lens of acculturation, as opposed to only focusing on race or ethnicity. While tests may not be psychometrically biased, they are often culturally and linguistically loaded (Ortiz, 2008). Educators, therefore, can assess the appropriateness of tests by viewing them on a continuum of culture reduced to culture loaded as well as language reduced to language embedded.

**Be aware of confirmatory bias.** Confirmatory bias refers to the process whereby we see what we expect to see. Educators responsible for assessing student progress often start traditional assessment with a referral concern suggesting the likelihood of disability. Evaluators in this scenario often choose instruments and interpret results based on confirming the diagnosis, rather than exploring factors that consider alternative explanations. From such a perspective individual evaluators or assessment teams may tend to overemphasize results that support a preconceived notion of student performance and disability. Often data that runs counter to initial suspicions about student disability is discarded or ignored (Ortiz, 2008).

Confirmatory bias may be even more common when schools evaluate students from diverse backgrounds (Ortiz, 2008). In order to reduce the likelihood of confirmatory bias, Ortiz encouraged a process of assuming internal normality in the student and testing hypotheses about alternative explanations for the concerns about the student. Specifically, “The process of assessment should begin with the hypothesis that the examinee’s difficulties are not intrinsic in nature, but rather that they are more likely attributable to external or environmental problems” (p. 664). While a truly internal challenge (e.g., neurological, biological, child-centered) is one possible outcome of a school assessment, evaluators must be open to the notion that challenges in schools may be connected to or even rooted in environmental or experiential variables. This process is explored further in the remainder of this assessment section. For more detailed information on acculturation and test bias, see Ortiz and Dynda (2005) and Ortiz (2008).

**Fair Assessment Tools**

The following tools were developed for this Reducing Bias resource to enhance the assessment of African American and American Indian students, school environments, and educator practices/processes. The tools provide options for supplementing the assessment process by having evaluators and assessment teams audit their approaches to working with American Indian and African American students. They may be used at any point in time, but are particularly appropriate for use in specific levels of a tiered service delivery system, as noted next:

**Tier 1 & 2 – Universal/Ecological**

- **Bias Vulnerability Checklist.** Designed to assist schools or districts in the identification of areas in which their student assessment process may be vulnerable to bias (i.e., possible blind spots needing improvement).
- **Learning Ecology Checklist.** An internal factor (e.g., low cognitive ability level) is just one possible reason for academic challenges. In contrast, numerous ecological (i.e., extrinsic or environmental) factors may contribute to learning
challenges. This checklist will help educators review potential extrinsic factors involved when African American and American Indian students are having learning difficulties.

**Tier 3 – Individualized Assessment & Intervention**

- **Sociocultural Checklist & Guide:** This guide and checklist includes items that help assess possible social and cultural influences on learning.
- **Assessment Tool Selection Guide:** This checklist serves as a best practice guide for choosing appropriate assessment tools for culturally diverse learners. Individual evaluators and evaluation teams are encouraged to review this checklist prior to conducting comprehensive assessments of an American Indian or African American student.

**Cognitive Ability & Basic Psychological Processing**

Traditionally, a comprehensive individualized evaluation has been conducted by educators after a student has struggled to meet academic, behavioral or other school expectations for a lengthy period of time. In many instances, these evaluations have coincided with a refer-test-place model, in which students fall further behind over time, with no or few informal supports, until the tested gap between expectations and performance is big enough to be significant (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter, 2003151). Frequently, this type of school assessment has emphasized the use of cognitive ability tests (i.e., IQ or intelligence tests) to evaluate student cognitive ability and basic psychological processing (e.g., working memory, processing speed, visual-spatial organization).

Cognitive ability tests that produce an intelligence quotient have been used widely in Minnesota and other states to evaluate learning disabilities and cognitive disabilities. Special education qualification and placement in programs designed to remediate concerns is often the goal and the outcome when such tests are used. Scores from cognitive ability tests results have been influential when educators make alternative placement decisions about struggling students. In theory, cognitive ability test results suggest a level of academic and problem-solving expectations that help predict where a student should be academically. Historically, given their standardized and norm-referenced structure and their strong psychometric properties, cognitive ability tests have been believed to be assessment tools that fairly compare an examinee to his or her same-age peers (Ortiz, 2008). Indeed, some tests (e.g., the Wechsler series) have been studied extensively for decades and have been revised several times, helping to ensure suitable content and fair comparison groups (i.e., normative sample) for most students.

However, in recent years, the educational literature has challenged the idea that all cognitive assessment tests are fair and appropriate for all students (e.g., Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Naglieri & Goldstein, 2009; Ortiz, 2008). In some cases, the unique characteristics of a student dictate the need to avoid use of traditional norm-referenced tests (Ortiz, 2008). As well, when using a test is deemed suitable for an individual student, educators must be aware that not all cognitive assessment tests are created equally. Some tests assume some degree of prior knowledge or experience with testing expectations, which is not true of all students. Other

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151 (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter, 2003)
cognitive ability tests have complex verbal instructions that ultimately could penalize a student from a diverse background. This penalty occurs with a lower score through lack of understanding instructions, rather than lacking cognitive ability. Some tests have are closely aligned with researched cognitive theories and training and instructional strategies that may not be used in the student’s school or home setting.

**The Concept of Stereotype Threat:**

Assessment teams and those involved in evaluating students must engage in assessment practices fair to all students. Some students are aware that some educators, or administrators, view their race or cultural background negatively, which creates tension and stress for them when they also know that those same educators or administrators are judging their performance. Research on the concept of stereotype threat shows that students' knowledge of stereotype-based negative expectations about their test performance can depress their actual test performance152.

Stereotype threat is defined as a risk factor for American Indian or African American students where the student confirms to negative expectations about their race (Reducing Stereotype Threat153). In some ways the concept of stereotype threat is similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where if one expects a student to perform poorly, that message is communicated to the student, or, responses given by the student are judged harshly so as to fulfill the prophecy of underperforming.

The concept of stereotype threat was first introduced by Steele and Aronson (1995), who showed that the performance of African American college students was depressed when their race was emphasized by examiners. A common example of a situation where stereotype threat is created for student from a diverse background involves evaluations for intellectual ability. American Indian and African American students may feel additional stress compared to their White Peers as they perceive themselves being judged by someone not from their race or background. Another common example is the expression of a belief that math is difficult for women. Women who are not aware of this belief system perform math tasks well, women who are communicated this belief system prior to performing selected math tasks do not score as well154.

To be clear, educators and evaluators can work cross-culturally, if they are aware of their communication patterns that express support for students, or subtle communication patterns that communicate an expectation of failure or difficulty with a task. Evaluators must be sensitive to the presence of any stereotypes about student performance that could reduce the quality of the student’s response to assessment.

When tests are used, educational assessment teams must adopt a best-practice policy of choosing them based on student individuality and needs (e.g., culture and language). Use of the *Culture-Language Interpretive Matrix* (Flanagan & Ortiz, 2001) is encouraged as a way to assist

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153 http://reducingstereotypethreat.org/definition.html
evaluators with choosing culturally fair standardized tests. With this matrix, the level of cultural loading and the degree of linguistic demands of various tests can be determined. It is essential to seek the best match possible between student characteristics and test structure, style, and content, keeping in mind that no test will be completely free of bias.

To assist assessment teams with that process, the Assessment Tool selection Guide provided here can help teams choose instruments to meet the needs of each individual student. This guide was developed in the original Reducing Bias manual (1998) and has been fully revised for the current edition. It is important to emphasize that no test is perfect and multiple sources of data are always appropriate for all student evaluations, regardless of student culture and characteristics.

Sattler (1992) reminds educators that:

*Probably no test can be created that will entirely eliminate the influence of learning and cultural experiences. The test content and materials, the language in which the questions are phrased, the test directions, the categories for classifying the responses, the scoring criteria, and the validity criteria are all culture bound (Sattler, 1992).*

In lieu of a refer-test-place model in which a single traditional evaluation serves as the primary response to student challenges, preventative system such as Multi-tiered Systems of Support and Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) have been developed and instituted in many American schools (for details, see: Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Sprick, Booher & Garrison, 2009; and Hulac, Terrell, Vining, and Bernstein, 2011). RtI and PBS structures typically involve levels of service, often known as tiers, where the intensity of assessment and instructional/intervention services can increase for individual students. Universal evidence-based instruction and practices are offered to all students followed be enhanced interventions as needed.
Example of a tiered system of support:

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<th>Universal</th>
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<td><em>Focused Screening</em></td>
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<td><em>Help/Support</em></td>
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<td><em>Design and implement universal supports</em></td>
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<td><em>Comprehensive Evaluations for nonresponders</em></td>
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Within any approach to intervention, there are likely to be students who fail to respond to instruction, and some who fail to respond to intervention. The mode of instruction for some students may be different than their preferred learning style. For example, some students may have strength in visual processing, yet the bulk of their instruction might require auditory processing. Although at Tier 1 interventions and strategies are designed to be inclusive of all students, it is necessary to maintain vigilance to students who are unique responders. Students have differing needs and learning patterns. The goal of universal screeners is to identify common factors and unique patterns.
Tiered service delivery structures like RtI are viewed as particularly appropriate for diverse learners such as African American and American Indian students. Recent literature has supported RtI and PBS in reducing the disproportionate number of diverse learners being served at the most intense levels of services (e.g., Special Education placement) (Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner & Vincent, 2006; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012; Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Utley & Obiakor, 2012). To better understand educational assessment across a tiered service delivery system, the evaluation of student cognitive abilities, cognitive processing, and problem solving skills in the early stage tiers (e.g., Tier 1 and Tier 2) is discussed next, followed by increasingly individualized assessment and intervention approaches that can be provided in Tier 3.

**Tier 1 & Tier 2 Strategies.**

Traditional assessment of cognitive ability as a starting point for addressing student needs (i.e., a single evaluation using standardized tests) is not likely to be a meaningful or efficient process in the early stages of a multi-tiered service delivery system (e.g., RtI). Rather, *Tier 1 strategies must be viewed as universal – for all students - and preventative*. To be most effective, Tier 1 must include evidence-based instructional strategies that address varied and diverse approaches to learning, with value being placed on the use of multiple strategies for multiple learning styles (Walker-Dalhouse, et al. 2009).

In order to improve and maintain a positive school climate, strategies that support diverse beliefs and values are employed. Positive school climate has been found to be correlated with improved academic and behavioral outcomes for all students, including diverse learners, and can be viewed
as a powerful preventative system (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold & Kannas, 1998). See the School Climate section of this resource for additional details. External factors in the student’s environment (e.g., important relationships, places, and the actions of others) are viewed as vital influences on the student’s motivation and problem-solving development. In contrast, a comprehensive evaluation involving traditional cognitive ability tests should only be viewed as a strategy to consider later (e.g., Tier 3), when parents and caregivers request, as necessary, or perhaps not at all. In most cases, the comprehensive evaluation should only be considered after universal evidence-based instructional and preventative strategies have been conducted and exhausted.

Assessment of cognitive ability and general problem solving in early Tier 1 and Tier 2 stages is driven by questions about how to assist a child in their development of knowledge and skills, and methods to support the child’s family and teacher. Issues of special education eligibility occur when universal instruction and prevention programs have failed to meet the needs of the student. Ortiz (2008) recommended educators start with the assumption of internal normality in children from diverse cultures who are not meeting expectations in school. A disability that is truly internal to the student (i.e., primarily neurological/biological) is only one reason for school performance difficulties, with numerous other ecological variables (factors outside the child), being potential contributing factors.

Ecological factors (e.g., home-school communication, family cultural values and customs, family structure and supports, etc.) must be assessed and considered when a student struggles to meet academic expectations. Such factors must be given significant focus when assessing the progress of American Indian and African American students, as the student’s cultural and other environmental factors can be quite different from that of their White Peers.

Educators need improved tools to assist with their understanding of factors that are external to the student, yet influential to learning and achievement. An emphasis on the assessment of ecological variables occurs with a de-emphasis of norm-referenced intelligence tests scores. This requires a paradigm shift in thinking about approaches to understanding the needs of the diverse student. The Learning Ecology Checklist is one example of a tool that can be utilized at this stage. Based on Ortiz’s best practices in nondiscriminatory assessment (2008), the Learning Ecology Checklist helps educators start by considering multiple ecological or environmental hypotheses.

Broffenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development can serve as a starting point to understanding the process (1979, 2005). In this model the individual develops through the interaction between personal biological tendencies and environmental influences. The model proposed by Broffenbrenner, can serve as a useful structure. In this model, levels of influence on cognitive processing begins with important systems that are experienced frequently by the individual (e.g., home and school) and move out to more distant or indirect influential

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macrosystems (e.g., cultural beliefs, governmental policies). Each component of this model is considered an important area to evaluate early and often when a student of African American or American Indian heritage is struggling in school.

Additional tools that help educators better understand external influences on a student or school include the Bias Vulnerability Checklist and the Socio-Cultural Checklist & Guide. These tools involve educator self-reflection and analysis of the school’s environment, with the mindset that school culture and school climate influence the progress of individual students. School problem-solving or leadership teams can utilize data from these instruments to address school climate and school culture, and develop strategies to remediate concerns within their settings. In the spirit of Ortiz’s (2008) recommendations, variables that are “within the child” are viewed as secondary at the Tier 1 or Tier 2 level. While not every student challenge can be addressed with a school-wide assessment and instructional process, Tier 1 approaches have been found to meet the needs of about 80% of the student population and reduce disproportional special education placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Hoover, 2011157; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003).

**Tier 3: Comprehensive Evaluation of Cognitive Ability and Processing.**

When a student of American Indian or African American heritage has experienced effective problem-solving strategies from their setting as recommended in Tiers 1 and 2, a high percentage of challenges can be prevented and disproportional representation in special education minimized (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). In a multi-tiered system of support, if cognitive ability and psychological processing continue to be of concern, a comprehensive evaluation for eligibility for disability based services may be warranted (Tier 3). Available standardized cognitive ability tests and measures of basic psychological processing may be considered for American Indian or African American students when used with discretion.

When a student’s acculturation status (i.e., family and community experiences) has been evaluated as being similar to the American mainstream, use of traditional tests may be given consideration. However, assessment teams or evaluators must be aware that for many American Indian and African American students, experiences at home or in the community are unique and not consistent with test construction or norm sample make-up of many standardized measures.

Ortiz (2008) cautioned that:

> “... the goal isn’t to eliminate all bias or find unbiased tests—this is unlikely and impractical. Rather, the goal is toward reduction of bias to the maximum extent possible. After data are collected from standardized administrations, examiners may then adapt and modify tests in order to secure additional qualitative information about functioning that is extremely useful in instructional planning (Ortiz, 2008).”

To assist educators with choosing appropriate evaluation tools, the previous edition of the *Reducing Bias Manual* (1998) included a *Test Selection Checklist*. The goal of that checklist was to provide school professionals with a guide to choosing assessment techniques that minimized bias and maximized the likelihood of valid and fair data collection for American Indian and African American students *when the use if such tests are deemed appropriate by the assessment team*). In many ways, the first edition of the Reducing Bias manual assumed that a test would be *used for all students*, and that the goal was simply to choose the best or least biased tool. In contemporary assessment approaches test selection caution is encouraged. While state guidelines require intellectual assessment for a specific learning disability, other relevant information may be gathered to give perspective to intellectual results.

Assessment teams or evaluators may decide that traditional tests have limitations for a specific student, even if modified or interpreted more qualitatively. In no instance should any student be recommended for special education placement based primarily on the results of a single standardized measure of IQ or achievement. Assessment teams must document evidence of consideration of multiple factors for placement decisions. Measures of acculturation should be an important aspect for the evaluation team to consider when an American Indian or African American student is evaluated.

The original *Test Selection Checklist* from the first edition of the Reducing Bias manual has been updated and revised and is included here as the *Assessment Tool Selection Guide*. This guide does not assume that a standardized test will or must be used; rather it is offered as a guide for if or when testing is deemed appropriate. Because no technique is likely to be free from bias, the *Assessment Tool Selection Guide* should not be viewed as a process from which a faultless single instrument can be determined. Instead, the guide provides a system by which the cultural and linguistic content and expectations in existing tests can be evaluated. This process may lead to one or more instruments being chosen as fair options for the individual student in question. Or, it may lead to a team decision to minimize weight associated with the use of nationally standardized tests for some children.

A single test should never be administered and interpreted in isolation. Whenever a student is evaluated at the Tier 3 level, a multiple-source and multiple-method evaluation and data interpretation process is essential *(McIntosh, Bohanon, & Goodman 2010)*. Specifically, data must be gathered from many perspectives and interpreted within the context of the student’s ecology and experiences.

Strategies for properly conducting teacher and parent interviews, student observations, and gathering data from a variety of tools has been discussed extensively in the literature related to evaluation of students *(Merrell, 2010)*; *(McConaughy, 2005)*; *(Briesch, Chafouleas, & Riley-*)

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Tillman, 2010\textsuperscript{161}; National Association of School Psychologists, 2009\textsuperscript{162}; Braden & Miller, 2007\textsuperscript{163}; Hansen, & Callender, 2005\textsuperscript{164}) and are beyond the scope of this resource. However, assessment modifications or unique emphases may apply when evaluating students from African American or American Indian backgrounds. The following elements are intended to guide educators as they evaluate African American or American Indian students with cognitive ability or basic psychological processing challenges. The elements noted are viewed as best practice procedures for all students, but indications for students of African American or American Indian heritage are given particular emphasis.

**Approach assessment with hypothesis that the student is capable**

In his best practices framework for nondiscriminatory assessment, Ortiz (2008) shifted the focus of school-based assessments beyond individual student variables (internal factors) to the environment (external factors). Student struggles may be associated with any number of causes; many of them due to environmental components such as stress at home, economic challenges, or issues with community safety. The *Learning Ecology Checklist* or similar tool can be an appropriate data collection strategy to accomplish the goal of learning about the influence of factors outside of the child.

The use of a tool such as the *Learning Ecology Checklist* or similar tool does not mean ignoring cognitive, behavioral, linguistic and other challenges that may have “within child” causes. Rather, the idea is to give external variables increased emphasis and more careful assessment through interviews with parents and teachers, student interview, use of multiple observations of the child in different settings, and review of records. *While assessment of environmental factors is often included in traditional assessments, it is their level of prominence that changes in nondiscriminatory assessment.* Environmental variables carry more weight as hypotheses or reasons for the student struggling. Frequently, evaluators conducting traditional assessments have based decisions about special education services primarily on test data and results focused on internal student factors (attention, comprehension, self-regulation) with environmental data (clarity of cues, language used, environmental antecedents) viewed as supplemental. Factors related to the student and factors related to their environment should be weighed in the decision-making process.


Assessment teams are encouraged to collect data that directly helps teachers with the selection of instructional and intervention strategies. Cognitive ability tests developed primarily for the purposes of eligibility determination are often weak choices as tools for developing interventions. Cognitive ability assessments that provides information about how a student solves problems, identifies their strengths, informs the teaching and learning process, or which shows how the student adapts, are methods that should be used. For evaluators, methods that have teaching items embedded within the evaluation process can be helpful in translating results from the evaluation to real life tasks and skills the student is expected to demonstrate school, home, or within their community.

When an assessment team decides that a standardized test is an acceptable inclusion in an evaluation of an American Indian of African American student, the specific test should be chosen carefully. See the *Assessment Tool Selection Guide* for assistance. In general, tests that were developed to measure cognitive processing or style of processing (e.g., the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children, 2nd Edition [K-ABC-II], Cognitive Assessment System [CAS], as opposed to traditional IQ tests developed primarily to measure levels of verbal and performance or overall ability, may be more useful for developing instructional strategies for American Indian and African American students. (Naglieri & Goldstein, 2009).

**Emphasize Student Strengths**

Historically, most educational or psychological evaluations have been diagnostic in nature. Evaluators used specific tools through which problematic characteristics were measured and analyzed, perhaps leading to confirmatory bias (Ortiz, 2008). When working with students with significant challenges, educators and caregivers sometimes become frustrated and may begin to feel helpless in their efforts to help. In some circumstances an evaluation report of such a student can include a list of challenges and problems, or discussion of what the student cannot do. While individual challenges should not be ignored, a more balanced evaluative picture can lead to more productive instruction and intervention. Recently, educators have been encouraged to more formally assess student protective factors and resilience in psychological and educational evaluations (Smith & Cochrane, 2006; Molony, Henwood, & Gilroy, 2010).

Throughout any evaluation, persons evaluating students must search for protective factors. Brooks and Goldstein (1999) described the need to search for *Islands of Competence* as a significant change in mindset for many educators and caregivers. As an example, when conducting a classroom observation, an educator may attempt to see when and under what circumstances the referral concerns occur, noting influential environmental components in those situations. As well, it is important to determine situations or settings when more appropriate functioning occurs. Assessment team members may take a similar approach when reviewing data.

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from student files or when interviewing parents and teachers. Additionally, several instruments have been developed in recent years to assist assessment teams in the evaluation of resiliency and protective factors. One example is the Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales [SEARS] (http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/SEARS.html).

**Carefully Evaluate Executive Functioning and Psychological Processing**

Kaufman (2010) noted “Executive skills are those elements of cognition that allow for the self-regulation and self-direction of our day-to-day and longer term functioning” (p. 2). In other words, executive skills include the ability to plan, organize, and influence one’s life. Specific to student success, skills such as goal setting, organizing one’s materials, time management, persistence, and self-monitoring are all critical executive cognitive processes, and are important to success in educational settings. From the perspective of universal prevention and intervention, educational settings should screen all students for their ability to utilize these types of skills. Through screening all students the system can identify gaps in skills that are found across students. Rather than a process of singling out individual students, the system makes adjustments to benefit groups of students.

Evaluators have an array of assessment options to evaluate executive functioning and basic psychological processing (e.g., BRIEF; Gioia et al., 2000; CPPS; Dehn, 2011). While generally considered psychometrically reliable tools, rating scales like these are often limited by their vulnerability to subjective bias (Hinshaw & Nigg, 1999). Subjective bias occurs when ratings are completed by educators and caregivers who interpret items based on their own attitudes and beliefs. Assisting students with the development of executive functioning and other cognitive processing skills is an important endeavor, as processing skills can be critical to the achievement process. However, when it comes to assessing these skills in American Indian and African American students, much like other standardized and norm-reference tools, extreme caution is warranted.

**Cautiously use Nonverbal Cognitive Ability Tests.**

In recent years, school assessment professionals have used nonverbal assessment tools to address the needs of diverse learners. Ortiz and Dynda (2005) noted the intuitive appeal of this process, yet cautioned that even nonverbal tools are not as culturally fair as they may seem to be. Interactions between an evaluator and examinee still require communication that is culturally bound. Use of the *Assessment Instrument Selection Guide* can assist evaluators in choosing appropriate tools.

**Cross-Battery Assessment**

Cross-Battery Assessment (XBA) is the process of using multiple tools to evaluate cognitive processing. The XBA approach is an additional method to guide assessment of cognitive abilities at the Tier 3 level, *so long as the primary intent is to assist with instruction or intervention* (Ortiz, 2008). This approach to assessment is based on the Cattell-Horn-Carroll (CHC) Theory of Intelligence a theory that proposes a three-level model of cognitive functioning (McGrew, K. S.)
(2005\textsuperscript{167}). The first level is comprised of a broad general factor of intelligence under which fall 10 broad abilities (second level;) and 70 narrower abilities (third level).

Using the CHC Theory of Intelligence as the foundation, the CHC Cross-Battery approach to assessment offers guidelines and procedures to help assist practitioners in “measuring a wider and more in-depth range of cognitive abilities and processes than that represented by a single ability battery (cognitive or achievement) in a manner that is psychometrically respectable and based on contemporary theory”\textsuperscript{168}.

Using a variety of tools through a cross-battery approach ensures a more fair evaluation process for African American and American Indian students. However, as when using a single instrument, caution when using any cognitive ability test still applies in XBA. Cognitive ability tests may be most appropriately interpreted qualitatively as a way to better understand how a student solves problems. In some cases, especially when a student’s level of acculturation is dissimilar to that of the standardization group used by a test developer, score results may still be deemed invalid or skewed. Additional literature associated with the CHC Theory of Intelligence and the CHC Cross-Battery Approach can be found at http://www.crossbattery.com/.

Consider Qualitative Procedures

Educators trained to evaluate students in schools understand both the value and limitations of standardized assessments. Standardized assessments require maintenance of specific administration and interpretation processes, so that student performance can be compared across individuals. However, in some cases, consideration of results from non-standardized procedures may be appropriate. When evaluating students from African American or American Indian backgrounds, the assessment team may want to emphasize how the student processes information or solves problems, as opposed to what the student knows compared to others. In such cases, trained test administrators may test the limits by using test materials in non-standardized ways. Dawson (2003\textsuperscript{169}) provided commentary on qualitative interpretation of data gleaned from cognitive ability tests.


Academic Achievement

Much has been written about the achievement gap in education today, especially since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB\textsuperscript{170}) act a decade ago. Prior to the Education and Secondary Education Act of 2002 (ESEA), there was no coordinated national system of measurement for measuring student progress in the public schools.

The NCLB 2002 implemented rules to identify the school district’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) and the state’s progress toward meeting the goals of having every student meet proficiency standards in reading and math. An expectation from the standards is that every student would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. This was a purposeful policy designed to make the elimination of educational disparities a national priority\textsuperscript{171}.

NCLB 2002 mandated that every state create annual assessments to identify that they were meeting the standards of providing instruction that led to proficiency in reading and math, demonstrated by performance on benchmark assessments. Accountability to NCLD standards became an essential aspect of measuring progress toward the goal of academic proficiency for students. These accountability assessments have been analyzed by separating the data into groups (disaggregating the data). Categories defined by the act include the following: socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, and special education status. One of the primary tenants of the NCLB act was to ensure that students in each of these categories were making adequate progress toward the goal of proficiency.

As these annual reports from every school district in every state were analyzed, certain groups of students were consistently discrepant in their acquisition of the necessary academic skills to score at a satisfactory level of proficiency. American Indian students and African American students consistently underperformed on measures of proficiency (see School Climate Chapter for more detailed performance data).

The Academic Achievement Gap

The academic ‘achievement gap’ may best be defined as a disparity in academic performance and attainment when results of performance between American Indian and African American students are compared to their White Peers. Extensive research and review of the data has consistently found limited improvement in these differences over the years (Johnston, 2000\textsuperscript{172}).

Disproportionate Representation in Special Education

Concerns about bias in assessments have long been a concern of professional educators. Professional ethics for educators and those involved in evaluation of students requires that test givers be aware of their own personal biases. The assessment team is required to consider the students’ background when conducting an assessment to reduce bias. Minnesota has written in to the rules and laws, requirements reflecting this expectation. Specific ideas for reducing the

\textsuperscript{170} http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml
\textsuperscript{171} Ed.gov
\textsuperscript{172} Johnston, R. (2000) Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement. Education Week, 19(27), 53-76
achievement gap and the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students are as follows:

**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Academic Achievement**

Current standards of practice in education involve use of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). The concept of interventions to support students and promote their success has been formalized in Response to Intervention (RtI), or Response to Instruction (RtI) models. The underpinnings of this approach involve the use of Scientific Research Based Interventions (SRBI), or Evidence Based Instructional Strategies (EBIS) [Chapter 2]. The use of levels of interventions from universal to specific approaches mark a change towards development of broader base of prevention and intervention systems with schools. The concept of intervention is embedded into the instructional delivery system for students to promote skill building, rather than using a traditional special education evaluation as a delayed response when failure has occurred for a student.

It is important to recognize that academic difficulties are only some of the many different challenges a student may have in a classroom setting. Whether it is social difficulties, difficulties with self-regulation, adaptive behaviors, or mental health adjustment, all benefit from the same systems found in the RtI/SRBI/MTSS processes. These systems can be utilized to identify the difficulty, teach the needed skill, and monitor the progress of students as they use newly developed skills.

A continuum of services and interventions supports the growth and development of students. Tier 1 academic services include evidence-based curricula for reading, math and all subject areas for all students. It assumes that all students are receiving high quality data-informed curriculum and educational experience. At this level, brief academic assessments are done with all students in order to quickly evaluate academic skills in need of development as early as possible.

In the traditional academic setting the instructional activities are composed of curriculum and educational activities that are shown to be effective for the instruction of most students. The assumption is that most students will be able to master the expected outcomes of the instruction, with progress monitoring involving formative and summative assessments used to provide feedback on the quality of instruction. One or more brief assessments are given to all students on several occasions during the year to identify their skill development and identify any delays before it becomes a serious difficulty. Using these data, the teacher and grade level support staff (school counselors, school psychologists) can identify the students who would benefit from additional instruction or re-teaching of the concepts.

**Tier 2**: When a student or group of students are found to have continued difficulty with some aspect of the academic instruction, the classroom teacher can identify the area of difficulty. Working with the building based teacher assistance teams, or similar problem-solving teams, educators can the can identify and document use of specific strategies to remediate concerns. With this additional intervention and instruction, most of the students who did not initially master the skill initially will likely will be able to master it.
At a Tier 2 level (within a 3 Tier model), when a student is identified as not making adequate progress toward mastery of the expected curriculum expectations, additional instructional time is developed that specifically targets the academic deficit with instructional strategies that are considered to be effective. Using instructional strategies that have been identified as effective (scientifically-based), additional instruction is provided. At this level, students may be placed in small groups consisting of perhaps two to four students who have similar difficulties and would benefit from the instructional methodology. At this level of academic interventions, progress monitoring will begin to occur more frequently that at Tier 1 level of support, perhaps on a weekly basis.

For some students who continue to have difficulty understanding academic information, more intensive instructional activities are necessary. In addition to more intensive instructional activities, more frequent progress monitoring and re-adjustment of instruction occurs. Educators trained in understanding unique methods of instruction deliver this instruction, or, the classroom teacher is coached to provide differentiated instruction and alternative instructional methods to benefit the student. At this level, group sizes are exceptionally small, with perhaps one or two students receiving instruction at the same time. At this level progress monitoring is expected to occur frequently, as often as daily, and no less than three times per week.

**Descriptions of Academic Services with a Tiered Service Delivery Model**

**Tier 1**

Students in a classroom are mastering the expected curriculum at differing rates. The educational staff is aware that these variations are normal and typical of general educator learning. In today’s classroom, regular monitoring of the progress of all students – universal monitoring – is completed to identify those students who have not yet mastered a part of the curriculum. A process of *benchmarking* (assessing students to get a snapshot of performance) provides an historical trend of information for individual and group performance. The student’s progress can be viewed compared to peers or compared to her or his own rate of skill acquisition.

**School-wide Assessments**

Identification of student academic skills generally starts through universal assessment of progress for all students. Typical of these assessments is the use of assessments found in the Northwest Educational Association [NWEA]. These programs are computer-generated assessments identified as MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) and include the evaluation of skills in reading and math. At times other subjects such as science are assessed. The results are based on an extremely large sample of students and can be analyzed for performance trends in and between different groups of students.

Global screening of students provides several advantages, including the ability to identify a specific student’s overall progress over a longer period of time as well as classroom and grade level progress. Universal screening provides measures on specific skills (‘threads’) students need to improve. Ideally, information of this sort is used to identify overall issues within a school or grade or classroom so that the educational staff can restructure the teaching to enhance skills within sets of students that are missing.
Beyond the universal measures, some common measures of individual progress can be found in settings that use Curriculum Based Monitoring (CBM). The most common adaptations of curriculum for assessment are referred to as Curriculum Based Assessments (CBA) or Curriculum Based Measures (CBM). These are short probes or tests designed to measure progress related to the curriculum and are frequently seen as quick to administer, and user friendly for the teaching staff when developed from the actual curriculum.

Using CBM/CBA the student completes the probes/test weekly, with the data recorded by the teacher to identify progress. For example, if reading is a concern the student may be asked to read a passage with the teacher tracking the number of words read, the number of errors and the types of errors the student made. Or, for comprehension, students may read short passages and respond to questions related to the content of what they have read. The underlying goal is to determine what assistance can be provided to the student to develop their reading ability and create success. The focus is not on labeling the student with a disability.

The value of CBM/CBA has been researched extensively by Deno and Mirkn at the University of Minnesota, formerly through the Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities. From their work curriculum-based measures were described as an “academic thermometer” that monitored a student’s growth in various academic domains (Hall, T., & Mengel, M. 2002, p. 173). When designing or determining which CBA/CBM to use, it is important to emphasize that the measures have high technical adequacy, have high reliability, and be valid measures of the academic domains for which they are used.

The issues of high reliability, technical adequacy, and valid measures of skills that apply to standardized evaluations of intelligence apply to CBM methods. Regardless of the type of instrument (standardized measure of intelligence or curriculum-based probe), if it is not technically adequate or valid, it will contribute to errors in the decision-making process about some students.

More formalized methodology can be found using DIBELS [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills] and AIMSweb [aimsweb.com]. These examples are structured programs from which school districts can develop norms from repeated assessments within their districts. Evaluation teams should not assume that such measures are inherently fair to American Indian or African American students.

Depending on the methodology, some tools like DIBELS are designed for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. Other measurements such as NWEA/MAP can cover a student’s entire academic career from school entry through graduation.

When issues related to bias in education are considered, the availability of Tier 1 interventions and services are thought to be critical as a mechanism to reduce the potential for American Indian and African American students to become entrenched in the special education system. Administrators, teachers, and staff need to be prepared in their professional training programs to

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learn about and understand the cultural considerations of the diverse populations to whom they are likely to provide service. Understanding cultural and family expectations are a critical component to improve academic expectations and strengthen relationships and communication with American Indian and African American students and their families.

**Academic Assessments using standardized instruments:**

When the decision is made to complete a formal assessment for academic concerns using standardized instruments several factors should be considered. Standardized individually administered achievement tests must be administered by a licensed and trained professional who is knowledgeable about the suspected disability area and other possible explanations for the concern, and who follows professional practices regarding test selection, validity, and reliability for use with American Indian and African American students. In addition to considering a test’s technical validity and reliability, evaluators should also keep in mind how individual students might respond to the format of various achievement tests.

The exclusive reliance on norm-referenced assessments is often problematic for use with diverse learners. Data on student achievement must be gathered from sources beyond standardized tests. Other sources of information include anecdotal information from parents and general education teachers gathered through interviews. Curriculum and other performance-based measures are frequently helpful and also may be used to develop IEP goals and objectives, if the student qualifies for an intervention program.

When interpreting achievement data about students, including American Indian or African American students, special attention needs to be paid to the student’s opportunity to learn. If the student has had a limited opportunity to learn, the referral for special education assessment may not be appropriate and academic interventions may need to be developed and implemented prior to implementation of a comprehensive evaluation.

For most of the standardized academic achievement batteries available, the representation of American Indian and African American students reflects a national set of demographics. On the surface this is an attempt at representation, yet it is imperfect. Even with a norm sample containing a few thousand students the lower rate of representation of American Indian and African American students yields a relatively small number of students across all grade and age ranges used in the standardization process.

When the norm sample is completed, the instrument often uses age classifications at every 3 months resulting in as many as 309 cohort sets of data for school age children. For example, one regularly used instrument has 4784 students to represent students across the country, resulting in about 150 students at each level. It is possible that no American Indian or African American student is actually in the norm reference sample at a specific age grouping. Therefore, it is a challenge to assume that American Indian students or African American students, or other diverse learners, are represented at every age or grade level. Even if there is representation, the representation may be limited to just a few students. This issue is referred to as the power of a test. In other words, what is the potential that there is a significant number of students from a diverse background to actually have an impact on the final results? In many situations this power
to influence results is limited. While a test may be standardized according to census data and population breakdown, an individual’s student’s results may be significantly different from the standardization group in settings where the student population has a great range of diversity.

Often, norm-referenced assessments focus on placement and eligibility decisions rather than programming decisions and intervention strategies. As multi-tiered systems are implemented it is proper to shift the focus of evaluations towards processes that lead to improvement in interventions for students.

More recently there has been a drive across the country supported by the federal government to standardize the curriculum and expectations in major subject areas. As a result, many states are moving to adapt Core Competencies and Core Standards in subjects defined by grade level. This system is emerging and will need to be evaluated in terms of benefits to learners and the ability to contribute to achieving the goal of proficiency in reading and math for students.

**Learning Disability Identification**

Most school districts in Minnesota utilize the Discrepancy Model for identification of students for eligibility for placement programs for Specific Learning Disabilities. Considering difficulties with the standardized assessment process, educational teams need to incorporate additional methods to identify the causes of a student’s lack of expected progress and specific skill deficit. Over the coming years and with the support of the Minnesota Department of Education, more schools are moving to a model supported by the Reducing Bias process of using response to intervention techniques, scientifically-based interventions, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (RtI/SRBI/MTSS) with ongoing universal progress monitoring.

Identification of academic delays and behavior issues with diverse students requires the skillful understanding of the professional educators engaged in the teaching process. Careful consideration of various factors should be a standard of practice.
Elements for Assessing Achievement

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<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Element 1</td>
<td>Review the presenting problem and define in measurable terms; review Tier 1 and Tier 2 data on the student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Element 2</td>
<td>Conduct record review: assess for evidence of concerns and include information on strengths (school and curriculum changes, stress, medical concerns, attendance patterns)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Element 3</td>
<td>Conduct observation(s): information from multiple settings is preferred, peer comparisons (particularly those from same background; use systematic sampling for discrete behaviors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 4</td>
<td>Conduct standardized assessment: make decisions about assessments that are likely to be fair for the student; use testing of limits when appropriate and consider qualitative information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5</td>
<td>Gather data from other sources: caregiver interviews, student interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 6</td>
<td>Interpret data and generate testable hypothesis for what explains the concerns, carefully consider all of the rule-out criteria in Minnesota eligibility guidelines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interventions for Students

In the development of this manual, considerable consideration was made to identify acceptable interventions. Several inherent problems immediately arose. The process of identifying the correct intervention for a student always requires considerable professional experience and judgment to match the difficulty with an intervention, and is based on understanding the needs of each individual student.

Many districts in the state of Minnesota are in the process of developing their own list of “Scientific Research Based Instructions” (SRBI). As a foundation of good practice each setting should have a mechanism to document interventions and develop a means to develop their own clearinghouse of what works. As new educators enter the system, the availability of consultation of proven methods and practices available to them will enhance their support. Teacher assistance teams and coordinators of such programs can review and assess interventions, and document and record those that lead to positive change for students.

The reader who is looking for references for current and acceptable interventions can start the search at their own district or neighboring school districts. Another resource to use is the What Works Clearinghouse174, which reviews program, policies, and practices in education for benefit to students. School districts and educational cooperatives are developing files of possible acceptable SRBI interventions for both behavior and academic concerns. Districts that have compiled such a listing have spent considerable time and effort to ensure that the intervention has a basis in research and has been shown to be effective. Within these procedures, the process and methodology of the intervention is critical to maintain its veracity and fidelity. As districts identify programs that support American Indian and African American students, sharing ideas

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with peers and professional networks becomes a basis to spread good practice throughout Minnesota.

**Behavioral Functioning Assessment & Intervention**

Various theories have been developed to explain the causes of social, emotional, adjustment and behavior difficulties experienced by students. These theories subsequently impact definitions and assessment approaches used to qualify students for programs. Theories of causation range from viewing the cause as within the student (biophysical), result of developmental lags, or as a reaction to issues within the family such as abuse, neglect, or inconsistent parenting (sociological factors). Other theories attribute causation of social adjustment concerns to society as a whole or schools in particular (ecological). For example, some would argue that anger from some students is an understandable reaction to a society that oppresses a student or to a school that rejects the student's cultural values (see School Climate discussion).

If students feel alienated from school and society they may develop behavior patterns that conflict with a school’s academic and behavioral expectations. Behavioral theories suggest that students learn maladaptive behavior through environmental connections (behavioral and social learning). Current theory in developmental psychopathology describes multiple pathways leading to a disorder. For example, a student’s problem may result from a combination of inherited dispositions, family problems, environmental stressors, and poor environmental match. The debate over theories of causation is on-going and perhaps impossible to resolve. Most experts agree that no single theory accounts for all observed social, emotional, or behavioral problems. Therefore, the consideration of multiple factors to explain concerns about student functioning is beneficial to assessment teams.

The development of interventions or the behavioral assessment of diverse students can occur within a multi-tier model of school-wide interventions, targeted interventions, and intensive interventions, all with a common goal of identifying concerns about students early and using resources within the school to support student growth and development. Each tier of service represents increasingly intense degrees of intervention strategies and assessment options, all designed to include appropriate instruction and intervention for each student.

Within Tier 1 and Tier 2 it is important to be inclusive of early stage school-wide behavioral assessment strategies, social-emotional instructional practices, and other resiliency building strategies. These positive approaches are reflective of a school climate that is proactive and preventative (Tiers 1 and 2) and are designed to come and even prevent the need to complete a comprehensive behavioral evaluation (Tier 3). Indeed, Tier 1 and Tier 2 preventative and strength-based practices are viewed as particularly vital for assisting students of African American and American Indian heritage (Duda & Utley, 2005; Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner & Vincent, 2006; Utley & Obiakor, 2012; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 2011). They have been found to lessen the frequency of special education referrals and evaluations for many diverse learners (Sullivan, et al, 2009b175) reducing the disproportionality issue that is so clearly noted in the literature (Sullivan, et al, 2009a176).

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The Bioecological model of human development (Brofenbrenner, 1979, 2005), serves as a model for understanding how both biology and environmental factors influence student outcomes. In the case of the development of child and adolescent behavior, both nature and nurture are thought to contribute and both are viewed as important student variables in which educators should assess and intervene\(^{177}\). For example, understanding a child’s temperament – his or her biologically based behavioral tendencies – is imperative. Indeed, recent literature has supported the idea of increasing caregiver understanding of childhood temperament and the need to work with or around a child’s natural temperamental tendencies (e.g., McCowry, 1998; McCowry, Rodriguez & Koslowitz, 2008; Taffel, 2001).

The Bioecological Model provides a structure for understanding the interaction between a child’s biologically-based temperament and the influence of their environment. It is a useful structure for guiding the evaluative practices of educators, as it provides ideas for reviewing multiple factors to consider when developing strategies for students or determining their needs.

Beyond a student’s temperamental qualities, social adjustment, and self-control, their development is influenced by interactions and response to family, peer, and educators. The school, neighborhoods and community where the student resides have influence on the student’s development. The cultural domain impacts a student’s identity and social development and behavioral response to the multiple settings in which they are expected to perform.

Many systems impact a learner. Understanding the forces that influence learning, from multiple perspectives, helps in developing interventions that support the student. For example, school climate, disciplinary strategies, communication patterns, and a host of other relationship variables can sway student behaviors one way or another in the school setting (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994\(^{178}\)). Given cultural differences between students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., American Indian or African American) and the more dominant Euro-American culture of many Minnesota educators and schools in general, it is important to understand the ecological factors that can influence student behaviors.

Educators can reduce bias toward American Indian and African American students by evaluating students with consideration of multiple environmental systems. Likewise, interventions and other supports can be multi-faceted to address the influence of multiple systems. From daily evidence-based instruction to advocating for policies that support schools and children at a broader level, educators and interventionists must understand the need to tie together multiple strategies for students where there is concern about their social adjustment or ability to manage their behavior on an independent basis.

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District Example: Words make a Difference

One aspect of increasing fairness is striving to improve objective understanding of student needs. One district reported service improvement based on reviewing forms used to document student concerns. Within the review of forms for social or behavioral concerns, district staff noted that some words used to document the referral were unclear or subjective. As well, the form to collect referral information appeared to express low expectations or only reinforced negative perspective about students. The form was revised to be more sensitive to the needs of students, and to provide more objective understanding of student needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes to the form involved the following:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title Change</strong>: from Discipline Referral Form to Administrative Support Referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The change in title to a neutral stance reduces defining the concern as a discipline problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change from Problem</strong> Behaviors/Event to Behavior/Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduces emphasis on defining the student as a problem and focuses more on the circumstances and reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific removal of undefined terms</strong> such as disorderly conduct, disrespectful, insubordination, defiant, and more inclusion of specific descriptions such as failure to follow directions, abusive language, harassment – threatening, harassment – bullying.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A completely new section was added that addressed possible motivation for the behavior, including avoid adult, avoid peers, avoid tasks, or gain attention. This latter section added address an understanding of the functions of behavior.

The limitations of a system dominated by traditional standardized assessments become apparent when viewing students through the Bioecological model lens. Most student evaluations summarize student-focused characteristics and problems that are owned by the student. The influence of the student’s ecology is not often a primary focus of the evaluation. Alternatively, a culturally-fair assessment approach involves a broader and more preventative assessment and intervention structure. A proposed multi-tiered system that reduces bias when working with American Indian and African American students is discussed next.

**Tier 1.** Tier 1 behavioral assessment and intervention strategies in schools are viewed as universal and preventative. They involve a focus on fostering and maintaining a positive school climate, school-wide data collection and proactive behavioral programming provided to all students in a school (see Hulac, Terrell, Vining, & Bernstein, 2011; Sprick, Booher & Garrison, 2009). Assessment data are gathered frequently about student and school-wide behavioral trends (e.g., hallway behavior trends, timing of challenging behavior, overall school climate). Data collection systems such as the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) assist educators in recognizing such behavioral trends in schools. Utilizing databased decision making in this manner, educators can adjust levels and locations of support and supervision, leading to more

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179 http://nyspbis.org/SWIS/SWISintro.cfm
efficient use of school staff resources. Ideally, such strategies are conducted prior to any comprehensive special education evaluation for an individual student.

Strategies that are primarily punitive and reactive in nature (e.g., zero tolerance approach), while sometimes immediately effective, have not been found to be effective in the long-term (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008), and may be particularly harmful for African American and American Indian students. In contrast, recent literature supports the effectiveness of several school-wide social-emotional learning and positive behavior support programs that are considered to be Tier 1 strategies (Shah, 2012; Horner, et al., 2009).

The Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system has been found to be particularly helpful for diverse learners (Duda & Utley, 2005; Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner & Vincent, 2006; Utley & Obiakor, 2012; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 2011). PBIS recognizes the universal human needs of belonging, recognition, and for personal influence. In a PBIS system, school-wide behavior development curricula and multiple strategies to assist educators in recognizing and encouraging student progress can be developed. Referrals for Office Discipline Referrals (ODR’s) and for special education evaluations have been found to be reduced significantly in schools utilizing a PBIS approach, thus freeing up resources for more effective instructional and intervention practices (Chitiyo, May, & Chitiyo, 2012). In this way, the majority of students are served proactively while minimizing the need for educator dependence on reactive or severe punitive consequences (e.g., suspension, expulsion) and testing as a perceived intervention.

To supplement Tier 1 school-wide assessment strategies at this level, the Learning Ecology Checklist discussed previously can be used. Based on Ortiz’s best practices in nondiscriminatory assessment work (2008), the Learning Ecology Checklist helps educators start by considering multiple ecological or environmental hypotheses when assessing student behavioral challenges. In other words, variables outside the child that influence their adjustment or acquisition of skills can be explored. Additional tools that help educators better understand external influences on a student or school include the Bias Vulnerability Checklist, the Reducing Bias Process Monitoring Checklist, and the Socio-Cultural Checklist & Guide. These tools involve educator self-reflection and analysis of the school’s environment, and help educators develop the mindset that school culture and school climate influence the behavioral development of individual students.

For more information on implementing PBIS, see the Minnesota Department of Education webpage: http://www.pbismn.org/

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Tier 2. Within a PBIS structure, about 90% of students will respond favorably to Tier 1 positive behavior approaches (Scott & Eber, 2003). The universal positive behavior process and focus on overall school climate will be sufficient for benefitting and supporting most students. For those students who do not respond adequately to universal strategies, small group interventions are often may be appropriate and effective. Mentoring programs such as Check & Connect (Christianson & Sheridan, 2002) and Check-in/Check-out have been found to helpful in assisting behaviorally and academically challenged students (Campbell and Anderson, 2011; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). These approaches serve as opportunities for positive interactions between a trusted adult mentor and the student. Sessions often focus on engaging the student with learning and allow for daily positive interactions with an adult educator or mentor. These strategies have been found to be particularly effective for African American and American Indian students (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009).

A variety of other proactive school-based interventions have been developed that address student aggression and promote self-discipline. In particular, several strategies known as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have strong empirical support when used with diverse students (Bear, 2012). SEL includes programs that may be known as character education, resiliency development, or positive psychology approaches. Specific programs found to be most effective at supporting pro-social behaviors in schools include (a) Caring Schools Community (Watson & Battistich, 2006); (b) Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Greenberg & Kusche, 2006); (c) Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum (Fitzgerald & Edstrom, 2011); and (d) the Seattle Project (Hawkins et al., 2007). Many SEL programs can be implemented in schools at a Tier 1 (universal) or Tier 2 (targeted small group) level. See CASEL (2005) and Bear (2012) for helpful summaries of these and other SEL programs.

Regarding assessment of student behavioral progress at the Tier 2 level, educators are encouraged to continue observing and collecting secondary data on students as they progress through interventions. Numerous data collection tools are offered on-line (e.g., www.interventioncentral.org).

Tier 3. When Tier 1 and Tier 2 services are comprehensive and effective, only a small percentage of students should require additional intense individualized assessment or intervention. Even at the Tier 3 level, continued intervention may be appropriate before any comprehensive evaluation for special education is needed. One Tier 3 approach that has become increasingly utilized in schools is known as wrap-around (see Burns & Goldman, 1999; Eber, Breen, Rose, Unizycki, & London, 2008). With the multiple levels of influence noted in the Bioecological model as foundation, school wrap-around services are developed on the assertion that students who display severe or unusual behavioral concerns require intense support within multiple systems and settings.

The wrap-around approach involves a proactive team charged with engaging the family and identifying positive supports in the child’s life (e.g., spiritual leader, family elder, coach). Given built-in rapport and cultural influence, noted adult supports can better assist the students as she/he develops improved self-regulation and executive functioning skills involving impulse control and improved self-monitoring. Successful wrap-around efforts include recognition of the child’s unique qualities, culture, and the need for communication between multiple supports in multiple ecological systems (Woitaszewski, Savage, & Johnson, 2012). A simple single intervention in one setting is not likely to be effective. For additional information about school wrap-around services and helpful case examples, refer to Eber (2005) and Eber et al. (2008).

For students whose academic progress has been impacted negatively by their problems with social adjustment or self-control, a referral for a special education evaluation may be necessary, and qualification for Emotional or Behavioral Disability (EBD) services may be warranted. A special education evaluation can allow for additional, more individualized data to be collected about the student in need and, ideally, assist educators with additional instructional planning. However, whenever possible, school assessment teams are encouraged to exhaust all available Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports prior to considering and conducting a special education evaluation. When embarking on a special education evaluation for a student of African American or American Indian heritage with significant behavioral concerns, the following best-practice strategies are indicated:
Be aware of behaviors that can be influenced by sociocultural conditions: An example

It is possible that parents, educators, and administrators respond to the behavior of a student in different manner. Each person brings his or her perspective to a situation where there is concern about a student’s interaction or ability to manage his or her behavior.

Given the example of a student who appears “withdrawn”, competing explanations for the behavior can be generated. When pressed for symptoms of the withdrawal, responses might include, *fails to talk, is a loner, or doesn’t speak when the educator asks for a response*. The behavior labeled as withdrawn may be symptomatic of different possibilities, including a function of a normal stage of second language acquisition if the student is American Indian. For other students, their failure to respond may represent behavior that is culturally appropriate to their culture, where silence in the presence of an elder is expected. Still, some students may feel uncomfortable in a setting where they are engaging with peers that are culturally different from them, choosing to observe and learn quietly. The behavior labeled withdrawn may have important cultural components that must not be ignored in making decisions about services for the student. This example illustrates the need for educators and individuals in the community to define terms or statements about students carefully, or in ways that can be measured. Many terms such as behavior problem, defensive, disorganized, or aggressive, are used without reference to an objective definition or standard that allows for clear comparison across different persons that touch the life of a student. For any of these terms educators, administrators, caregivers and persons in the community who work with the family have different connotations of these terms.

For some disability categories negative connotations often exist. For example, some parents of American Indian students and African American students may express resistance over the negative correlates of the Emotional/Behavioral disability category. Negative correlates of this label include the implied assumptions of educators or others of poor parenting, an unruly or bad kid, or non-supportive family. Due to such concerns about how they are perceived, some caregivers and parents of American Indian and African American students are sometimes reluctant agree to special education programs that are intended to provide support for emotional or behavioral concerns. Lacking clear explanations about the factors that contribute to the student’s behaviors of concern, some parents may respond with anger towards the student, negatively impacting the student’s self-esteem and motivation. The student’s self esteem may further plummet when he or she perceives rejection by their caregiver for difficulty in regulating their behavior.

**Comprehensively assess rule-out conditions, mandated within every evaluation for Emotional or Behavioral Concern.**

A student should not be deemed eligible for EBD qualification in Minnesota when unsatisfactory educational progress is primarily a result of cultural or linguistic factors. Unfortunately, when comprehensive tiered service delivery does not exist in a school (as described in this resource), the assessment team may feel pressure to provide services to a child only through special education services. In such cases the influence of culture on behavior may not be given sufficient attention. An evaluation for EBD in Minnesota requires consideration of a full picture of

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186 https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/rules/?id=3525.1329
potential cultural factors that influence the child’s behavior. Awareness of behaviors that can be influenced by culture and use of the Socio-Cultural Guide can assist educators with this evaluation. Additionally, utilization of a trained cultural liaison or cultural representative will help ensure understanding of the normative nature of an African American or American Indian student.

Collect data that is valuable for instruction or intervention.

Data collected should go beyond simple administrative assessment (i.e., an assessment that gathers data intended only to answer the yes/no special education qualification question). Emphasis on Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) can be particularly fruitful in providing information that can be used for intervention. Furthermore, when available, previously collected data from assessment and intervention efforts at Tiers 1 and 2 can be given heavy consideration. Standardized cognitive assessment and other time-consuming tests should be used sparingly and ideally, only when needed as a way to assist with instruction.

It is necessary to clarify that the use of cognitive assessments does not imply evaluation for discrepancy between intellect (IQ) and achievement. Cognitive assessments are better understood as a mechanism to gain information about a student’s problem solving ability, manner in which she or he processes information, or factors related to attention span. Cognitive assessments should provide a profile of the student that specifically includes strengths and understanding of any unique factors that influence the student’s ability to meet the demands of their setting.

Be aware of traditional assessment tool limitations.

The results of commonly used behavioral rating scales (e.g., the BASC-2, Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) are based on the perceptions of teachers, parents, and/or the evaluated child her- or himself. When teacher perceptions are used, and cultural differences between student and teacher are apparent, behavior rating results may reflect an inaccurate picture of the behavior severity. When using behavior rating scales, use of multiple reports is encouraged so that the perceptions of caregivers at home, school, and in community settings can be compared and contrasted. Qualitative interpretation of the results may be necessary and helpful (discussing significant items with raters and reviewing if culture or language have influenced results).

Emphasize Student Strengths

Throughout any evaluation, professionals making up the assessment team are encouraged to search for protective factors. Brooks and Goldstein (1999) described this need to search for Islands of Competence as a significant change in mindset for many educators and caregivers. Additionally, several instruments have been developed in recent years to assist assessment teams in the evaluation of resiliency and protective factors (e.g., Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales [SEARS]).
Provide Elaboration on Important Issues Through the Evaluation Reports

Evaluation reports should provide more than a listing of scores. Scores without elaboration fail to provide a context of understanding the student and their development. The evaluation report or assessment summary should contain information about cultural factors and other issues such as socioeconomic factors that can influence student behavior. As well, the report provides an opportunity to identify strengths, protective factors, or supports that may help the student achieve academic, social, or behavioral goals.

Several assessment and intervention best practices and cautions have been outlined in this section. **Critical promising practices in reducing bias include:**

- The need for schools to begin with prevention and early intervention efforts.
- The need to provide a multi-tiered service delivery system.
- The need to understand the influence of individual student levels of acculturation.
- The need to analyze the student’s environment and the potential influence of ecological factors on achievement.
- The need to collect assessment data that leads to intervention or improved instruction.
- The need to build on student strengths and assets.

Assessment teams must be selective in their use of standardized and norm-referenced instruments. As well, decisions must be based on and document the use of multiple sources of information collected over multiple points in time. Results from a single evaluation tool such as a score from a cognitive ability test must not be the sole determining factor in instructional or placement decisions. Evaluators must understand how multiple types of biases can influence students and that no test or procedure is completely culturally-fair, and also understand that there are various types of assessment bias. Bias can occur long before any formal test or tool is used. It can exist in preconceived notions about students or their families. Indeed, it can occur at any level or tier of service, from school climate problems to test selection errors. Assessment and intervention must be collected from multiple sources of data and occur at multiple points over time.

Mental Health and Emotional Functioning/Resiliency

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports “African Americans in the United States are less likely to receive diagnoses and treatments for their mental illnesses than Caucasian Americans”\(^{187}\). Several factors are associated with this finding, including lack of representation of persons of color among psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers, and social workers within the professional community. In other situations professionals may misunderstand cultural factors within the assessment process, leading to misdiagnosis of mental health conditions. Educators should be prepared to provide culturally competent mental health services. Culturally competent mental health services are defined as “policies and practices that enable school personnel to effectively address the social, behavioral and mental health needs of students from diverse cultures”(Williams, 2007\(^{188}\)).


\(^{188}\) Williams, B.B. (2007). Culturally competent mental health services in schools: Tips for teachers, NASP.
American Indian and African American families may fail to participate in mental health screenings or mental health services due to concern about the stigma of mental illness. There may also be shame about participating in mental health services where caregivers may feel judged by educators. For other families, access to mental health care may be restricted due to economic factors related to the costs of purchasing services.

For some American Indian and African American families, concerns about mental health needs of their child are first addressed with use of family and community connections, such as the tribe or church. Given these types of concerns or barriers that interfere with accessing services for American Indian and African American families, it is imperative that school-based professionals understand their role in screening for early intervention and providing support for families who would benefit from such services. Many professional agencies have made a commitment to focus on youth mental health intervention, prevention, and treatment. It is imperative that the specific needs of American Indian and African American youth be a focus of this national effort and within public schools in Minnesota.

**The Use of a Multi-tiered System of Support for Mental Health Concerns**

**Tier 1: Universal**

Universal interventions target the entire population of a school with the goal of promoting age-appropriate mental health, social adjustment, and emotional well-being. Within the universal level of support, school-wide programs that foster safe and caring learning environments and which engage all students are the goal. Such services are culturally sensitive and they promote social and emotional learning to develop a connection between the school, home, and community. Typically universal interventions meet the needs of 80-90% of the students within the school. As students experience success and achieve stability in their well-being, reliance on Tier II or III interventions is reduced. Universal approaches should reflect the specific needs of the school population. For example, the use of cognitive behavioral instruction focused on self-control techniques may be part of a school-wide strategy delivered to the whole population in one school, while it may be considered a Tier 2 intervention, and only provided to some students, in another school.

In the realm of mental health services, specific school-wide prevention programming can include a clear and intentional focus on a healthy school climate, where student and staff diversity and varied cultural experiences are valued. Positive intervention approaches (e.g., PBIS) and other Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies can be utilized as universal systems of mental health support. Furthermore, the psychological safety factors discussed in the PREPare crisis prevention and intervention curriculum are effective evidence-informed and universal mental health support strategies (Brock, Nickerson, Reeves, Jimerson, Feinberg, & Lieberman, 2009).

In an effort to promote mental health and adjustment, and reduce behavioral crises, school leadership teams can focus on resiliency building activities, and school connectedness between and among students, staff and caregivers. These strategies promote a more caring and respectful

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190 Brock, Nickerson, Reeves, Jimerson, Feinberg, & Lieberman (2009). PREPare
environment that can increase diversity awareness and respect for varied student and staff beliefs and experiences. Multiple school-focused resources for accomplishing those goals are available for educator use in the PREPaRE curriculum.

**Tier 2: Targeted**

Targeted interventions are specially designed scaled-up supports focused to meet the needs of the roughly 10-15% of students who require more than Tier 1 supports. These interventions occur after the onset of an identified concern, and are also implemented as a target for individual students or subgroups of students whose risk of developing mental health concerns is higher than average. The presence of risk factors for specific groups of students does necessarily indicate poor outcomes, but only serves as a warning to consider the needs of students. Cultural and family liaisons, if available in the district, can serve as a point of contact between home and school. Cultural liaisons can work with the student, educators, and caregivers to provide support and communicate about circumstances that are impacting the student.

Examples of risk factors that could serve as a reminder to attend to the needs of students include loss of a parent or loved one, frequent moves resulting in multiple school placements, or exposure to violence and trauma in the student’s social environment. Interventions are implemented through the use of a comprehensive developmental approach that is collaborative, culturally sensitive and geared towards skill development and/or increasing protective factors for students and their families. Specific strategies involve individual or small group counseling and supports.

An analysis of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) indicates that this form of support can be effective in reducing disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Ghafoori & Tracz, 2001\(^{191}\)). The focus of the approach is to combine understanding the factors that reinforce a behavior, including inappropriate behaviors, and what thoughts about themselves students carry with them. CBT looks at distorted beliefs about themselves that some students develop that contribute to anger, frustration, sadness, or loss of self-esteem. The goals of CBT include helping the student redefine their capability and identify their competence.

**Tier 3: Intensive**

Intensive interventions are designed for roughly 1-5% of individuals who are identified as having the most severe, chronic, or disabling concerns in the school setting. Interventions are implemented through the use of highly individualized and developmentally based interventions, in addition to the ongoing universal and Tier 2 strategies already discussed. Collaboration with caregivers and mental health consultants in the community providing services to the student occurs.

Goals of services at the Tier 3 level include reduction of risk factors and increasing protective factors of students. Typical Tier 3 examples in schools include use of individually designed behavior support plans that address problem behavior at home and school, evidence-based

individual and family intervention when appropriate, and the use of comprehensive wraparound plans. Functional Behavioral Assessments can be useful in identifying factors that contribute to the maintenance of a problem behavior.

At the Tier 3 level wraparound plans are useful. Wraparound plans typically include support persons such as liaisons and collaboration with community systems such as social services to address needs and promote enhanced functioning in multiple life domains of the student and family. Obtaining release forms to consult with community supports such as mental health counselors or private practice therapists can connect the different systems that provide support to a student. Youth Service Bureaus, if available in the community, may be a resource that provides after-school support programs such as social skills groups, or topic groups for parents and caregivers so that they are better able to provide support for the student.

Example of a Multi-Tiered System of Support for Adjustment and Social Concerns

Tier 1 Problem Solving

- Collect School Wide Data (graph)
- Analyze data
- Determine potential concerns
- Identify and reinforce strengths

Problem Analysis

- Develop hypothesis about why problems exist
- Determine if intervention programs are implemented with fidelity
- Identify replacement behaviors for concerns

Intervention Design & Implementation

- Determine Interventions: Evaluate Response to Intervention
- Develop intervention plan, specify who, what, when
- Train educators on the intervention, provide support to staff

Evaluate Response to Intervention

- Evaluate school wide data at team meetings
- Assess fidelity of interventions
- Consider Tier 1 Decisions

Tier 1: Decisions

If discipline data shows an increase in office referrals or use of suspensions, or that a significant percentage of students receive 1 or more office referrals, then consider changing universal supports to improve system capacity to support students. Such change may involve re-teaching expectations, increase in use of positive reinforcement for desired behaviors, and improvement to classroom supports.

If a significant number of referrals come from non-classroom settings (school bus, playground, cafeteria), then consider whether universal supports are available in those settings. Increase active supervision and implementation of proactive factors in non-classroom settings.
If discipline referrals occur in a specific location, time of day, type of activity, or between or among specific sub-groups of students, then consider revising school-wide behavior supports to problem-solve and design interventions to match the setting or circumstance.

Possible Tier 1 Interventions for social, adjustment, and behavioral concerns.

School-wide Interventions

- Re-teaching
- School wide programs on individual differences

Interventions for Specific Populations or Locations with the school

- Identify desired behaviors and provide intermittent reinforcement
- Provide classroom support and training for teachers with high referrals
- Restructure discipline procedures
- Insure parent and caretaker communication occurs

Methods to improve Fidelity of School-wide interventions

- Review referral forms for objectivity and measurable documentation of concerns
- Provide concrete definitions or examples of behaviors that should result in a referral
- Provide training to staff on completing referrals
- Use teacher assistance teams as a means to provide coaching to staff who refer a large numbers of students

A legislative policy brief policy funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated, “school-based programs provide opportunities to identify, refer and support children with mental health problems” 192. Further, students from diverse backgrounds have less access to services and often do not receive the care they need. Specific action recommendations from this legislative record suggested that mental health be defined broadly, with emphasis on positive outcomes and the concept of mental health care to reduce the stigma associated with mental health discussions and to specifically confront equity issues such as access to mental health services. Often social factors such as historic racism or issues related to social economic status interfere with access to services, particularly for African American families.

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192 School mental health services, Legislative Policy Brief (2007). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Concerns about EBD label for American Indian and African American Students

Within public school settings many African American students who are involved in special education programs receive services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD). Research indicates that the dropout rates for students with severe emotional and behavioral problems are nearly twice as much as other students (Lehr & Johnson, 2004\(^\text{193}\)). Data also show that suspension or expulsion from school for behavioral concerns is used in a disproportionate manner with African American students, where at the elementary level an African American student is twice as likely than their White peers to be sent to the office for problem behavior. At the middle school level the referral rate to the office for a discipline concern is almost four times as likely as a white peer (Skiba, 2011\(^\text{194}\)).

Suspensions and expulsions are often used in a differential manner with African American students as a consequence for behavior. Frequently, White Peers who exhibit the same or similar behaviors that draw negative attention do not receive the same degree of consequence involving separation from peers and removal from the school setting as do African American students.

The concern for the overuse of suspension and expulsion for African American students is also important when combined with zero-tolerance policies in schools. Zero tolerance policies are those that require prescribed consequences such as suspension and expulsion for a wide range of violations involving behavior and conduct (Evenson, A., Justinger, B., Pelischek, E. & Schulz, S. 2009\(^\text{195}\)). With the combination of disproportionate referral for discipline concerns, and the impact of implementation of zero-tolerance policies, African American students are particularly vulnerable to loss of access to a free and appropriate public education. Some argue that school discipline has shifted from a prevention and intervention model to a model of punishment (Cohn and Canter, 2004\(^\text{196}\)). Students from diverse groups, those with disabilities, and students within urban settings all more likely to be penalized by zero tolerance policies or use of suspension and expulsion.

Social factors serve as important warning sign for the potential of developing a mental illness (www.nami.org). African Americans make up approximately 12% of US population but 40% of the homeless population. As well, African Americans make up a significant portion of the prison population in the United States. Other social factors that are indicators of stress on families and individual children include the number of African American children involved in foster care or child protective services, or the number of children and families exposed to violence (NAMI.org). Given exposure to such stressors, potential mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety disorders, or posttraumatic stress syndromes are possible.

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Leong and Kalibatseva reviewed literature on the treatment of mental illness within the United States and concluded, “the perennial and intractable problems of inadequate mental health services and mental health disparities for ethnic and racial minorities have remained” (2011). Further, they discussed barriers to treatment and categorized four barriers that contributed to difficulty accessing services for diverse families. The barriers they identified included cognitive barriers, affective barriers, value orientation barriers, and physical/structural barriers.

Cognitive barriers involved a person’s perceptions of the nature, cause, and treatment for mental illness, which they argue are culturally influenced. People form their own perception of causes of mental illness, as well as what factors will alleviate mental illness. It is important for clinicians and persons developing interventions to develop a sense of understanding about the person’s or caregiver’s perception of the mental illness. As an example locus of control may be an important factor to investigate when developing strategies to address concerns. Does the family consider the difficulty within the person's control, or do they view it as a reaction to some external factor? Failing to address issues such as this may lead to miscommunication about the potential for change.

Affective barriers are present when there is mistrust between the help seeker, and those providing treatment. Caregivers of American Indian and African American students may be sensitive to this barrier due to persistent concerns about bias in testing and their questions as to whether the treatment provider understands the cultural perspective of their child.

Affective barriers may be combined with value barriers when American Indian and African American families periodically question the benefit of talk therapies as opposed to other forms of treatment involving medication, restrictive interventions, or restitution. Structural barriers may occur when families have difficulty purchasing services, or have challenges with transportation to benefit from services.

**Mental Health Within State of Minnesota Guidelines**

Students who exhibit difficulty with social, emotional, or behavioral functioning may be referred for investigation for the specific category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders EBD within Minnesota school settings (HYPERLINK EBD Criteria). When students exhibit significant difficulty managing or conducting their behavior, an assessment for EBD may be an appropriate step. However, some student mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, or reactive attachment disorders might be better addressed through mental health services that are community based. It is important for schools to collaborate with mental health service providers to fully address the mental health needs of students.

When assessing the social, emotional, and behavioral domains, members of assessment teams need to be sensitive to diversity factors. Students from diverse backgrounds may be responding emotionally or behaviorally to poverty, reactions to racism, or feelings of isolation when they have no strong relationships within their school.

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197 Frederick T.L. Leong and Zornitsa Kalibatseva, (2011). Cross-Cultural Barriers to Mental Health Services in the United States
The Minnesota criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders define difficulty with behavior, problems with social competence, or unsatisfactory educational progress not related to intellectual, physical health, or cultural factors. Additionally evidence must show significant impairment in at least one of the following areas: interpersonal, academic, vocational, or social skills.

Evaluation requirements for a determination of an emotional or behavioral concern indicate that several sources of information should be used to document a thorough assessment. Prior to conducting a comprehensive special education evaluation however, a best practices approach involves universal social-emotional learning curricula and other individualized interventions implemented to address concerns about a student's behavior.

Within the Minnesota guidelines for EBD, examples of information that can be used to complete an evaluation include vocational measures, measures of personality, self-report scales, adaptive behavior inventories, socio-cultural and ethnic information reviews, or chemical health assessments. At the K-12 level documentation to support qualification for services for students EBD concerns must be based on clinically significant scores on nationally normed behavior rating scales, individually administered and nationally-normed tests of intellectual ability and achievement, review of records, mental health screenings, interviews with parents, pupils, and teachers, three systematic observations in the classroom or other learning environments, review of health history, and the use of functional behavioral assessments.

Additional standards apply for EBD placement for prekindergarten students, who must meet standards for difficulty with behavior in patterns of concern, combined with specific areas of impact such as self-care, social relationships, and social emotional growth. As well, within the pre-K population, case histories including medical, cultural, and developmental information, must be documented with other aspects of preschool EBD qualifications. Information from cognitive ability assessment, social skills assessment, cultural and developmental information is combined to develop a comprehensive understanding of the student. Standardized adaptive behavior scales, and standardized interviews with parent, teacher, caregiver or childcare provider are also recommended.

A consistent theme within the EBD criteria is the inclusion of information about the student's cultural background and the impact that information could have on the decision-making process. It is appropriate to consider cultural norms within the decision-making process. An interview of the student, as well as caregivers and educators who work directly with the student can be an effective means to elaborate on the context surrounding the student and her or his behavior. Information in many places is often collected through the use of rating scales and checklists. Rating scales are useful in gathering information about concerns, but are limited in helping to define the nuances of the circumstance for each individual student and may be susceptible to rater bias. An interview is an important tool useful for gaining information, but perhaps even more important as a means for building relationships with students and their caregivers.

Usefulness of an interview:
• Means to establish rapport
• Means to define the referral concerns
• Means to identify the student’s or family’s worldview
• Means to define antecedents, consequences, and functions of behavior
• Means to gather important social, family, and cultural background information

Components of a Caregiver Interview:

• Student’s birth and prenatal history
• Developmental History
• Medical History
• Family History
• Social Skills
• Caregiver Expectations about Education
• Educational History
• Problem Definition
• Determination of Strengths
• Cultural and Linguistic Information

Networking and Professional Educator Training Programs

Steps can be taken to implement intervention and referral services that lead to positive outcomes and appropriate utilization of mental health resources by American Indian and African American students. Also, educators can work to support a family’s use of churches and other social networks for other means of support beyond the school. The development of mentor programs for families to support other families going through the assessment process could be an important tool to foster and develop relationships that would address affective and values barriers.

An example of a mentoring program is Check and Connect (http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/). This program is designed to assess a student’s engagement with their school and monitors attendance, behavior, and grades. As well, the program seeks to develop partnerships among educators, families, and service providers.

Professional educator training programs, as well as those for administrators, should emphasize factors related to cross-cultural mental health. Promoting professions in school psychology, counseling, social work, teaching, and administration for diverse students early in their high school years to develop future orientation, is important to address issues related to the underrepresentation of persons of color within professional education careers.

Other specific strategies to enhance mental health services for American Indian and African America families include introducing mental health consultation at the preschool level so that families can be assisted in developing strategies early for students who have difficulty with behavioral control, emotional expression, self-esteem, or other mental health challenges. Within schools, a Multi-tiered system of support can be used to address adjustment, social, or behavioral concerns. Caution should be used when referring to behavioral problems associated
without the provision of a concrete or objective definition, educators and parents are left with their subjective definition of what is a behavior problem.

As with other aspects of assessment and student services, a foundation of culturally competent services is recommended for mental health services. Aspects of culturally competent services include understanding traditions, customs, and parenting styles of diverse families, acknowledgment of worldview differences between educators and families, and knowledge of help seeking behavior of different cultural groups. Including such information at the intervention stage to design effective intervention, and including such information at the decision-making stage for special education placement, is critical for appropriate decisions for African American students.

Collaboration between schools and community mental health services advisors is essential. Diagnosis of severe mental health disorders and then providing treatment is beyond the capacity of most public schools. Educators, however, can work with community mental health service providers to identify ways to support students in the educational setting. Educators can help families identify services and provide documentation of the student’s social, emotional, or behavioral standing to service providers outside of the school. This information is useful in developing treatment and intervention plans, or useful in documenting response to medications for those who may benefit from prescriptions. The attainment of a release of information to allow the educational setting to share observations or intervention strategies benefits the student, and helps the student feel supported in the various settings they operate within.

As a bridge to connections to outside sources to provide intervention for more severe cases, mapping community resources is recommended. Agencies outside of the school and social service providers are linked to provide resources for families. Through identifying resources available to families and developing a referral network, particularly those that are culturally specific, caregiver’s feeling supported, and more severe needs are given the additional support necessary.

**Adaptive Behavior Assessment/Behavioral Strengths**

The assessment of adaptive behavior is an essential aspect of eligibility determinations for a variety of disability categories. Every person has a range of behaviors that allows him or her to respond to the demands of daily living across many different settings and different social expectations. From birth, across cultures, every individual is expected to exhibit the skills and an increasingly independent manner that ultimately leads to the effective functioning in adult roles. The American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) defines adaptive behavior as skills needed for successful life functioning. Adaptive behaviors are developmental (increasing in scope and complexity from childhood to adulthood: reflect expectations of others (parents, communities, cultural groups); are influenced by specific situations and environments; and include both ability and performance dimensions. The assessment of Adaptive Behavior is important because of the goal of identifying important areas of the child's development that could respond to remediation, increasing their chances for independent functioning later in life.

The assessment of adaptive behavior typically occurs in cases where there are questions about difficulty meeting expectations and functioning as regarding self-care, social interactions, or
ability to successfully conduct tasks within the community expected for one's age. Historically, adaptive behavior assessment as a requirement was restricted to concerns for cognitive disabilities. However, assessment of adaptive behavior is useful within a broader context of understanding a student’s functioning and development of skills.

Specific disability categories where adaptive behavior inventories are useful include concerns for cognitive disabilities, or difficulty with maintaining appropriate behavioral reactions within social settings. Adaptive behavior assessment is an important component to include whenever there are concerns about the potential for a student to have a developmental delay, or when students experience difficulty with learning, so that a full understanding of their skills and strengths are identified through the assessment process.

Common elements of definitions of adaptive behavior

A review of inventories of adaptive behavior yields common elements used in definitions. **Cultural specificity:** In many ways, what is appropriate adaptive behavior depends upon the circumstance or the culture surrounding the individual. In some cultures, belief in spirits is typical, while in others beliefs in spirits may be denied. In some cultures eye contact between individuals is expected, while in others, it may be considered a sign of lack of respect if a younger looks an older person directly in the eye.

**Situational:** Adaptive behavior has a situational component. Generally staff may not expect a teenager to cry in school, however, if the team doesn’t cry at the death of a close person, it could be considered maladaptive if they didn't cry. Another example of situational determinants is when the circumstance of a child with no siblings at home from a rarely had to share toys placed in a setting with a peer group where sharing is the norm for behavior.

**Developmental Nature:** Adaptive behavior has a developmental component. As individuals grow, their skills in many areas become more refined. We can anticipate that as a child grows she or he becomes more competent in their ability in various domains of functioning such as independence involving feeding, dressing, toileting, communication skills, and work completion task among other examples.

**Domains of Adaptive Behavior**

Adaptive behavior covers multiple aspects that all contribute to potential for independent functioning.

**Preschool Areas:**

| Self-help skills: eating, toileting, dressing, and hygiene |
| Interpersonal Skills: cooperating, sharing, and taking turns |
| Cognitive/Communication: expressive language, how well the child uses language to communicate, receptive language, how much the child or adolescent understands when spoken to, recognizing shapes by name, counting blocks or sorting objects, written language, the child’s ability to express information through composing sentences. |
Motor Skills: gross motor (climbing, walking, running, balance), fine motor, use of scissors, pencil grasp

For Older Children: Vocational responsibility: getting to work on time, staying on task, completing work
Domestic Skills: preparing food, house cleaning
Community Skills: use of telephone, reading safety signs, riding the bus

Characteristics of a Good Adaptive Behavior Scale or Behavioral Checklist

Educators and those involved in the assessment process are selective in the instruments that they use to gather information about a student. Instruments should provide understanding of the child's strengths as well as any needs for the student in independently meeting the demands of their setting. There are skills that can be identified that separate successful from unsuccessful students. Successful students are able to follow directions, seek assistance, ask questions, or organized materials. Communication about these behaviors is important, as some parents may consider these types of skills outcomes of education. Some educators may assume that students need to come to school with some of those skills already developed. Inventories that allow for the determination of these discrete skills can be useful as far as supporting appropriate interventions and services for students.

Type of Performance Sought Through Adaptive Behavior Assessment

One of the issues important to consider when assessing for adaptive behavior is making a distinction between maximal performance and typical performance. Under most circumstances the goal of adaptive behavior assessment is to determine the child's level of typical performance so that he or she is not penalized for expectations that are above their daily capability. The distinction between maximal performance and typical performance is shown by the differences between the following questions: What could the child do (maximal) if reminded, cued, or prompted, compared to what does the child do (typical) without reminders, prompts, or cues? Adaptive behavior inventories are designed in a different way from standardized achievement tests or standardized tests of intelligence.

When an achievement or IQ test is given, evaluators are attempting to get measures of maximal performance. Outcomes include the highest grade level achieved, highest standard score, or highest percentile rank obtained. With typical performance, we are looking how the child performs under most circumstances. This is different that what the child is capable of doing, but how they routinely behave and perform. When interviewing parents, they sometimes are expressing their hope of what their child can do, particularly when there is concern about a disability when assessing a child’s adaptive behavior, it is important to gain an understanding of typical performance, so that realistic goals can be established for that child.
Methods to Collect Information on Adaptive Behavior

Adaptive Behavior measures rely heavily upon interview with an informant who is familiar with the child. The informant can be the caregivers/parents, foster care providers, daycare providers, a teacher in a special education program, or a social worker. Given that caregivers and parents are prime audiences for completing information on a student’s adaptive behavior, it is important for evaluators and assessors to consider cross-cultural factors in terms of developing a relationship with the caregiver, and in terms of communication of information about the purpose, goals, and outcome of information collected from in adaptive behavior assessment.

There are many types of adaptive behavior instruments available for gathering information about the student’s status. Some are broad band instruments (meaning that they screen for a wide variety of problems), while others are only narrow band, meaning that they detect only a specific problem (expressive language inventory). Assessments that focus on measuring social skills should also be considered an aspect of adaptive behavior. The method of gathering information can vary as well and are typically covered by one of four approaches involving structured interview (standardized questions), semi-structured interview (open ended questions), questionnaire (checklist), or use of observation.

Limitations of Adaptive Behavior Inventories

Regardless of the type of interview procedure selected and used it is important to consider limitations associated with adaptive behavior inventories. There are several issues to be aware of when following an interview format. It is important for the examiner to make determinations about their confidence in the accuracy of the information collected. Some parents may be at a stage of grief when involved in the assessment process. It may be difficult for them to acknowledge that their child may have challenges. In some situations the caregiver may not provide an accurate assessment due to their difficulty in acknowledging weaknesses for their child. This level of reaction requires that the interviewer acknowledge the difficulty of the circumstance for the caregiver, and work to communicate ways to provide support through this emotionally challenging time for caregiver and family.

Parents and caregivers don't want to be viewed as failing their child in some way, or feeling that they are to blame for the child’s difficulty. If the interviewer indirectly communicates a sense of blame, a defensive or distant reaction from the caregiver is not surprising. This may be followed by hesitation to comply with requests for information about the child's social, developmental, family, and medical history, as a degree of trust has not been established to facilitate information sharing.

A key aspect for the collection of accurate information about the student is sufficient time and experience with the child on a range of behavior to adequately respond to questions about performance. Adaptive behavior inventories operate on the assumption that the respondent has meaningful experience with the child. A non-caretaking caregiver might have some experience with the child, but may be in a position where they seldom provide discipline or structure. If they are asked to measure the child's ability to respond to social demands they may not be in the best position to give the best information. The parent who comes home from work and spends an
hour and half with the child before bedtime can have a different perspective than the parent who is with that child for 8 hours without a break during the day.

Examiners must be attentive to issues related to comprehension when giving adaptive behavior inventories. If checklists are used, or if the examiner is composing questions for a semi-structured interview, it is important to consider issues related to readability of questions. It is important to access questions to determine that they are they written in a way that most people would understand. If the questions are complex or if the person does not understand the question, the respondent may guess and not give appropriate ratings of behavior.

**Standardization samples with measures of adaptive behavior**

Most adaptive behavior inventories that are used for decision-making purposes meet standards for technical adequacy. Although they may have a representative sample based on national census data, the standardization sample may not match the census data associated with many urban public school settings. For settings with significant diversity in their population, nationally standardized adaptive behavior inventories are not representative of the population of specific school districts. Therefore, such information from adaptive behavior inventory should be used cautiously and combined with other information when used with diverse populations. The use of national norms may obscure significant factors in individual's functioning if that individual's daily environment is significantly different from that of the mainstream. The development of local norms maybe an option to address settings the arson is really different from Nestlé standardize instruments. Local norms however can be an asset and a liability depending upon the intended use of the measure. A limitation of local norms is the limited degree of confidence with which generalizations can be made to other populations. Local norms can be useful in terms of identifying specific skills that a population may lack, and then developing interventions to address those skills.

**Best Practices in Adaptive Behavior Assessment**

- Assessment teams should consider adaptive behavior assessment as part of a comprehensive strategy, not merely because it is a required component of cognitive disabilities assessment.
- The scope of adaptive behavior assessment should be broadened to include children with learning and behavior problems, and within a functional behavioral assessment process.
- Norm-referenced scales should not be used alone; they should be supplemented with behavioral observations and interview of the child or caregivers. Information collected should review expectations for skills and success between different settings such as home school or community.
- The assessment team should not only consider skills exhibited in the school, but skills necessary for the child to function in other environments when conducting assessments.

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Forms and Checklists

Learning Ecology Checklist

Date: ___________________
Individuals providing input and title: ________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Instructions: Begin an assessment of a student you wish to support by assuming internal normality (Ortiz, 2008). Difficulties learning academic information, or difficulty with social interactions may be attributed to an internal factor (e.g., low cognitive ability level, lack of understanding) or numerous factors that are environmental (stress, poor nutrition). Evaluators are encouraged to use multiple strategies to develop a picture of a student’s learning ecology (e.g., interviews with teachers and parents, review of educational and medical records, curriculum expectations, and observation of instruction). Additionally, the following checklist will help educators review potential extrinsic factors involved when American Indian and African American students are having learning difficulties. When information addressing the issues defined has been collected, use the information to determine what gaps exist in knowledge about the student, and what important information should be collected to develop a full understanding of the needs of the student and types of interventions that would best support the student.

When assessing the potential extrinsic contributing factors to the learning difficulties of American Indian or African American heritage, consider the following questions (elaborate on issues in the space provided):

1. Is there a possible mismatch between the student’s overall level of acculturation and the academic/classroom expectations she/he experiences? □ Yes □ No

2. Is there a possible mismatch between the student’s acculturation and the non-academic (e.g., physical education, recess, school physical environment) expectations she/he experiences? □ Yes □ No

3. Is there a possible mismatch between the home, community, and school behavioral expectations she/he experiences? □ Yes □ No

4. Are there any concerns that the student’s basic needs are not being met properly, relegating academic achievement to a lower level of priority? □ Yes □ No

5. Are there factors from the student’s family history (e.g., history of childhood trauma, abuse, or neglect, family mobility) that impact learning or social skills? □ Yes □ No

6. Is there a possible mismatch between home/community and school linguistic and communication patterns? □ Yes □ No

7. Have home-school communication patterns been explored and analyzed? □ Yes □ No

8. Has the student’s life experiences been explored. Highly unusual or idiosyncratic experiences are considered (i.e., significantly different than middle class U.S. experiences). □ Yes □ No
9. Does the school climate experienced by the student reflect positively on the culture of American Indian and African American students (visual aspects of the environment such as posters, symbols, inclusion of culturally events on a regular basis)? □ Yes
□ No

10. Has the student experienced connectedness or mentoring from at least one important adult in her/his school building? □ Yes
□ No

11. Has the student’s sense of belonging at school been explored and considered? □ Yes
□ No

12. Has the degree of connectedness between the student’s school and cultural community/neighborhood been explored and considered? What are the strengths of the connection? What are the challenges of the connection? □ Yes
□ No

13. Have assets and strengths for the student/family been identified? What are they? □ Yes
□ No

14. If available, consultation with cultural liaisons and cultural brokers occurs to facilitate communication and understanding occurs. □ Yes
□ No

Prioritized Action Steps:

Given the results of the completed Learning Ecology Checklist, teams are encouraged to develop an action plan to increase external supports and identify appropriate interventions. Prioritize goals here (short term goals are immediate strategies (within next 4-6 weeks, while long term goals are more extended):

1. □ Short Term
□ Long Term

2. □ Short Term
□ Long Term

3. □ Short Term
□ Long Term

4. □ Short Term
□ Long Term

5 □ Short Term
□ Long Term

Commentary on Information collected:
Instructions for Use: The following checklist should be used to gauge the appropriateness of standardized instruments for individual students. Please note, regardless of student race or ethnicity, norm-referenced tests should only be used when the student’s level of acculturation is similar to that of a middle-class group of students. If a student’s level of acculturation is deemed significantly different, evaluators are encouraged to consider alternatives to standardized/norm-referenced procedures. For additional information and detail on test bias and acculturation, see the Assessment section of this resource.

The checklist serves as a best practice guide for choosing appropriate assessment tools for diverse learners. Individual evaluators and evaluation teams are encouraged to review this checklist prior to conducting comprehensive assessments of an American Indian or African American student. As new tests are introduced for use by the school, a team within the school performs an audit to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a test with African American and American Indian students. No test can be culture or language-free and no test can be completely culturally fair. Even tests deemed to be low on verbal demand and cultural loading involve interactions between an examiner and a student. Nonverbal exchanges can be influenced by culture.

The following prompts serve as a guide to discussing appropriate use of nationally standardized, norm-referenced assessments. There is no scoring system, professional judgment is required.
1. The student’s level of acculturation and life experiences were analyzed.  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: When the student, regardless of race/ethnicity, is thought to be dissimilar to that of middle class America, evaluators should consider avoiding standardized tests altogether. Evaluators cannot assume it is sufficient for tests to be stratified by race and similar to the U.S. census, as test norms do not include culture as a variable.

2. The specific purpose of the instrument was analyzed.  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: Instruments that measure cognitive processing or nonverbal cognitive abilities (as opposed to traditional tests of IQ that measure verbal/performance differences) are often more suitable for use with diverse learners.

3. The degree of language demand of the instrument was analyzed (e.g., frequency of verbal instructions or receptive/expressive verbal response tasks).  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: Instruments can be evaluated through the Culture-Language Test Classification process suggested by Ortiz (2004). Instruments deemed to be high on verbal demand may not be appropriate for some African American or American Indian students.

4. The degree of cultural loading of the instrument was analyzed (e.g., the cultural references of visually or verbally presented tasks were considered).  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: Instruments can be evaluated through the Culture-Language Test Classification process suggested by Ortiz (2004). Instruments deemed to be high on cultural loading may not be appropriate for some African American or American Indian students.

5. The norms of the instrument were collected within the last ten years  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: Norms older than 10 years are a poor comparison for students being undergoing a recent evaluation.

6. Any limitations of the instrument for diverse learners are described in the instrument manual.  
   YES ☐ NO ☐

   NOTES: Evaluators must analyze and consider those limitations as they apply to the student being evaluated.

---

7. The test manual describes differences in test performance across racial, cultural, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic groups.  

    YES ☐ NO ☐

    ➢ NOTES: Those differences are analyzed and considered when making test use decisions for the specific student being evaluated.

8. Test users have confirmed that an item analysis has been conducted on this instrument from the framework of cultural and communication characteristics of diverse cultural groups.  

    YES ☐ NO ☐

    ➢ NOTE: Content validity for diverse students is discussed in the manual (i.e., how biased items were handled). This information was analyzed and considered when making test use decisions of the specific student being evaluated.

9. The instrument clearly describes expected demands of students (e.g., reading level, response type, test-taking behaviors).  

    YES ☐ NO ☐

    ➢ NOTE: Those demands are considered when making test use decisions about the specific student being evaluated.

10. The instrument includes flexible features for diverse students (e.g., theoretical options, administration options, scoring that allows for regional language use).  

    YES ☐ NO ☐

    ➢ NOTE: Those features are considered when making test use decisions about the specific student being evaluated. Flexible theoretical and administration options are often more appropriate for students of American Indian and African American heritage.
Bias Vulnerability Assessment

Date: ___________________
Individuals providing input: ________________________________________________________________

Instructions: This tool was designed to support school in problem solving and reflecting on issues related to bias through assessment. School assessment teams, leadership teams, or other school professionals responsible for collecting and interpreting student data are encouraged to explore the following prompts collaboratively. Open discussions about identifying factors within the school that support students are recommended. As well, identifying potential barriers and developing an action plan to overcome barriers contributes to the development of a positive school climate. Individual schools or districts can use this checklist to identify areas where their assessment process may be vulnerable to bias (i.e., possible “blind spots” needing improvement).

When assessing the needs of American Indian or African American students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The setting uses a multi-tiered system of support, involving progressively intense instruction/intervention, as needed, and maintaining the least restrictive approaches for programming for students.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prevention and supportive services for the student are prioritized (e.g., social-emotional adjustment, academic adjustment, school connection, diversity awareness building)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The influence of school climate as an influential factor on student learning and achievement is considered.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student’s learning ecology is explored. Data about the student’s home and community environment are given significant emphasis in understanding factors that influence the student’s performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple hypotheses for student struggles are considered, analyzed, and a clear process for testing hypothesis is followed. Focus on strengths and capabilities are clearly an emphasis of the problem-solving process used.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The emphasis on gathering data that improve instruction or intervention is given high priority (as opposed to answering Yes/No questions only, such as “Does this student qualify for Special Education?”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student’s level of acculturation is explored and understood (i.e., the student’s home and community experiences are compared to that of)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The team, with administrative support, de-emphasizes use of standardized when the student’s level of acculturation is determined to be significantly different than that of middle class students, typical of a standardization group used in norm-referenced assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualitative interpretation of standardized test data is considered an option (i.e., de-emphasis on test scores), and included in narrative discussion of tests results interpretation.</td>
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<td>The elimination of standardized tests altogether is an option (if deemed a</td>
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<td>Statement</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>poor match with the student’s level of acculturation.</td>
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<td>Standardized tests, when used, are chosen based on best match for the</td>
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<td>student (as opposed to a single test or narrow set of tests being available for all students).</td>
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<td>Test givers are aware of and knowledgeable about the cultural and</td>
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<td>linguistic loading of any tests.</td>
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<td>The student’s language and verbal communication skills are understood,</td>
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<td>particularly in terms of use of home language or communication styles</td>
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<td>that differ significantly from communication expectations used in</td>
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<td>schools. Language proficiency is determined in English and native</td>
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<td>language (i.e. BICS and CALP), as needed.</td>
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<td>The student’s internal and external strengths and assets are identified</td>
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<td>in narrative reports about the student and given significant emphasis in</td>
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<td>developing interventions.</td>
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<td>Educators, school staff, assessment professionals, and administrators</td>
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<td>have received ongoing professional development addressing the needs of</td>
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<td>diverse learners. Cultural competency is promoted through continuing</td>
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<td>education opportunities or in-service training for persons in the school</td>
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<td>community.</td>
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<td>Evaluators have strong knowledge of the student’s unique cultural</td>
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<td>experiences, which can influence assessment responses or behavioral</td>
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<td>The cultural background (not just race/ethnicity) of the student is</td>
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<td>reflected in the norm or comparison group of any standardized tests</td>
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<td>Input from caregivers is gathered and valued.</td>
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<td>Cultural brokers or representatives are used to provide input on common</td>
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<td>or expected behaviors, reactions, and responses to any assessment tools</td>
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<td>Interventions are designed to consider the relationship between the</td>
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<td>student’s background and the learning environment.</td>
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Prioritized Action Steps:

Given the results of the completed vulnerability assessment, teams are encouraged to develop a bias reduction action plan. Prioritize goals here (short term goals are immediate strategies (within next 4-6 weeks, while long term goals are more extended):

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Comments:
Tier 1 Relational or Behavioral Intervention Tracking Form

Student: __________________________________________ Grade: ______________
Teacher: _______________________________________ Grade: ___________
Date: __________ Parents/Caregivers Consulted Date: _____________

Issues of Concern: ____________________________________________________________

Please list the following Tier 1 interventions in place:

**Date started:** _______________
Baseline Data: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Intervention: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Outcome: ________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

**Date started:** _______________
Baseline Data: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Intervention: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Outcome: ________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

**Date started:** _______________
Baseline Data: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Intervention: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Outcome: ________________________________________________________________
Introduction to the Sociocultural Checklist and Guide

The *Sociocultural Checklist* is designed to summarize information known about diversity factors including racial and culture information, communication preferences, information of socioeconomic factors, and factors such as life experiences and family issues. The checklist can be completed from information that is gathered through a referral form, record review and other sources.

The *Sociocultural Checklist* is not meant to be used as a family interview device. In Minnesota, many American Indian and African American families are impacted by socioeconomic challenges and language differences. Although many families and students living in difficult circumstances survive and thrive, research has shown that socioeconomic stress can be a risk factor contributing to challenges at school.

When students experience problems in school, sociocultural factors should be investigated and the information used in planning interventions. The checklist is also designed to assist schools in documenting that they systematically gathered information to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs of a student.

*The Sociocultural Checklist* is accompanied by the *Sociocultural Guide*. The guide discusses how diversity factors affect children in school and can be used as a resource in planning interventions. The *Sociocultural Guide* also suggests assessment accommodations and thus also serves as a tool in the assessment process as well.
## Sociocultural Checklist

### 1. Student Information
Name (optional) __________________________
Date of Birth:_________________Age: _____________Grade:_________
School:______________________________________________

### 2. Respondent Information
Name:__________________________________
Date: ___________________Position:______________________________
Agency/School :________________________________________________

**Instructions for Use:** Using your knowledge of this student obtained through observations, record review and parent contacts, complete the Sociocultural Checklist by placing a check by all statements that apply. It is possible that information for certain questions is not available. When completed, refer to the Sociocultural Guide to review pertinent information and/or research with regard to each statement checked.

### A. Racial/Cultural Factors

1. The student is racially different from the majority of peers and staff in this school.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

2. The student’s family participates regularly in events or social groups within their race/cultural group and/or the family is an enrolled member of a recognized American Indian tribe.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

3. The student interacts with peers or staff of other racial/cultural backgrounds or has good relationships with peers and staff of other racial/cultural backgrounds.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

4. The student’s culture values support of family or group over individual effort.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

5. The student recently moved from another town, city, state, or country. The student and his/her family are recent immigrants, refugees, or itinerant workers. The student and his/her family reside on a reservation.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

6. The student demonstrates behavior or survival strategies that are culturally appropriate or appropriate to a previous environment but that are different from the expectations of the current environment.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐

7. There is support in the home for bicultural development.  
   Yes ☐ No ☐
Adjustment Factors

8. The student displays confusion in locus of control. Yes ☐ No ☐

9. The student displays heightened stress or anxiety in cross-cultural interactions. Yes ☐ No ☐

10. The student expresses or displays sense of isolation or alienation in cross-cultural interactions. Yes ☐ No ☐

Cognitive/Learning Factors

11. The student displays few cognitive learning strategies that are appropriate to the classroom/school. Yes ☐ No ☐

12. The student’s cognitive learning style is different or inappropriate in relation to teacher’s instructional style Yes ☐ No ☐

13. The student uses learning strategies that are not appropriate. Yes ☐ No ☐

Experiential Factors

14. The student has limited or inconsistent school attendance. Yes ☐ No ☐
15. The student has had little exposure to subject or content or is not familiar with material in class. Yes ☐ No ☐

16. The student’s early childhood development was disrupted. Yes ☐ No ☐
17. The student’s responses in the classroom show difficulty understanding social or behavioral expectations. Yes ☐ No ☐

18. The student uses/knows different terms/concepts for subject areas or materials and content. Yes ☐ No ☐
B. Communication Factors

19. There is a language, dialect, or communication style other than standard English spoken by family members in the student’s home.  Yes □ No □
20. The student has a language, dialect or communication style other than standard English.  Yes □ No □
21. There is support in the home for bilingual development.  Yes □ No □
22. The student does not speak English.  Yes □ No □
23. The student has limited academic language in native language.  Yes □ No □
24. The student has limited social language in English.  Yes □ No □
25. The student rarely speaks in class.  Yes □ No □
26. The student only speaks to culturally similar peers.  Yes □ No □
27. The student has limited academic language in English.  Yes □ No □
28. The student asks a peer for assistance in understanding.  Yes □ No □
29. The student appears to know English but cannot follow English directions in class.  Yes □ No □

C. Socioeconomic Factors

30. The student is currently homeless or lacks adequate clothing, housing, and/or nutrition.  Yes □ No □
31. The student’s primary caregivers have a high school diploma or GED.  Yes □ No □

D. Resiliency Factors

32. The student has special strengths, talents, or interests. Describe:______________________________
33. The student is involved in school and/or community activities. Describe:
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
34. The student has a mentor or a positive adult role model.  Yes □ No □
35. The family has a support network. Describe:________________________________________________
E. Other Factors

36. The student’s family is very mobile (has moved more than once during the current school year or has a pattern of moving at least once a year over several years).

37. The student’s previous education has been sporadic, limited, or very different from the current school.

38. The student’s parents or caregivers have had disagreement with educators.

39. The student’s primary caregiver has changed within the last year.

40. The student has recently experienced a crisis or trauma.

41. The student expresses or displays a sense of stress, anxiety, isolation, or alienation.
Sociocultural Guide

A. Race/Cultural Factors

1. The student is racially different from the majority of peers and staff in this school.

Research in other states suggests that there is a correlation between minority status and academic success, special referral and placement. Students from diverse backgrounds enrolled in schools where students and staff are predominantly white are more likely to be referred to special education than are students enrolled in schools with diverse populations. A student in this situation may feel a great deal of stress and isolation that affects their classroom performance as well as their performance on special education assessments.

2. The student’s family participates regularly in events or social groups within their race/cultural group and/or the family is an enrolled member of a recognized American Indian tribe.

Tribal enrollment and participation in community cultural events are indicators of how closely the family identifies with their cultural or racial group. Among American Indians, families who participate in traditional spiritual practices or other events are more likely to have values or characteristics that are traditional to American Indian people. Student and family orientation to traditional beliefs should be considered when determining whether published norms are adequate and when interpreting assessment results. The student and family’s participation in cultural events may also demonstrate their access to a support system. This information can also be useful in planning instruction and interventions.

3. The student seldom interacts with peers or staff of other racial/cultural backgrounds or has poor relations with peers and staff or other racial/ cultural backgrounds.

The team should investigate the reason for the lack of interaction when interviewing the student and family to determine whether there are racial issues that are affecting the student’s behavior or academic performance. Also, if the student prefers to interact with members of his/her own cultural group and/or is antagonistic toward others, assessors of different races may need to make extra efforts to establish the rapport needed to carry out a comprehensive assessment.

4. The student’s culture values support of family or group over individual effort.

Students from some cultural backgrounds are uncomfortable when expected to perform individually in class or to compete with classmates. One-on-one assessments may also be uncomfortable for students whose families hold traditional values that encourage group cohesion and discourage individual performance or displays of skills. Classroom teachers should provide a mix of small group opportunities if they are concerned that some children are reluctant to compete individually. In an assessment, staff should explain the purpose of the individual assessment and take time to get to know the student and develop rapport (perhaps assess over more than one session if the student appears very uncomfortable). In addition, assessors should plan ways to gather pertinent information by
observing the student in a group setting with peers of a similar racial/cultural background as well as individually.

5. The student recently moved from another town, city or state (specify where).

The academic and adjustment problems the student is encountering may be the by-product of adapting to a new environment. Check to see how long the student has been enrolled and whether assistance was provided to help the student adapt. When interviewing the parents and the student, try to learn as much as possible about the academic and behavioral norms in the previous schools and to determine if the student experienced similar difficulties. Also ask about the reason for the move and whether the student came voluntarily or involuntarily.

6. The student and his/her family recently moved from another area but retain behavior or survival strategies that are not adapted to the current environment.

Families who have moved from stressful environments may also have developed survival strategies that are no longer needed in their current situation. Families may not be aware of the behavioral norms of their current situation or of how others perceive their actions. Their prior experiences may impact their child-rearing or discipline strategies in ways that negatively impact their child’s ability to succeed in school. For example, a family who previously lived in a dangerous neighborhood may not allow their children to play outside even after they move to a small town that is generally safe. This can cause problems if teachers expect students to gather wild plants for a science project, interview neighbors for social studies, or similar activities. The mismatch between the parent’s expectations and the schools can also create emotional stress and confusion for the child. When interviewing the family, the team should ask about their previous experiences.

Students who have moved from stressful environments may also have developed survival strategies that are no longer needed in their current situation. Students may exhibit behavior problems in school that are rooted in their prior experiences (examples, hoarding food or school supplies, startling at loud noises, hypervigilence, unwillingness to take turns). Students may not be aware of the behavioral norms of their current situation or of how others perceive their actions. As a first step, all students and staff should be aware of how behavior and social interactions differ in different environments. Students in this situation are in need of intervention to explain the written and unwritten rules of behavior and social interaction in order to help them adjust. The ability to learn and to adapt to new environments is an attribute of intelligence and good mental health. Failure to adapt despite appropriate interventions is a possible indicator of a disability. Assessors should work with the family to determine whether the student’s behavior can be attributed to the past environment and whether the student has responded to efforts to help adjust to the new environment.

B. Communication Factors

19. There is language, dialect or communication style other than Standard English spoken by family members in the student’s home.
Even though the student appears to be English-speaking, the use of another language by caretakers can affect the student’s development of English. Further information about language use and influences in the home should be gathered using the communications section of the family interview if not already done. The family’s use of another language or dialect may also inhibit their ability to provide support for the student’s education through reading, homework help, and so forth.

20. The student has a language, dialect or communication style other than Standard English.

The student’s use of another language, dialect or communication style may also inhibit academic success. In some situations, communication differences may lead to actual or perceived behavior problems. For example, both American Indian and African American educators have reported that the misinterpretation of nonverbal communication style sometimes causes students to be labeled as having behavior problems. Most educators of all races agree that Standard English is needed for success in school and that students may need formal, discrete instruction in language.

Speech/language clinicians or other team members should review the information on linguistic diversity to determine whether verbal and nonverbal communication patterns exhibited by the student are typical of nonstandard English users. Team members may need to accept alternate (dialectic) responses to verbal tasks or to emphasize nonverbal tasks.

C. Socioeconomic Factors

30. The student is currently homeless or lacks adequate clothing, housing and/or nutrition.

When reviewing information and interpreting test results, the team must consider whether the student’s difficulties are attributable to lack of basic necessities. For example, a student who is homeless or living in extremely crowded conditions may not complete homework or may lose textbooks and materials. Lack of adequate housing may also be indicative of other social/emotional, physical health, and nutritional problems. A person who is concerned with basic survival needs may not be able to develop at other levels and may not have the ability or motivation to master academic tasks. The team should also consider whether the student’s lack of basic necessities is a long-term or a short-term situation and if it is an indicator of long-term, generational poverty. There must be clear evidence of the existence of a disability and the need for special education services in order to rule this out as an exclusionary factor.

31. The student’s parents or caregivers have a high school diploma or GED.

If the parent or caregiver of the student lacks a high school diploma or GED, the family is more likely to live in poverty or encounter socioeconomic stress. They also may not be able to provide the types of support for education that is expected by the school, thus minimizing the student’s chances of success in the school environment. It may be a challenge to provide assistance with homework or other types of help that the classroom teacher expects. In interpreting the student’s academic performance, team members should consider whether socioeconomic factors have impacted the child.
D. Resiliency Factors

Items 32-35 combined: The student has special strengths, talents, or interests; the student is involved in school and/or community activities; the student has a mentor or a positive adult role model; the family has a support network.

Items 32-35 pertain to student strengths or resiliency factors. Knowledge of strengths, talents, and involvement in the community activities can be the key in identifying interventions of interest to the student or starting a pattern of success. Likewise, an adult mentor may be the key person in resolving the student’s difficulties in school. The family’s support network can also be involved in helping the school and the child. In assessments, information about these areas of strengths can be compared with performance on assessment instruments to compile a balanced picture of the student’s abilities. Knowledge of special interests can also help examiners establish rapport and enhance assessment performance. Adult mentors may have information to contribute to the assessment process and may even be included in the IEP team with parent consent.

E. Other Factors

36. The student’s family is very mobile (has moved more than once during the current school year or has a pattern of moving at least once a year over several years).

Frequent moves may be indicative of a family that is experiencing poverty and stress. Frequent moves also interrupt schooling. The student’s difficulties may be the by-product of an inconsistent education, rather than evidence of a disability. Assessors should look for inconsistent patterns of knowledge and achievement when evaluating students. Family interventions may be needed in order to encourage more stability in the child’s education.

37. The student’s previous education has been sporadic, limited or very different from the current school.

See item 14 also. The student’s current difficulties may be the result of lack of exposure or exposure to vastly different curriculum or instructional methods. Diagnostic teaching as well as interviews with parents and the student can help to determine the exact nature of previous education and to identify gaps in instruction. In an assessment, staff should use testing of limits procedures as well as “test/teach/test” processes to better ascertain the student’s ability to learn given consistent instruction.

38. The student’s parents or caregivers have had disagreements with educators.

Parents’ past experiences with school may also affect how they interact with special education staff and may even limit the information they provide as part of an assessment. Schools need to make every effort to establish trust and to obtain complete and accurate information from parents. If parents have had negative experiences during their own schooling, their attitudes may carry over and affect their children. Their children may feel that they have no chance of success or that they cannot have positive relationships with teacher or peers. This information should be considered when analyzing classroom performance and interpreting assessment results.
39. The student’s primary caregiver has changed within the last year.

A change in a student’s family situation will create stress. The team should consider whether this is related to the presenting problems and whether interventions outside of special education (such as counseling) would be appropriate. For actual assessments, the current caretaker may not know the student well enough to provide significant information to the team. Staff may need to gather information from other sources who know the child such as other relatives, older siblings, previous caregivers, etc.

40. The student has recently experienced a crisis or trauma.

Staff should consider whether the crisis or trauma is related to the presenting problem and whether interventions outside of special education would be appropriate. The nature and duration of the crisis and the student’s response should also be considered (is the student experiencing a short-term adjustment or long-term, chronic adjustment problems). The severity of the crisis may also inhibit the student’s performance on special education assessment procedures, limiting the validity of results.

41. The student expresses or displays a sense of stress, anxiety, isolation, or alienation.

The team should consider whether the student’s stress, anxiety, isolation and alienation are related to race and cultural issues, poverty or language differences or by the process of adapting to a new culture. Staff should determine whether these feelings persist across all settings in school or only in certain settings or subjects. It is also important to gather information from the student and the home to determine whether the lack of confidence impacts the student outside of school.
Minnesota Department of Education

Home Language Questionnaire
ED-01336-08E

The following is to be completed by School District Personnel:

STUDENT IDENTIFICATION INFORMATION

Student's Full Name: _____________________________________
Date Of Birth:_________________ Age ____________ Grade Level: ________

DISTRICT INFORMATION/VERIFICATION INFORMATION

School name:______________________________________ District number:________

I hereby verify that the above information is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.

_______________________________________________
Name (Printed)

Signature – Responsible Authority                  Title                  Date

The following is to be completed by Parent/Guardian:

STUDENT LANGUAGE INFORMATION

Dear Parents and Guardians:
In order to help your child learn, your child’s teachers need to determine which language your child uses most.
Please respond to the questions below by checking the appropriate box.

1. Which language did your child learn first? □ English □ Other (specify): ____________
2. Which language is most often spoken in your home? □ English □ Other (specify): ____________
3. Which language does your child usually speak? □ English □ Other (specify): ____________

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION

I hereby verify that the above information is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

_______________________________________________
Name (Printed)

Signature – Parent/Guardian                  Date
Glossary

**Academic Language**: the complex components of the English language that is required for success in academic settings such as speeches, workplace discussions, debates, comprehension of content, as well as writing in the content areas.

**Achievement/ability discrepancy**: Difference between a student’s academic performance and intellectual (IQ) potential.

**Adequate Yearly Progress**: set of standards used to assess schools and districts to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act

**Advocate**: A person who helps parents and children in their communication with school districts about services

**Assessment**: means of gathering data to make informed decisions about strategies, services, or interventions to benefit the individual student, or to support caregivers and families. Assessment includes screening, focused problem solving observations, use of standardized testing, and progress monitoring.

**Attention**: the regulation of arousal and vigilance, selective attention and focus, sustained attention, attention span, and control of behavior.

**Basic Psychological Processing**: Also known as information processing, involves perception, thinking, reasoning, problem solving, learning, storage and retrieval of information.

**Behavior Rating Scale**: a checklist of behaviors or symptoms usually completed by a caregiver and teacher to identify concerns about a student or describe the student’s performance in different settings.

**Bidialectal**: using two dialects of the same language.

**BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills)**: Basic interpersonal skills are language skills used doing social interactions in a meaningful social context, such as at a party, talking with friends, or gaining directions.

**CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)**: CALP is defined as the ability to comprehend and communicate thoughts and ideas with clarity and efficiency, and to carry on advanced interpersonal conversations. This ability takes approximately 5 to 7 years to develop and is required for academic success. CALP is commonly used in referencing the level of language acquisition of an English Language Learner.

**Caregiver involvement**: A broad term inclusive of several types of participation to support their child.
Categorical placement: Federally recognized special education programs where students are placed based on meeting specific criteria. Alternative models include non-categorical placement and cross-categorical placement.

Cognitive Ability: referring to reasoning or intellectual capacity.

Continuum of services: A range of services available to students of a school district so that they may be served in the least restrictive environment.

Conference: Generic term that may refer to a special education determination meeting, annual review of a student’s progress, or other type of meeting.

Cooperative: Association of school districts that work together to provide special education services using a shared administrative structure.

Cultural Competence: a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies within a system, agency, or among professionals, to enable those involved to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Curriculum: The subject matter that is to be learned by students. A curriculum described in terms of its scope (what it covers) and sequence (the order in which domains are covered).

Curriculum-based assessment: A method of evaluating a child’s progress by developing tests from their curriculum and measuring the student’s skill development, usually done at frequent intervals.

Curriculum-based Measures (CBM): CBM is a method for assessing the growth of basic academic skills. CBM involves the use of standardized assessment procedures that are technically adequate and have specific rules about what skills to measure, and how to measure those skills. CBMs are developed from the student's curriculum and directly sample skills and knowledge and under timed conditions. CBMs have many equivalent forms to allow for repeated measurement, are very brief, and are easy to teach and use.\(^\text{200}\)

Delay: Child or student is behind with development of skills compare to others his or her age. Delays can be global (multiple areas), or specific (only in speech for example).

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction: Developmentally appropriate instruction and practice involves the consideration of age expectations, individual needs, and cultural factors when preparing classroom settings, designing instruction, or conducting assessments.

**Disability:** A physical, sensory, cognitive, or affective impairment that causes the student to need special education to assist in their growth and development.

**Due process:** Legal safeguards for caregivers and parents, including elements of proper notice of meetings, opportunity to be heard, and standards for completing assessments in a timely manner. Due process involves federally defined procedures and safeguards that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.

**Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD)**[^201]: An established pattern of one or more of the following emotional or behavioral responses: (A) withdrawal or anxiety, depression, problems with moods, or feelings of self-worth; (B) disordered thought processes with unusual behavior patterns and atypical communication styles; (C) aggression, hyperactivity, or impulsivity. The pattern must adversely affect education or developmental performance, including intrapersonal, academic, vocational, or social skills. The concern must be consistently exhibited in at least three different settings, two of which must be educational settings one other setting either the home child, care or community.

**Executive Functioning:** Executive functioning involve processes tasks that help students learn new information (such as analysis and comparison), remember and retrieve information (memory) and use skills to solve problems of everyday life (perception).

**Extended school day:** A provision for a special education student to receive instruction for a period longer than the standard school day.

**Extended school year:** A provision for a special education student to receive instruction during ordinary school break periods.

**Evidenced-based interventions:** Interventions that are based on or informed by research, but do not meet the technical standards of scientific research-based interventions. See the definition of scientific research-based intervention for the technical standards.

**FERPA:** Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. A federal law that regulates the management of student records and disclosure of information from those records. Records of students should only be seen by those who have a legitimate need to review records.

**FAPE:** free appropriate public education

**Fidelity:** refers to the concept that interventions are implemented as designed without alterations that may lesson the quality of the intervention.

[^201]: https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/rules/?id=3525.1329
**Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)**: A FBA is a process involving the use of a variety of data collection methods and sources to lead to the development of hypotheses and summary statements to explain behavioral patterns of learners, and which leads to the development of supportive interventions.

A good FBA process should include:

1. A description of problem behaviors.
2. Identification of events, times, and situations that predict the occurrence and nonoccurrence of the behavior.
3. Identification of triggers (antecedents) occurring slightly before but not immediately before the target behavior (distal), and triggers occurring immediately prior to the target behavior (proximal).
4. Description of reinforcers that maintain behavior.
5. Hypothesis for functions of the behavior (what does the behavior gain for the student?)
6. Description of positive alternative behaviors or replacement behaviors that lead to more successful interactions for the student.

**Functional curriculum**: A curriculum focused on practical life skills that promote independent living.

**Heterogeneous grouping**: An educational practice in which students of diverse abilities are placed within the same instructional groups. This practice is helpful in the integration and full inclusion of children with disabilities.

**Homogeneous grouping**: An educational practice in which students of similar abilities are placed within the same instructional groups.

**IEP (Individualized education plan)**: the document developed at an IEP meeting which sets the goals and objectives for the student to achieve when they become involved in special education services. The IPE describes the educational program designed to meet the student's unique needs and must contain specific information about the child or student such as present level of academic achievement and functional performance that lead to statement of needs. Goals and accompanying objectives are developed based on the student’s assessed needs. An IEP is written for a 12-month period and must be reviewed annually.

**IEP meeting**: A gathering required at least annually under IDEA in which an IEP is developed or reviewed for a student receiving special education.

**Implicit Bias**: refers to bias or attitudes about others that a person may not be aware of, sometimes referred to as hidden bias.
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Federal law that ensures services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to eligible students. It also includes a description of parent rights and procedural safeguards which support compliance with the law.

IFSP: Individual Family Service Plan. Document which outlines the services to be delivered to families of infants and toddlers receiving special services.

In-home interventions: Services delivered in a child’s own home.

Joint agreement: Also called a "cooperative." A joint agreement is a voluntary association of school districts who join together to provide special education services.

LEA: local educational agency. i.e., a local public school district.

OCR: US Office for Civil Rights. An agency of the federal government’s executive branch within the Department of Education. It enforces a number of civil rights statutes including Section 504.

OSEP: US Office of Special Education Programs. An office within OSERS charged with assuring that the various states comply with IDEA.

Permanent record: A document containing information about the student and outcomes of assessment.

Present levels of educational performance: Information about the student’s level of performance across educational domains at the time of assessment.
**RACE:** The U.S. Census Bureau adheres to the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity that classifies written responses to questions about racial identification.

The racial categories are:

- **White** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

- **Black or African American** – A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

- **American Indian or Alaska Native** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

- **Asian** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

- **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander** – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

The 1997 OMB standards permit the reporting of more than one race.

**Referral:** Notice that a child may be in need of special education.

**Related services:** services such as transportation needed to support a student within the special education process.

**Reliability:** from repeated measures, consistent results are obtained. Information gained from the assessment device is consistent from one time to another.

**Response to Intervention:** Response to Intervention is a framework for building a school-wide process for delivering high-quality instruction and interventions and ensuring they are matched to the needs of students requiring additional academic and behavioral supports.

**School –Wide Information System (SWIS\textsuperscript{202}):** A web-based system designed to help review office referral data and develop interventions based on a review of data.

**School Climate:** quality of experience in the school setting involving goals, interpersonal experiences, learning practices, and organizational structure.

\textsuperscript{202} http://nyspbis.org/SWIS/SWISintro.cfm
Scientific Research-based Intervention (SRBI):

A. Research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs.
B. Includes research that employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment.
C. Involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn.
D. Relies on measurements or observational methods that provide reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers, across multiple measurements and observations, and across studies by the same or different investigators.
E. Uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which individuals, entities, programs, or activities are assigned to different conditions and with appropriate controls to evaluate the effects of the condition of interest. It carries a preference for random-assignment experiments.
F. Presents experimental studies in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication or, at a minimum, offer the opportunity to build systematically on their findings.

Accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

Section 504: Provision of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that prohibits recipients of federal funds from discrimination against persons with disabilities.

Slope: Teacher analyzes student’s rate of progress against pre-determined aim line, goals, or decision rules. If student's growth is below what is desired or expected, action is taken to accelerate growth (knowledge or skill development). If growth exceeds aim line, the goals and aim line for the learner are adjusted upward.

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD): A disorder on one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. Difficulties with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling or performing math calculations can be found.

Standardized tests: Tests that have norms reflecting a large population involving the performance of children throughout the country on the same tests, usually these tests use age or grade based comparisons.

Technically adequate assessment: Refers to tests and procedures for which recognized professional standards of construction, validity, reliability, and use have been met.

Test: Any standardized procedure used for measuring a sample of behavior (e.g., observations, student constructed responses, rating scales, checklists, curriculum based measures).

203 http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SpecEdClass/DisabCateg/SpecLearnDisab/
**Testing of Limits:** Altering standardized assessment procedures selectively in order to gain additional qualitative information about a student’s abilities and problem-solving strategies.

**Trend:** The direction of a student’s rate of growth across time.

** Validity:** the assessment device measures the defined concepts accurately, rather than unknown or different factors.

**Zone of Proximal Development:** A concept attributed to psychologist Lev Vygotsky, based on the belief that learning occurs best when it is within an area of challenge that is not so easy that it becomes boring or uninteresting, and not so difficult that it creates frustration. Within the zone of proximal development the learner retains curiosity and interest in the task, and is better able to learn.
Appendix 1: Educator Statements on Cultural Responsibility


The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published a manuscript titled Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2010). Embedded within are the recognition that educational disparities exist and the role of the school counselor in addressing them. In general, the manuscript calls school counselors to “create opportunities for equity in access and success in educational opportunities” (ASCA, 2010, para. 2). Additionally, the document highlights core tenets of professional responsibility, one of which is that school counselors ensure comprehensive school counseling programming respects, gives dignity to, advocates for and affirms all people including those from diverse populations (i.e., ethnic/racial identity, age, economic status). Another core tenet of professional responsibility specifically states that all individuals have a right to receive support and information to progress towards self-direction and self-development as affirmed by their own group, with special consideration being given to those who historically have received inadequate education including students of color, students from low socioeconomic statuses, students with disabilities and students from non-dominant language backgrounds.

The Ethical Standards for School Counselors document also summons school counselors to develop competency in the area of Multicultural and Social Justice Advocacy and Leadership. As such, a professional school counselor:

- Demonstrates exemplary multicultural competency by monitoring and not imposing personal beliefs or values on students or stakeholders.
- Improves personal awareness, knowledge and skills of multicultural and social justice advocacy issues.
- Develops the ability to detect how prejudice, power and various forms of oppression (i.e. racism, ableism) affect students and stakeholders.
- Improves awareness, knowledge and skills for working effectively with diverse populations by seeking educational, consultation and training experiences.
- Affirm cultural and linguistic identities of all and advocate for equitable school program policies and practices.
- Use culturally responsible and inclusive language.
- Improve family-school collaboration to increase achievement.
- Advocate and provide leadership for school counseling programming that aims to close achievement, opportunity and attainment gaps that hinder students from attaining educational goals.

The School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA) adheres to the Code of Ethics (2008) from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The Code of Ethics states that a professional social worker embodies and exemplifies six core values throughout their career: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. The Code of Ethics details a social worker’s responsibilities to clients, colleagues, in the practice setting, as professionals, to the social work profession, and to broader society. Valuing diversity and working toward just systems and personal interactions are embedded within the six core values of a social worker, and the responsibilities toward clients and broader society embellish specific responsibilities of the social worker in this area. Within a social worker’s ethical responsibility to clients is the directive for demonstrating competence regarding cultural and social diversity. Within a social worker’s ethical responsibility to broader society is the mandate for social and political action to expand opportunity and protect rights for all individuals, to encourage respect, and prevent and eliminate discrimination against any group.

Social workers are ethically responsible for demonstrating cultural competence in their work with clients. They do so by recognizing the impact culture has on society and on an individual’s interactions within society and by valuing cultural diversity. They also demonstrate cultural competence by ensuring adequate knowledge of their clients’ cultures and by providing services that are sensitive to people and cultural groups. Finally, they seek education concerning social diversity and oppression with respect to various forms of diversity, including race, ethnicity and national origin.

Social workers are also ethically responsible for promoting social and political action within broader society. As such, a social worker seeks to ensure equal access to resources, employment, services and opportunities necessary for full development. Social workers encourage respect for diversity, both social and cultural, within the United States and across the globe. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for cultural competence in programs and institutions, and promote policies protect the rights and promote equity and social justice for all people. Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of background or ability.


The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is responsible for delineating the roles and responsibilities of Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) employed in school settings. In the professional issue statement titled Roles and Responsibilities of Speech-Language Pathologists in Schools (ASHA, 2010), a critical role of school based SLPs is to provide quality, culturally competent services. As such, a school based SLP contribute to equity in education by identifying and utilizing appropriate assessment approaches that lead to accurate identification of
student needs. Specifically, they contribute to distinguishing between the presence of a language disorder from a difference in cultural or linguistic background, a socioeconomic factor, a lack of adequate instruction, or a dialectic difference between home and school. Additionally, by using their knowledge of communication and language, a responsibility of school based SLPs is to inform “how linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences may contribute to achievement gaps. SLPs may also provide insight on approaches to reducing disproportionate referrals of diverse students to special education by accurately identifying whether student performance is reflective of a true disorder” (ASHA, 2010, para.22).


The American Association of School Administrators has stated in the Belief and Position Statement (2011) it is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure school climates where diversity is recognized and valued. The organization advocates on behalf of policies to “address the unique needs of persistently underserved children” (AASA, 2011, 200.1). AASA supports educational experiences that foster a respect for diversity and an understanding of individual differences and cultures (200.2). Additionally, school leaders have both a moral and ethical obligation to promote high quality, integrated schools to best prepare all students for full participation in a multicultural society (200.2).


The Association of American Educators (AAE) has established a Code of Ethics for Educators. Principle IV: Ethical Conduct toward Parents and Community, states that a professional educator “endeavors to understand and respect the values and traditions of the diverse cultures represented in the community and in his or her classroom.”