

Disproportionality

Nov 13, 2025

Presentation Overview

- Equity
- Equity & the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- State & Federal Context
- Defining key terminology: Disproportionality & Significant Disproportionality
- Data
- Root Cause Analysis
- Action Plan

Our Goal: Equity for All Students

- **Equity:** Educational equity means that all students have access to the educational resources, opportunities, and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income to meet high expectations for cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional growth and development.

Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs, <https://ccsso.org/equity> and National Equity project, <http://nationalequityproject.org/about/equity>

MA DESE District Standards and Indicators,
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators>.

Overview of IDEA Equity Calculations

States have **distinct** equity requirements under various sections of IDEA.



Significant
Discrepancy in
Discipline

(SPP/APR Indicators
4A & 4B)



Disproportionate
Representation

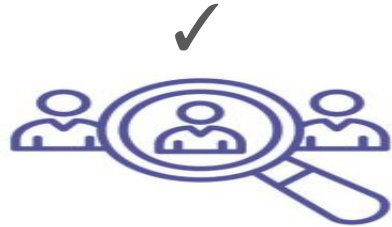
(SPP/APR Indicators 9
& 10)



Significant
disproportionality in
Identification,
Placement &
Discipline

IDEA and Disproportionality

- IDEA requires that states determine disproportionality in respect to:
 - *identification* of children as children with disabilities in specific disability categories
 - *placement* in particular educational settings of such children
 - *disciplinary actions* including the incidence, duration, and type, includes both suspensions and expulsions.



Identification



Placement



Discipline

Significant Disproportionality

- States have flexibility to set:
 - Minimum group size
 - Number of years of historical data
 - Risk ratio threshold
 - Definition of “reasonable progress”

Significant Disproportionality

- DESE uses a formula to measure if students with certain demographics are disproportionately more or less likely to be identified for special education, be identified in specific categories, be placed in more restrictive settings, or experience discipline.
- A risk ratio of 3.0 or higher for 3 consecutive years results in a finding of disproportionality.
 - A risk ratio of 3.0 means that students with a specific demographic are 3x more likely to experience an outcome than students without that demographic.



Disproportionality in Specific Disability Categories

In all years, the state target for disproportionality in special education is 0%.

This indicator measures the % of districts showing a disproportionate over-representation of students from racial/ethnic groups in specific disability categories that was the result of inappropriate identification.

Districts are "flagged" for further review if, for three consecutive years, the district exhibits a weighted risk ratio of 3.0 or greater.

Risk Ratio & Reasonable Progress

- The risk ratio threshold in Massachusetts is 3.0
- If the district is making reasonable progress, a state is not required to make an identification of significant disproportionality
 - **Reasonable progress:** lowering the risk ratio or alternate risk ratio for the group and category in each of the two prior consecutive years

	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>	<u>Year 3</u>	<u>Reasonable Progress</u>
District 1	5.6	5.3	5.2	Meets Reasonable Progress
District 2	4.9	4.8	4.6	Meets Reasonable Progress
District 3	4.7	4.9	4.3	Does Not Meet Reasonable Progress

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Significant Disproportionality: PSB

- In the past 5 years, the district has been identified by DESE twice as having a significantly disproportionate number of Black and African American students identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD).
- Cited in FY 20 & FY 25
- At Risk Status
- No reasonable progress to lower the risk ratio
- Significant Disproportionality Designation

Identification as a student with a Specific Learning Disability: SY 23-24

	Risk Ratio	Total No of Students	Total No of Students with SLD	% of Students with SLD
African American Black	3.22	441	43	9.8%
Asian	0.09	1,538	6	0.4%
Hispanic or Latino	1.61	872	45	5.2%
Multiracial	0.85	801	24	3.0%
Native American or American Indian or Alaskan Native	-	-	-	-
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	-	-	-	-
White	1.14	3445	127	3.7%
District Total		7104	245	3.5%
State Total		924,947	44,258	4.8%

Disproportionality: Definition

The over-representation of a specific group relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population, and/or the under-representation of a specific group in accessing intervention services, resources, programs, rigorous curriculum and instruction relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population.

Disproportionality: Definition

Disproportionality is the structured probability with which students of color are more likely to be “documented” as disabled

Purpose of this Work

- “In recent years, there’s been a lot of talk about the reasons behind the low performance of many students of color, English learners, and poor students. Rather than examine school policies and teacher practices, some attribute it to a ‘culture of poverty’ or different community values toward education.
- The reality is that they struggle not because of their race, language, or poverty. **They struggle because we don’t offer them sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks (Jackson, 2011; Boykin and Noguera, 2011).** That’s the achievement gap in action.” (p. 14).

Students who are Black and have Low Income

237

Current
Enrollment

IEP

41%

EL

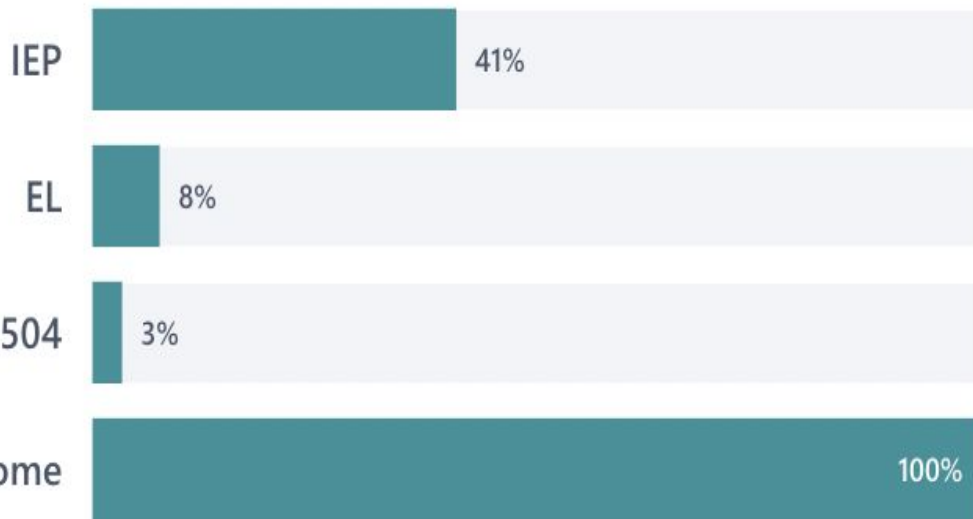
8%

504

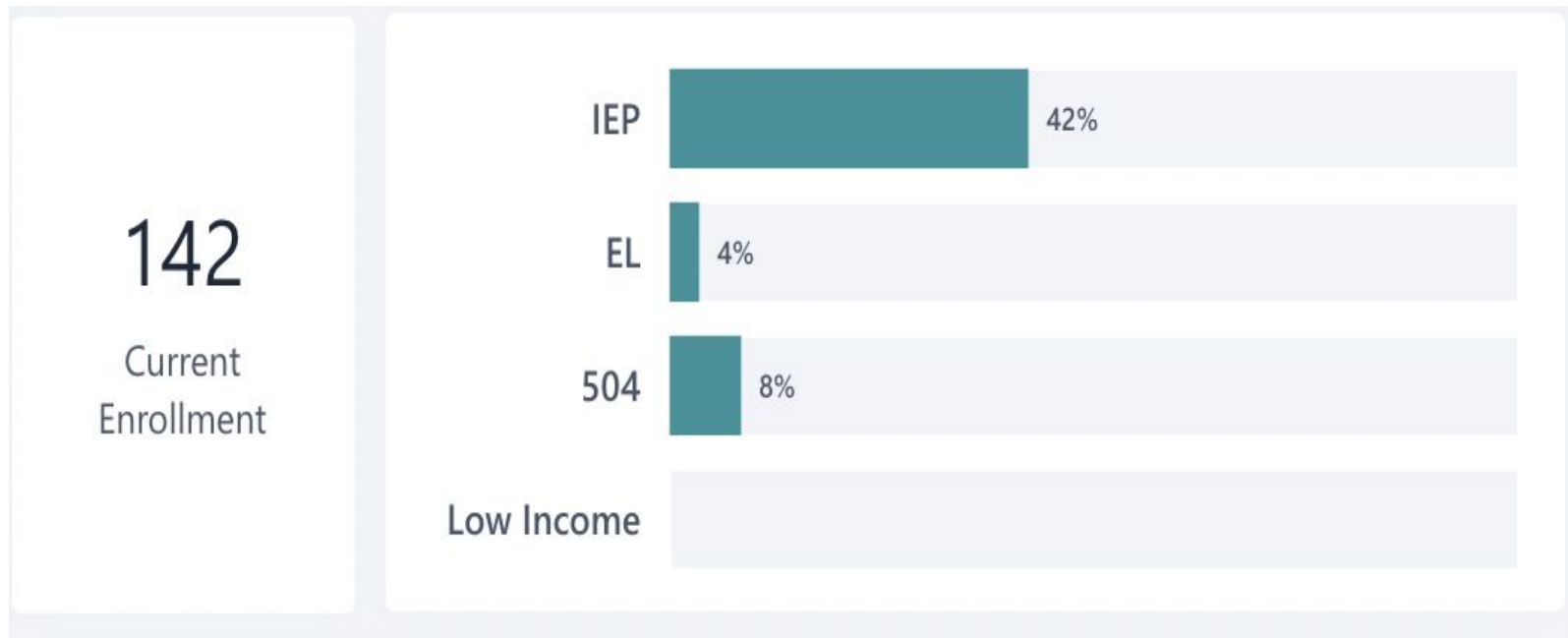
3%

Low Income

100%



Students who are Black and do NOT have Low Income

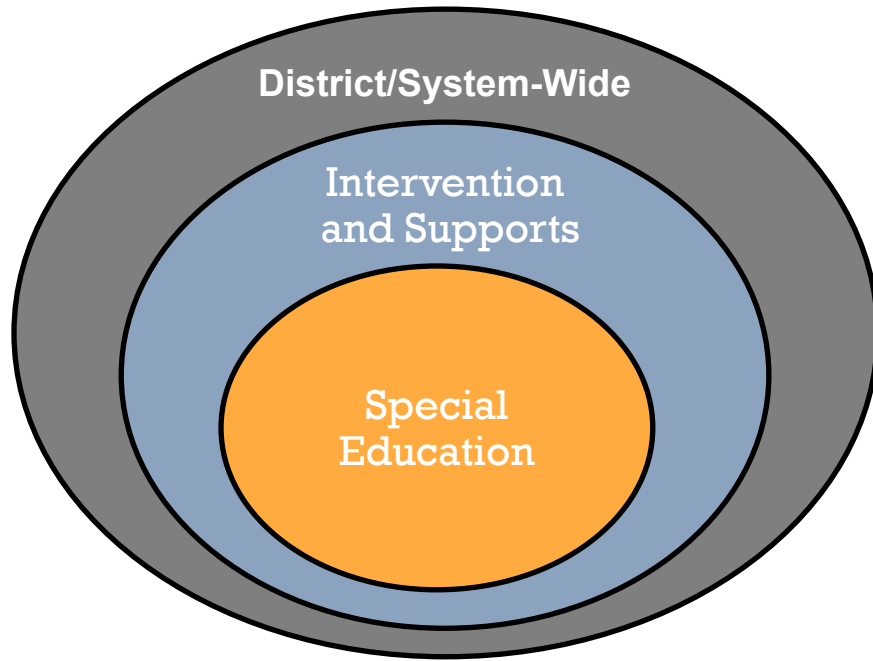


Working Toward Equity Involves...

- “Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor
- **Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children**
- Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests that every human possesses.”

National Equity Project, “Why Equity?” <https://nationalequityproject.org/about/equity>

Disproportionality is most often NOT a special education issue



While disproportionality citations come from special education laws, the factors that lead to it are often times outside of the realm of special education as are many of the solutions

Significant Disproportionality Expectations

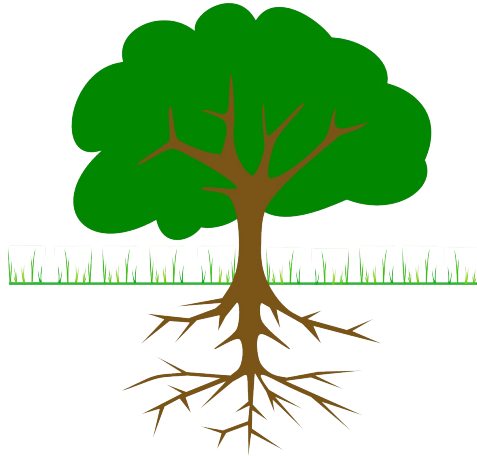
Identified Districts

- Identify factors contributing to significant disproportionality
- Conduct a review of Policies, Practices, Procedures (PPP) and publicly report on revisions
- Create an action plan and submit to DESE
- Reserve 15% of IDEA funds for Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS)
 - Ages 3-21
 - Students with or without disabilities

At Risk Districts

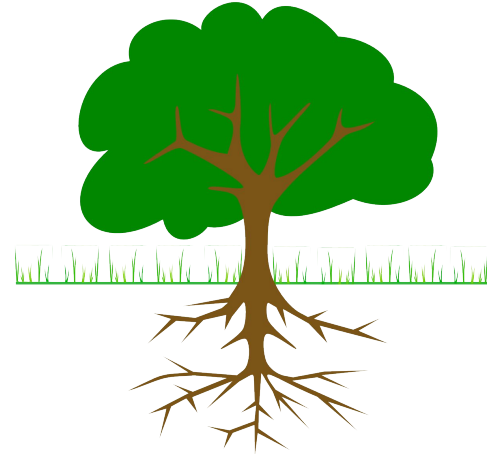
- Identify factors contributing to significant disproportionality
- Conduct a review of Policies, Practices, Procedures (PPP)
- Create an action plan

Systemic Change Comes From the Root



Root Causes

- Interactions of school practice (inputs) and student outcomes
- Diagnosis, Difference and Disability
- Understanding school & district processes and mechanisms that allow individual and group decisions that create and perpetuate disproportionality



Root Cause: Best Practices

There are 3 critical components of a root cause analysis



Root Cause Best Practices



- Policies, Practices, Procedures lens of your root
- Systems lens of your root
- Student-data lens of your root

Root Cause Best Practices

- Root cause analysis is both intensive and essential.
- Informal processes might be predicated on personal biases or beliefs.
- Identify gaps in performance across five domains.
 - Data-based decision making
 - Cultural responsiveness
 - Core instructional program
 - Assessment
 - Interventions and supports

Root Cause: Data

New Teacher Center Report, 2021

- 21% of PSB students in special education are categorized as having a Specific Learning Disability
- 20 % of the students in the SLD category are Black or African American
- 45% received no general education intervention prior to referral to special education
- Many Interventions that were provided were not targeted, were not progress monitored and not delivered with fidelity.

Root Cause Analysis

- Inconsistent Tier 1 literacy/reading practices/curricula used across the district.
- Many of the practices and curricula that were being used were not aligned with the science of reading.
- Inconsistent practices across schools regarding how students were identified as needing academic intervention, the types of interventions students received, when students received intervention (which occasionally occurs during Tier 1 instruction), and in measuring how students responded to intervention.
- Varying levels of performance, including data that is just below age expectations, are seen as impairments and weaknesses that are indicative of a disability.
- Pressure in the system for eligibility findings.

Root Cause Analysis

- Students have inconsistent Tier 1 experiences in the classroom and inconsistent experiences with intervention.
- For students with the highest needs, their academic needs are inconsistently and/or ineffectively being met at Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3.
- There are also **mindset needs** that directly impact how teachers approach students with academic skill gaps, beliefs about what students need when skill gaps are present, and the underlying root cause for the skill gap.

Root Cause Analysis

- Lack of procedures to determine eligibility for academic interventions and to link assessment data to intervention
- Lack of procedures to determine what represents an effective response to intervention.
- Lack of procedures to help determine if students have had sufficient access to evidence-based Tiered instruction.

Without these procedures, it is difficult for schools to rule out a lack of effective instruction as a proximal contributor to a student's difficulty- this is a critical exclusionary criterion

Root Cause Analysis

The root cause analysis of the persistent disproportionality identified Tier One - Core Instruction as a significant contributing factor.

New Teacher Center Report

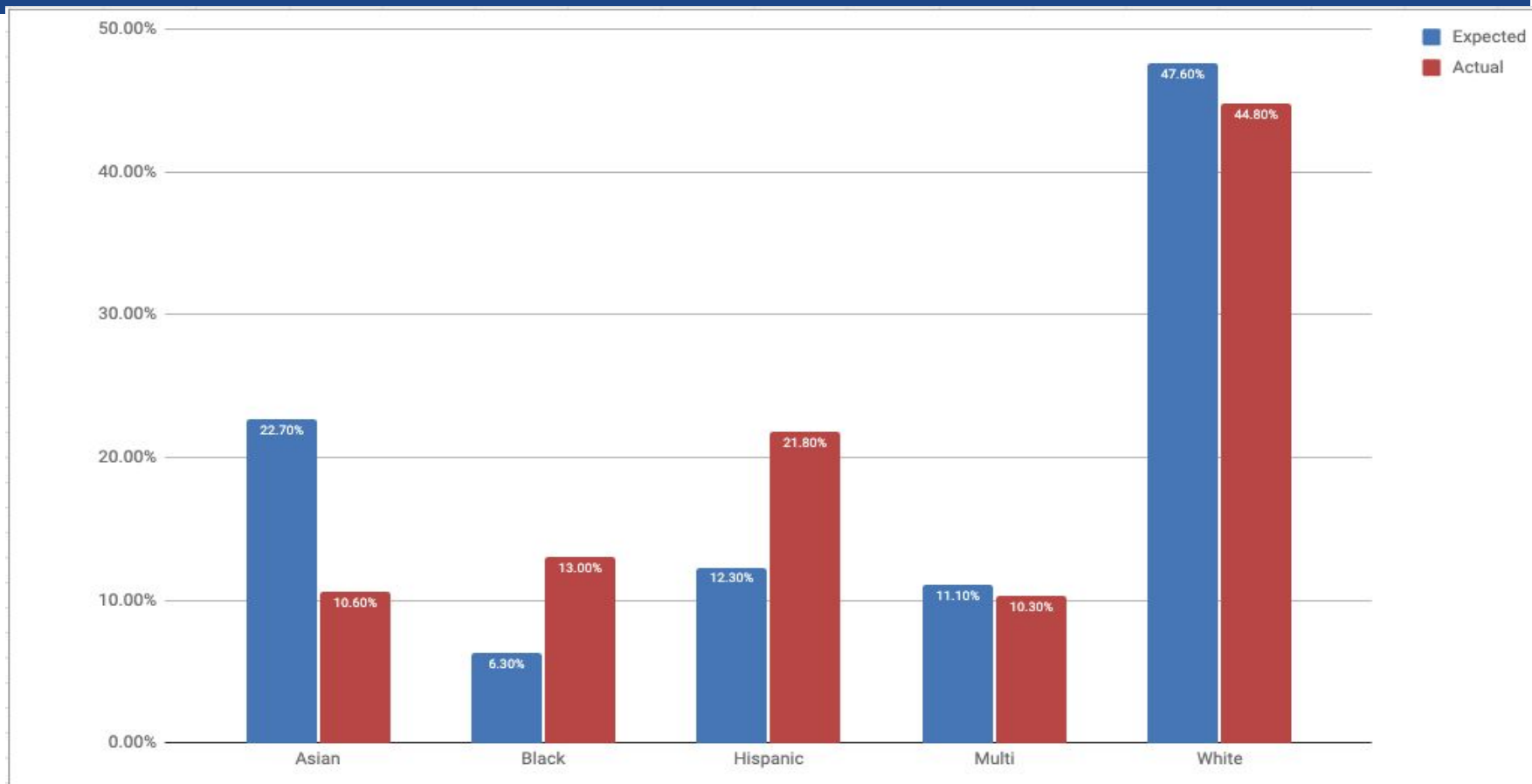
PSB Demographic Data

Title	% of District	% of State
First Language Not English	30.7%	27.2 %
English Learners	11.4%	13.9 %
Students with Disabilities	18.6%	20.6 %
High Needs	41.1%	55.8 %
Low Income	14.6 %	42.1 %

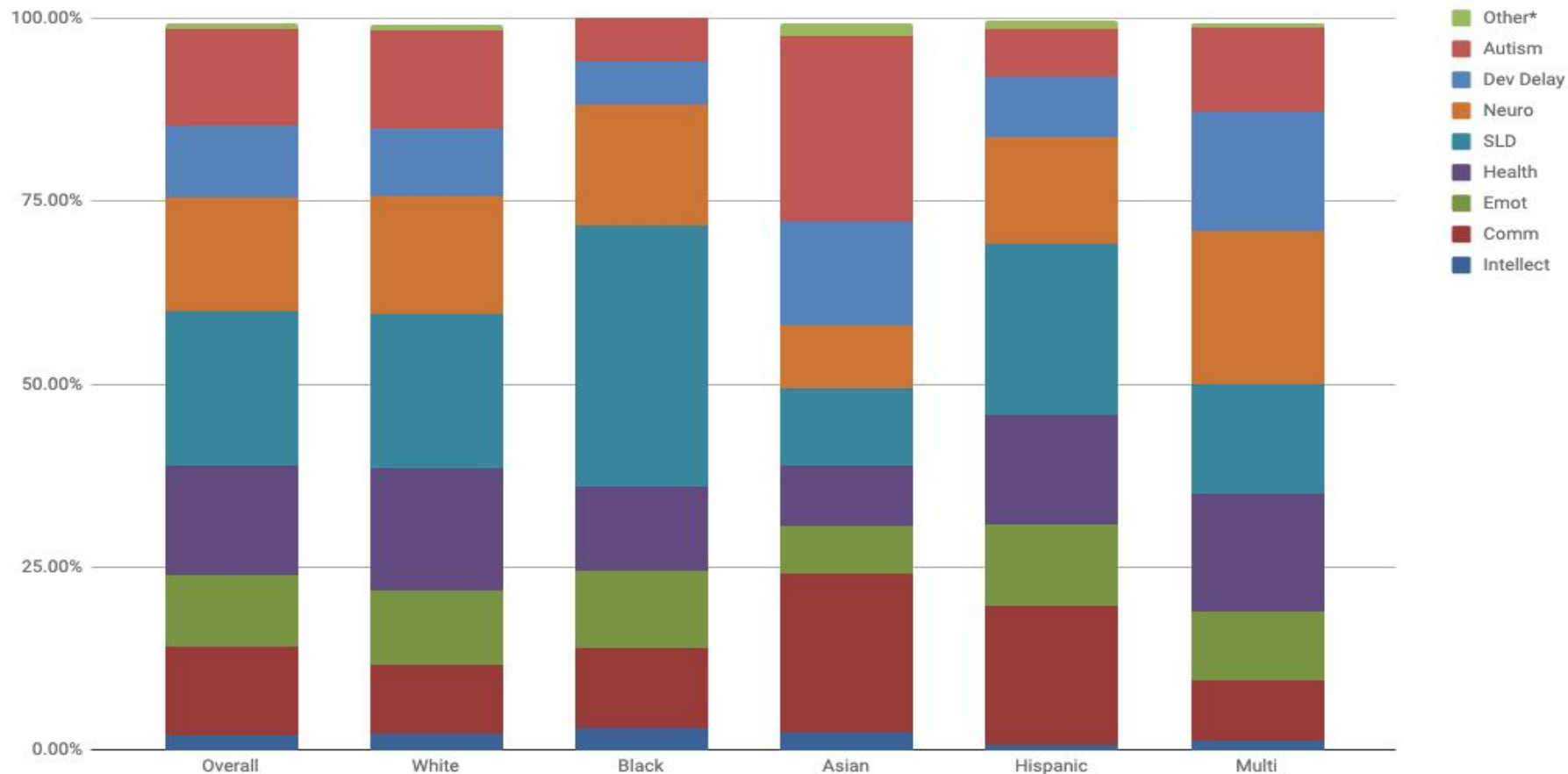
PSB Demographic Data

	African American/ Black	Asian	Hispanic/Latino	Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	White
Total Enrollment	6.3%	22.7%	12.3%	11.1%	47.6%
Special Education	13.0%	10.6%	21.8%	10.3%	44.8%

Special Education Representation



District Disability Category by Racial Identity



Multiple Causes and Solutions

Interactions
of **Policies,**
Practices &
Beliefs



District Priorities: Equity

- As educators we can engage with connections between historical roots, current cultural norms, existing structural practices, and as professionals can create change.
- Teachers who understand the social construction of racial ability, social class norms and how they differ in time and place, are more accepting of students as who they are and diversity in general.
-
- It is within an educator's reach to become more conscious of ways in which racism works in school and out.

Action Plan

Systems Level

- Literacy Curriculum & Instruction work: K-8 Structured Literacy
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: Data, Systems, Structures
- Disproportionality Work group: Data & Accountability
- Student Intervention Team (SIT) Process
- Wilson & Orton Gillingham Training
- Paraprofessional Training in Literacy Supports
- Eligibility Alignment

Student Level

- High Dosage Tutoring
- Flexible Behavioral Support Team
- After-School & Vacation Literacy Tutoring
- Family Engagement