

Addressing Disproportionality Through Undoing Racism, Leadership Development, and Community Engagement

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In 2005 the Texas 79th legislature passed Senate Bill 6, which included mandates to address disproportionality. This article will describe how the Texas Department of Family Protective Services in collaboration with Casey Family Programs' Texas State Strategy systems improvement initiative is addressing disproportionality statewide through promising practices and innovations in undoing racism trainings, values-based leadership development, and community engagement strategies.

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In 2005 the Texas 79th legislature passed Senate Bill 6, mandating the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS) to address disproportionality, specifically to provide cultural competency training to all service delivery staff; increase targeted recruitment for foster and adoptive parents to meet the needs of children waiting for homes; target recruitment efforts to ensure diversity among child welfare staff, and develop collaborative community partnerships to provide culturally competent services to children and families of every race and ethnicity. (James, Green, & Rodriguez, 2006, p. 9)

Texas was required to determine “whether Child Protective Services (CPS) enforcement actions [were] disproportionately initiated against any racial or ethnic group after accounting for other relevant factors” (Texas Health and Human Services Commission [HHSC], 2006, p. 1). In 2005 data showed that “African American children in Texas were almost twice as likely as Anglo or Hispanic children to be reported as victims of child abuse and neglect” (Department of Family Protective Services, 2007). Since the mandate, Texas’ efforts to address disproportionality have been nationally visible, as evidenced by learning exchanges with other states such as Washington, Michigan, and Kentucky. Spurred by interests in systems change, leadership development, legislative support for systems improvement, and integrating undoing racism trainings into leadership development, these states have sought to adopt strategies successful in Texas to their own situations.

Texas’ disproportionality work began when concerns were raised in the late 1990s by a child protective services regional director, who was successful in developing a plan and vision for Project HOPE (Helping Our People Excel), a One-Stop Service Center

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(Belanger, 2002). When this regional director became the Assistant Commissioner of CPS, she initiated changes modeled on Project HOPE to address the issue statewide (J. James, personal communication, February 21, 2007). Texas recognized its problems prior to the legislative mandate and collaborated with Casey Family Programs through the Texas State Strategy systems improvement initiative in 2004, expanding their partnership “to concentrate resources and energy to establish intensive planning and implementation processes to reduce disproportionality in the Texas child welfare system” (James et al., 2006, p. 3). Casey and CPS partnered to bring regional directors and program administrators from the two largest Texas regions (Houston, Arlington/Dallas-Fort Worth) to a two-day planning meeting. An expanded community advisory model used in developing Project HOPE became the strategy for expanding regional efforts. That year, the governor also issued an order for reform, which the HHSC identified disproportionality as a reform recommendation.

Inaugurating a statewide, multiyear response to disproportionality, the Houston and Arlington/Dallas-Fort Worth areas were selected as pilot sites due to the large concentration of African American children in care. In 2005 a Regional Community Advisory Committee on Disproportionality was established for the Houston area and a regional steering committee and three advisory committees representing three counties were established for the Arlington/Dallas-Fort Worth area. With broad stakeholder representation, chartered committees provided ongoing guidance for disproportionality planning and implementation work including recommendations for change and informing regional and state policymakers and CPS management. A workgroup, which made recommendations that could be implemented and sustained statewide, could ensure outcome-based policy and practice changes, and could reflect best and promising practice, was formed. TDFPS, believing communities and families must inform solutions, urged that external stakeholders be included. Key stakeholders were CPS clients (birth families, youth in care, foster care alumni, kinship

families); foster and adoptive families; policymakers and their staffs; CPS staff; community-based organizations; faith-based communities; state human services systems; law enforcement; city, county, and state resources; foundations and funders (local, state, and national); private industry; community advocates, advisory council on minority adoptions, and service providers. In May 2006 Casey and CPS initiated the planning phase for disproportionality in Austin, where community meetings, with a broad range of stakeholders and constituents, have been ongoing.

TDFPS aimed to address issues surrounding the disproportionate rate at which children enter the CPS system, inequities in service access, and disproportionate and disparate outcomes for African American children in the child welfare system, for all phases of service (investigation, removal, placement, reunification, and adoption) and the influences at decision points that impact the disparity of outcomes. Internally, CPS planned a concurrent examination of related statewide policy and procedures. It also forged a cultural shift using a cross-systems approach linking child welfare, juvenile justice, education, health and mental health, workforce, and other systems.

TDFPS planned an evaluation of its progress in reducing disproportionality and CPS created a disproportionality director position and disproportionality specialist positions. The State Office Disproportionality Division Administrator was hired, along with five disproportionality specialists and staff to work with CPS staff in specific regions. The assistant commissioner for CPS, the disproportionality director, and the Casey Texas State Strategy Director offered disproportionality community awareness presentations on the local, state, and national levels (James et al., 2006). In 2005 and 2006 all of the regional directors, program administrators, and CPS state office managers completed Undoing Racism training from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. A majority of program specialists and selected community members and staff through the worker level in the pilot sites also received this workshop. Repeated sessions of the Undoing Racism training have been held in pilot areas.

TDFPS staff, who provide Basic Skills Development (BSD) training for all new CPS caseworkers, attended the Undoing Racism training to introduce the issue of disproportionality vis-à-vis systemic/institutional racism and the approach Texas CPS is taking to address it. In addition, the three-part “Knowing Who You Are” (KWYA) curriculum was adopted for implementation in BSD for all new Family-Based Safety Services and Conservatorship caseworkers. The agency has provided this training to management and is planning on providing this training to investigators as well.

Selected administrators and staff participated in the national Casey Family Programs and Annie E. Casey Foundation Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Disproportionality which focused on building community awareness, cultural competency in case planning practices, and hearing from community residents, providing early indicators of community concerns and needs specific to disproportionality. Between 2005 and 2006, CPS offered enhanced training for service delivery staff and management, developed collaborative relationships with community partners, increased staff diversity, and improved targeted recruitment efforts for foster and adoptive families.

To document and examine efforts made, TDFPS and HHSC released the report, “Disproportionality in Child Protective Services,” to the Texas legislature in January 2006. The Disproportionality Remediation Plan, which TDFPS released with HHSC on July 1, 2006, stated that, since Senate Bill 6’s passage, the state had analyzed data related to enforcement actions, reviewed policies and procedures in the child protection program, and developed plans to remedy disparities. In accordance with Senate Bill 6 legislation, CPS was required to

examine the relationship between risk, race, ethnicity, and poverty to gain a better understanding into individual practices and biases so that it may one day have the tools to extricate improper considerations such as poverty and race from an assessment of risk of harm to a child.

A study by Rivaux et al. (in press) analyzed CPS data collected from 2003 to 2005 and findings suggested “all else being equal, race, risk, and income predict the services decision and the removal decision.”

TDFPS has concurrently been examining the data from their renewal initiatives in Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and Kinship Care (Texas Department of Family Protective Services, 2006; Texas Department of Family Protective Services, 2007). To ensure that these practices and changes in disproportionality are sustainable and effective, TDFPS has integrated FGDM—innovative work engaging families in planning and making decisions for the child’s treatment plan to divert the child from entering the CPS system—into the disproportionality work. Kinship Care Initiative connects the child to the relatives and extended family providing safety, stability, and permanency. These initiatives represent the varied programs that TDFPS has adapted to its disproportionality work.

In the 2006 final evaluation of the FGDM, “32% of African American children whose families attended a FGDM conference returned home, relative to 14% whose families received traditional services” (Texas Department of Family Protective Services, 2006, p. 4). In a preliminary evaluation report of Kinship Care (Relative Caregiver Assistance Program), the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (2007) found “Kinship placements were more likely than nonkin placements to end with a return home (kinship returned home 19.3% compared to 15.6% nonkin)” (p. 4). These findings confirm progress toward the TDFPS mandate to address disproportionality.

Literature Review

Disproportionality asserts that

- a great difference exists between races in the likelihood that a child will be removed from home and placed in foster care;
- children of color enter the system at disproportionately high rates as compared to Anglo children;
- African American children are four times more likely to be placed in care;

- African Americans are no more likely to abuse their children than any other race;
- unadjusted data indicate African American children are overrepresented in the Texas CPS system and the level of disproportionality increases at each stage of service;
- adjusted data indicate that African American children are more likely to be removed and spend time longer times in care than Anglo children, as do Hispanic children (James et al., 2006, p. 13).

Risk factors for African American families occur at the macro and mezzo levels of society (McRoy & Vick, 2006). Macrolevel factors of racism, oppression, and poverty contribute to erroneous reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect. Targeted and unsafe neighborhoods deprived of resources or omitted from community development projects because of their racial composition, contribute to African American families' sense of internalized oppression. Family poverty, unemployment, single parenthood, limited resources, unsolicited involvement and decision making contribute to communities that succumb to "coping" rather than engagement. The neglect of cultural strengths such as extended family and grandparent involvement perpetuates the harm of excluding African American family members in deciding their fate. Family group decision making and kinship care may counter racist attitudes and practices outside and within the public child welfare system (Fong & Knopf, 2007).

Successful innovations for reducing disproportionality depend on systemic cultural changes within CPS and other systems impacting African American children, families, and communities (Hendricks & Fong, 2006). CPS constituents (families, youth, and foster care alumni) must be "at the table" to inform this work. In its proposed action steps, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA; 2003) said it would

consult with diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial communities to obtain their perspective on the existing challenges and collaborate with these families and communities to

develop political solutions to disproportionate identification by involvement in, and interventions by the formal child welfare system. (p. 6)

TDFPS, like CWLA, made a commitment to engage the community in addressing disproportionality in the state.

Innovations

Texas has also promoted three promising practice innovations to address disproportionality: Undoing Racism trainings, values-based leadership development, and community engagement strategies.

Undoing Racism

Undoing racism is a priority in the Texas work. The People's Institute for Survival offers trainings to undo racism and "considers racism the primary barrier preventing communities from building effective coalitions and overcoming institutionalized oppression and inequities" (The People's Institute for Survival, 2007).

Undoing Racism training began for CPS leadership in 2005 with the Houston Region, followed by the Arlington Region, and spread throughout the state. The two-and-a-half-day Undoing Racism workshop teaches how to (1) analyze power, (2) define racism, (3) identify manifestations of racism, (4) learn from history, (5) share culture, and (6) organize to undo racism within systems and institutions and at the community level. The workshop asserts that to undo racism, participants should analyze its manifestations, undo internalized racial oppression, develop leadership, network, maintain accountability, and reshape gate keeping. Successful efforts must acknowledge the existence of institutional/systemic racism, that "racism has been done and can be undone" and that the work must incorporate antiracist principles.

To support statewide and systemic attitudinal change about racism, as well as to address cultural awareness, Undoing Racism and KWYA trainings are offered to staff. Furthering their cultural competence, the two-day specialized KWYA training helps child

welfare professionals explore race and ethnicity and prepares them to support the healthy development of their clients' racial and ethnic identities. The KWYA training for all new CPS foster-adopt caseworkers has been expanded to include workers and managers in all stages of services focusing on information on disproportionality.

The Undoing Racism training has produced sustainable practices within the CPS system. Workers are more open about discussing race and institutional racism, and team management meetings discuss the issues regularly. Caseworkers are becoming more sensitive in making case decisions, some of which have been revisited due to new awareness of institutional or personal racism. New staff hires are more sensitive to cultural issues, and a more diverse workforce at the department's state and regional offices is evident. While the trainings have been received well and plans exist to multiply their numbers, the difficulties encountered in the trainings are related to sustainability and evaluation of effectiveness. The Undoing Racism trainings need to be mandatory. There must be commitment and follow-through that all employees at CPS will receive the training. Trained CPS workers need institutionalized means to reinforce their training as it applies to client practice. Process evaluation and evaluative posttraining follow-up are needed to see if the training impacts client outcomes.

Values-Based Leadership Development

The values-based literature (Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1995; Cameron & Quinn, 1999) and the empowerment literature (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998) share common traits of effective leadership in empowerment-oriented programs, which include "articulating a clear vision of values and goals of empowerment," "demonstrating a strong commitment to these values and goals," "forming strong egalitarian collaborative networks among workers, clients, community action groups," and "reflecting empowerment-oriented values in all aspects of program development and implementation" (p. 175). These principles are demonstrated in the CPS leadership development efforts in Texas. Supporting values such as

undoing racism and community engagement are integral to addressing disproportionality problems.

Formal leadership development processes are an intentional part of the Texas state strategy's efforts to support and develop leaders in public child welfare. This serves to focus the work throughout child welfare on the cultural change towards a family-centered practice model. Effectively addressing disproportionality makes this shift imperative.

The leadership development process began in 2003 with training for CPS managers producing an initial set of core values. Sessions facilitated by Dr. Gloria Burgess, from the Casey Family Programs' Organizational Learning Alliance (OLA), modeled the leadership development that continues to support agency leaders in their integration of antiracist values into disproportionality work.

The CPS leadership team is committed to strong leadership grounded in values that can ensure a strong legacy of intentional leading through vision and values. Burgess (2006) exhorts, "Legacy honors our deep concern and caring for others. . . . Vision is the bridge that connects us to the future, for it allows us to hold in our mind's eye, our heart, and our soul images our passion. . . ." (pp. 18–19).

Between 2003 and 2005, CPS developed and enhanced vision and values. The initial set developed in 2003 were "Children First: Safe and Secure," emphasizing the values of respect, inclusiveness, integrity, compassion, and commitment. The enhanced set developed in 2005 became "Children First: Protected and Connected." Respect for culture; inclusiveness of families, youth and community; integrity in decision making; compassion for all; and commitment to reducing disproportionality were and continue to be core values throughout CPS. The more defined set of vision and values clarify the operational values in the context of a family-centered practice approach.

CPS' leadership development focus presumes that good leadership must be fostered to effect an internal organizational cultural change that all leaders and staff who interact with youth, families,

and communities can embrace. This includes supporting staff in the cultural change process so that cultural competence, family support, and strengths-based work underlie and define the way work is done throughout the organization.

Vision and values must be developed that integrate all aspects of the cultural change desired. New models and methodologies are also incorporating sustainable family-centered practices. Like the values described previously, the vision reflects a more integrated way of engaging youth, families, and communities so that youth have strong, safe connections to family and community and opportunities to fulfill their potential.

The value and practice has been to ensure that sustainable practices in case decision making, hiring practices, and management processes are all linked to vision and values so that staff and managers can see how they are interconnected in their daily management and direct practice. There is a strategic link to data-driven decision making, ensuring that actions are both informed by data and relevant to CPS and the community and that goals are aligned with policy and program changes. Underlying values-based leadership development efforts is the concern that racism contributes to disproportionality and requires a mandatory, systematic response to undo it. One problem in implementing values-based leadership is that not all leaders uphold the values promoted in their workplace. Administrators and case managers who do personally and professionally support the value of undoing racism and engaging African American families to have input in decisions need to find consistent ways to model it in the workplace and embed it into management practices, perhaps requiring policy changes.

Community Engagement Strategies

In addressing disproportionality, the Texas public child welfare system seeks community partners who have decision authority, the ability to commit resources, and leverage investments designed to ensure sustainability. Particular attention is given to how community partners are “enrolled” while regional and local advisory

committee members assist by bringing others “to the table” and engage in a gap-identification process to determine who is missing and what agencies, organizations, or individuals need to be present.

Sites continue to be selected using CPS and community mapping data including community strengths, resources, employment and unemployment rates, incarceration rates, high school graduation rates, and available resources and services such as churches, schools, child care facilities, shopping facilities, and service organizations. Other important issues have included how a site is defined by adjacent zip code areas or how it might be staffed, what the advantages are to being situated in the community served, and accessibility for families to services and supports. Communities must be the identifiers of solutions, leading and investing in the work and its results. By involving policymakers and staff, community partnerships and their efforts can and will lead to public policy change that can propel needed changes into action.

To address disproportionality in Texas, a nonsequential, four stage model community engagement framework is used. The first stage of community awareness and engagement involves foundational concepts including making the problem of disproportionality visible in communities and internal organizational systems serving families and youth. It includes sharing the data with the community and other agencies making the undisputable facts visible so the problem is grounded in real numbers and anecdotal data. Critical is “telling the story” through the media and voices of constituents—alumni, birth parents, kin caregivers, foster parents—who know disproportionality firsthand. It is also important to enroll community leaders and others who can commit resources linked to sustainable change strategies and are informed advocates. Other recruits should be media representatives, policymakers and their staff, and other public policy advocates to keep telling the story. A compelling message must be given to the community that the work is bigger than CPS and it must be presented as an ongoing systems improvement through community engagement.

The second stage of community leadership involves expanding leadership beyond organizations or institutions to the appropriate community level, which reflects knowledge of community strengths. It presumes this work must be led by the community in partnership with CPS through a facilitative leadership process. Communication with committee members must be regular to ensure participation.

In Texas the leadership processes are cofacilitated by CPS and Casey Family Programs' Texas State Strategy. Community advisory / steering committees with a broad membership operate under written charters created by the regional advisory committee. Recommendations regarding the approaches, the practice models to apply, and the processes through which the community site areas are selected are key activities. Facilitators inform what the work is, through a guided process by which committee leadership emerges. For sustainability of interest and commitment, community members need opportunities to participate in meaningful ways.

The charters outlining committee operations describe the vision for the work, the assumptions and beliefs of the advisory committee members, the decision-making processes of the regional committee, roles and responsibilities, leadership structure, suggested work areas, operational structure, and how the work is sponsored—tying it back to statewide efforts.

Community investment and ownership in systems improvements are directly linked to community strengths, constituent voice, and needs identified by the community. The work in Texas demonstrates the conviction that community leaders and members, who often have been critical of CPS practices, can become allies and advocates when brought to the table. This has required being vulnerable, being willing to listen to criticisms of CPS practices, and being willing to change and improve in areas identified by the community.

The third stage of community organization involves learning from the community what its strengths and needs are, hearing from residents, and genuinely bringing them into the process as

key informants. It works to directly legitimize the process and confirm the practices selected for application in the community and aims to ensure that the community is given ongoing opportunities to contribute in selecting and applying strategies for change.

This stage also emphasizes work guided by antiracist principles, principles of community organizing embedded within child welfare practice through the work by disproportionality specialists, the premise that “the community knows best,” and the belief that communities are resilient as are their residents and members.

The fourth stage of community accountability involves working to identify short- and long-term outcomes, tracking milestones toward outcomes achieved, and evaluating measurable results. Sustainability is the ultimate goal—to leave communities in a better place once the issues are known and addressed. The guiding belief is that communities are the “owners” of the solutions to achieve sustainable safety, permanency, and well-being for their children. Community leaders do not stay silent; they advocate and put resources forward to keep children safely in their communities with their families. Communities, through their strengths, hold systems accountable for the oppression of their residents. Accountability must be visible—through written Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) and other formal strategies. An example is how Project HOPE became 501(c)(3) organization.

Promising Practices

TDFPS and Casey Family Programs, through collaboration in the Texas state strategy systems improvement initiative, have implemented statewide community building strategies to address disproportionality through undoing racism, values-based leadership, and community engagement. CPS has a different definition of “helping,” emphasizing community engagement and more listening to clients, more awareness of race and cultural factors, and including this knowledge in case assessment and treatment planning. Because of the CPS administrators’ values-based leadership

philosophy and framework, staff and workers at the state and regional levels understand families are important players. Attitudinal changes are occurring, often due to the permission given by the Undoing Racism trainings to discuss institutional racism.

The core of addressing disparities within the child welfare system is developing a cultural change embracing principles of anti-racism in everyday practices. Leaders have become change ambassadors by making disproportionality visible in their region and in the communities. Texas leaders have taken specific steps to identify systemic racist practices and policies that negatively impact African American families and have developed action plans to successfully improve outcomes and decrease disparities by

- attending Undoing Racism training;
- having open discussions of institutional racism in leadership, program, and unit meetings;
- addressing biases that affect placement of African American children;
- ensuring that staff explore all options available before placing children;
- developing culturally appropriate strategies to remedy negative impact on African American children and families;
- using data to address disparities; and
- making staff accountable for measurable outcomes.

Regional staff is improving service delivery—a change visible to those we serve and the community at large. Every day, CPS leaders demonstrate accountability and passion through the belief that disproportionality was done and therefore can be undone. Countless testimonies from staff describe how they have reexamined their life stories and view families and youth differently. One regional director said it this way:

As the leadership for Child Protective Services, we can—and will—change our agency culture to true family-centered practice. We will work together as a team to continue to move forward but remember that all of us individuals also have the responsibility to move ourselves forward. Our responsibility

is to children and families who deserve to be treated as individuals and to receive the best possible services.

TDFPS is aware that continued and extensive evaluation is needed in the next phase of disproportionality work. For the Undoing Racism training both process and outcome evaluations are necessary. Surveys need to be administered before and after the Undoing Racism trainings. Follow-up surveys should occur annually. Feedback mechanisms about training principle application need to continue to occur through structured meeting times such as once a month group dialogue with both administrators and frontline workers.

In terms of values-based leadership, evaluation of subjective change would initially need to be documented through process evaluation measures. Individual subjective change would need to be noted.

In evaluating the community engagement model, CPS is conducting an evaluation at the state level. The state evaluation uses a decision-making ecology framework (Baumann, Fluke, & Kern, 1997) and is focused on four primary areas: the case factors, worker factors, organizational factors, and community factors. At the organizational level, the TDFPS needs a cultural assessment to determine what CPS values, behaviors, and outcomes have changed as a result of the statewide disproportionality efforts. The evaluation of the community engagement strategies should include stakeholders and the community members. To “reinvest the resources” CPS should review the data collected from the various pilot sites on disproportionality and determine what the next steps must be, keeping in mind that each site is different because the needs of African American families vary by community.

Conclusion

The core of addressing disparities within the child welfare system is developing a cultural change that embraces the principles of anti-racism in everyday practices. The leadership of Texas has

taken specific steps to identify systemic racist practices and policies that harm African American families and have developed action plans to successfully improve outcomes and decrease disparities. Leaders have become ambassadors for change by making disproportionality visible in their region and in the communities. Regional staff has improved their delivery of services—a change visible both to those clients served and the community at large. Every day, CPS leaders demonstrate both accountability and passion through the belief that disproportionality was done and therefore can be undone.

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