

CNN's Newsroom, anchored by Randi Kaye
Interview with Dan Losen
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KAYE: It is time for today's "Undercovered Story." It is one that you need to hear and we need to be reporting on much more. According to a new report to the National Education Policy Center, schools disproportionately punish and discipline students of color and the disabled. Yes, it's true. Can you believe this stuff? Today, even for the same minor offenses, U.S. public schools are suspending black, Hispanic, and disabled students at much higher rates than their white counterparts.

Joining me now for much more on this, the study's author, Daniel Losen from Massachusetts and CNN contributor Steve Perry, he's joining us from Connecticut. Welcome to both of you. Daniel, just briefly if you can, break down your report and tell me what the most shocking findings to you.

DANIEL LOSEN, AUTHOR, NEPC REPORT: Well, I think it's very important to understand we're talking about mostly minor offenses. So, things like truancy, excessive tardiness, dress code violations, minor disruptions to the class, kids are being suspended right and left for these kinds of minor violations. Over 3.25 million students every year are being suspended. And when we look at the middle schools, the numbers get even worse and parents really need to know. For example, black male students, more than one out of every four black male students was suspended out of school for these kinds of minor violations, compared to only about 10 percent of white male students. Kids with disabilities are also being suspended in really large numbers and it -- sometimes we're able to look at the first-time offenders and compare those data.

So we have data from across the state of North Carolina. And they are for something like possessing a cell phone. About 32 percent of the first-time offenders for black students, suspended out of school. Only about 14 percent if you're white. Same thing with public display of affection. These kinds of minor violations we're seeing in large racial disparities.

KAYE: Yes. So we have a cell phone, showing affection.

Steve, do you see this in your school?

STEVE PERRY, CNN EDUCATION CONTRIBUTOR: You know, we don't have that great of a disparity. However, I have seen it in schools. And what happens is, there's an overcriminalization of the behavior of African-American, Latino and some of students who are special needs. The expectation is that what they're doing is worse than what other children are doing, even when it's the same thing.

I also have seen at the primary school level, there's a, you know, there's a whole focus on having the boys act -- I call an over feminization of primary education, which means that we expect the boys to act and react the same way that girls do. And when they don't, we think that there's something wrong with them. And as a result, many boys are being turned off to school as they're being suspended.

KAYE: Daniel, why is this happening is really the bigger question. I mean who's to blame here?

LOSEN: Well, one of the things we need to get back to is using suspension as the last resort. So one of the things that has happened over the last 20, 30 years is we're resorting to suspension for these minor offenses with a really high frequency. What we need is -- teachers also need to be trained better in classroom management. We also know from the

research that it really matters what the attitude of the principal is. So the choice isn't between chaos on one hand and suspending kids right and left on the other. There's a lot of things that a well trained school leader with well trained teachers can do in between that keeps kids in school.

KAYE: Right.

LOSEN: And it's so important because being suspended is one of the leading indicators of whether kids will eventually drop out and become incarcerated.

KAYE: Yes, I was just going to get to that actually with Steve.

I mean, Steve, what do you think really the long-term effects might be on these students who are being so harshly treated?

PERRY: Well, I mean it's almost a direct line from a statistical perspective to prison, and/or dropping out and/or pregnancy and/or any of the other maladies that are often faced by those people who don't do well in school. We can, as principals, we can do a better job.

I don't know about sensitivity training. I think sometimes that's overstated. What I can do as a principal is, I can identify the teachers who are least effective at managing their classrooms and discipline them, as opposed to disciplining the children who are constantly being put in a bad situation by a teacher who can't control the classroom.

KAYE: Steve Perry, Daniel Losen, thank you so much. A very important topic to discuss there.

And we'll continue to watch it as our "Under Covered" story. Thank you.

LOSEN: Thank you.