Dr. Pedro Noguera is executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at New York University. His research suggests boys of color possess serious educational and social vulnerabilities across urban, suburban and rural America. He points to specific structural conditions in neighborhoods and schools that marginalize these youngsters and undermine their educational opportunities and achievement.

In an *Education Week* article titled "Saving Black and Latino Boys," Noguera writes that African-American and Latino males are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school, and that dropout rates for African-American and Latino males in most U.S. cities are well above 50 percent.

Boys of color, Noguera found, are less likely to enroll in college or graduate than others, and even middle-class young men of color lag significantly in grade point average and on standardized tests – patterns so common and widespread he suggests we no longer register surprise, or even alarm, at the dismal statistics.

In Central Ohio we see the same disturbing trends in low reading scores and graduation rates and higher suspension and expulsion rates for black and Latino young men. Franklin County Commissioner Paula Brooks concludes with certainty: "Our boys of color are being left behind. They need our help and they need it now."

**Slipping through the cracks**

"If you look at the building blocks for successful child development – a positive early childhood experience, a strong stable neighborhood and economic security for families – boys of color are vulnerable across all of these factors," said Jason Reece, who studies these trends as research director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University.

His data indicate African-Americans possess the highest infant mortality rates and are two to three times more likely to be low-birth-weight births or pre-term. Further, African-American and Latino boys experience a disproportionate level of poverty in our community, and often live in neighborhoods that are less safe and have significant blight.
"These young men then come into school facing many barriers that other kids in our community don't face," Reece says. "So as they enter school, they may need more support than other kids coming from more affluent families or communities."

James Moore III, College of Education and Human Ecology distinguished professor of urban education and director of the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male at Ohio State, studies youth in some of the most vulnerable schools in America and has seen the academic achievement gap up close.

"When you look at the data, black males and Latino males are always at the bottom," he says.

Moore, a school counselor by training, says African-American males underachieve throughout the educational pipeline and the reasons are complicated. He notes many don't have expectations of academic excellence for black males, a stigma that follows them throughout their educational experience.

"For some, it inspires," he says, "but for some, it inhibits their academic journeys."

Frederick Luis Aldama, arts and humanities distinguished professor of English at Ohio State, arrived in California from Mexico City at age 4. When he came to Columbus in 2005, he visited schools and families.

"I saw that, in fact, the Latino elementary, middle and high school students were slipping through the cracks."

His research confirmed the dismal statistics – large numbers of Latino males not advancing through high school and few heading to college.

"There are a lot of family pressures for Latino males to get a job to support the family. On top of this, the larger social mirror in which we exist in this country says 'these opportunities are not for you,' " Aldama says.

Moore agrees: "Oftentimes in American society, there's a social phenomenon in the air that suggests 'these individuals are not worthy, they're not valued, they're not capable.'"

He talks about the heightened anxiety this creates for African-American youth.

"This plays out in tests, it plays out in achievement," he says.

Reece sees the stress for boys of color as a disrupter of their emotional and physical well-being. He terms "the mental tax of poverty" when these boys must think about where their next meal is coming from or if they are going to again be evicted from their home.

"These stressors are chronic, unrelenting," Reece says. "So a teacher might see a student who's acting out and that may be viewed as bad behavior or poor decision-making when it may be a symptom of untreated trauma or a child trying to process the enormous stress they're living under.

"Implicit bias is a form of self-conscious bias. Most Americans today will consciously reject the idea of racial prejudice, but studies demonstrate that the majority of us hold biases across lots
of different domains," he says.

**How race bias plays out**

Indeed, Reece calls race one of the more powerful biases that most Americans carry around.

"It's not something we're consciously aware of, but it definitely impacts our behaviors in the way we perceive people around us," he says. "We often refer to it as being blind to our own blindness."

Data in Ohio and elsewhere illustrate African-American and Latino males are treated differently in the classroom – that in subjective situations related to classroom disorder or in issues of respect, these boys are punished more harshly. These trends show up as early as in preschool.

"Young boys of color are seen as being energetic and disruptive," Reece says, "whereas young white children who exhibit the same behavior are being seen as just experiencing play."

At Westerville schools, administrators proactively began to address this issue. They saw a pattern where students of color were disproportionately represented in discipline incidents involving school rules – areas they believed to be subjective.

"So we wanted to make sure that we peel back the onion to find out what is at the root cause of why more students of color, particularly boys, are sent to the office," says **Cynthia DeVese**, minority achievement coordinator at the Westerville City School District.

Examining research on school discipline and implicit bias done by the Kirwan Institute raised important questions for the school district, DeVese says: "Could it possibly be our teachers are recognizing the behavior of our boys of color more so than our other students?"

The Westerville team wondered if unconscious societal biases among teachers might contribute to the imbalance around disciplinary actions. The school district began to work with Kirwan to develop self-awareness training among their staff. They initiated Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies, a program involving teachers and students in building a positive environment for the school.

"It's not that our students are bringing in negative behavior. It's sometimes how we view the behavior they bring in," DeVese notes. "What we need to do is understand who we are, what we bring to the table, and make sure that when we deal with every student, there's no bias."

Awareness is one of the fundamental issues Reece hopes is addressed across Central Ohio.

"As a community, we need to make sure that our systems and our institutions and our different agencies are free from bias, or at least working to address bias, and are aware of the impact of that on their actions and their outcomes," he says.

**Linda Kass** chairs the United Way of Central Ohio's Champion of Children event March 10 that will address this topic.