

Linda Tropp comments in a story about “implicit bias” in the Amherst schools on NEPR:



Amherst Town Hall

(Photo Credit: [Scott Merzbach for The Daily Hampshire Gazette](#))

Amherst Task Force Takes On ‘Implicit Bias’ In Schools

by: *Karen Brown*

APRIL 14, 2015

The Amherst, Massachusetts, public schools have been talking a lot about race since last year, when an African-American math teacher was the target of racist graffiti around the high school. In response, the school committee created a task force to advise it on matters of “equity.” Now, task force members want the district to tackle a more subtle form of racism — something called “implicit bias.”

In the early 1990s, the Amherst NAACP sued the school department for its method of ‘tracking’ students — the group claimed the system made it difficult for students of color to break out of low expectations. Ever since, the district has released a yearly report on race-based statistics, including academics.... and discipline. Those are the numbers that get Michael Burkart most upset.

“Every year, it showed black and brown students getting disciplined and suspended at two to four times the rate of the population,” he says. Burkart used to consult for corporations on improving diversity. Now retired, he’s a member of the Amherst school equity task force — specifically, the sub-group looking at discipline.

According to state data, black students last year made up 7 percent of the Amherst student body and 22 percent of suspensions. Latinos are 13 percent of the schools and 29 percent of suspensions. The U.S. Department of Education has found similar disparities across the country. Also...around 85 percent of teachers — nationally and in Amherst — are white.

Burkart says there’s clearly more going on than just poor behavior.

“We all get the same message from the media, who’s dangerous,” he says, “and we know this starts around 6th grade. As black and brown boys start to get bigger, especially with white women teachers, it takes on a whole different dimension.”

Burkart, who is white, is talking about “implicit bias.” That’s a psychological term referring to the lens through which people sub-consciously perceive the world around them, even if they don’t explicitly discriminate.

Another task force member, Vira Douangmany Cage, says teachers may misinterpret behavior in children who grow up in different cultures. “In certain communities, looking in the eye of someone is considered rude,” she says. “In certain communities, talking to adults is not encouraged.”

Cage has Asian heritage, and her children are part African-American. She was just elected to the Amherst school committee. Cage says she hasn’t seen bias play out against her own family, but has noticed it elsewhere.

“I would say it’s tougher in Amherst to admit or accept our problem and our challenges because we are a progressive community,” she says, “and it’s hard to understand how implicit bias can happen in our community, in our town.”

But the school district says they’ve already accepted there is bias in the schools.

“Even if you didn’t see things playing out in your discipline data, we’re human beings who are raised in a culture, who come in with our own bias,” says Superintendent Maria Geryk. “It’s sitting there.”

For this reason, Geryk says the district has instituted in-depth teacher trainings about stereotypes and behavior.

Linda Tropp is a UMass psychologist who’s researched race disparities in schools. She doesn’t doubt hidden bias plays a role, though not as much with suspension-level offenses, like fights, that she says are more clear-cut.

“Where the ambiguity came in was with more minor infractions,” Tropp says. “So, for example, being disrespectful, or things that might involve more personal interpretation of events.”

That’s one reason Amherst administrators say they revamped the student code of conduct. A number of behaviors — like swearing at teachers, or leaving the classroom — are no longer immediate grounds for suspension. And teachers are encouraged to talk to students before they discipline. Amherst High principal Mark Jackson says it’s important to recognize the complex reasons that some students of color may act out.

“They’re alienated. They walk in with a significant degree of alienation. They sit on the margins of the school,” Jackson says. “So to simply narrow the conversation down to who gets suspended, who does not get suspended, I think takes your eye off a much larger prize, which is, how does instruction unfold, and how is climate established, both at schoolwide and classroom level.”

Amherst administrators insist changes put in place over the past year are working. They say only 9 students have been suspended so far this year — compared to 84 last year — though they haven’t released the new numbers by race.

Task Force members say they won’t be satisfied until the percentage of students of color disciplined reflects their proportion in the student body, and they want school administrators held accountable for meeting those goals. The group plans to present its recommendations to the school committee April 14th.