

ABSENTEEISM ON THE RISE

Absent

Suspensions are down, but one in three students miss troubling amount of class

Justin Murphy Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District continued to make progress in 2017-18 in reducing the number of student suspensions but lost some ground in chronic absenteeism, with more than one in three students missing a troubling amount of class. ■ According to year-end data provided in response to a Freedom of Information Law request, 36 percent of students in the district, or about 10,700 children, were absent for more than 10 percent of the time they were enrolled during the last school year. That is up a few percentage points from 2016-17 and represents one of the most stubborn dilemmas facing the community.

“That missing 10 percent of class is killing us,” Chief of Schools Idonia Owens said. “You can’t teach them if they’re not in the building. I’m not sure what else we can do other than continue to reach out to parents.”

The district is undertaking the same outreach strategies as it has in the last several years but is beginning earlier, before school starts, in an attempt

to establish relationships with parents early. It has also hired 25 new staff members whose sole responsibility is to work on attendance at particular schools.

Owens also pointed to efforts to improve

See **ABSENT**, Page **7A**



ABSENTEEISM ON THE RISE

Absent

Continued from Page 1A

relationships among students, parents and school staff so that children know they’re expected and welcome in school.

“We have so many kids failing and struggling, and when you’re struggling at school, you don’t want to come to school,” she said.

Several high schools had more than half their enrolled students marked as chronically absent, led by Vanguard, at 63 percent. Many of those students have effectively dropped out but not been taken off the books.

you’ll have flaws.”

Tim Cliby, president of the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester, said he doesn’t believe principals have been under-reporting the number of students they send home, in part because more alternate resources are now available in schools.

“I think (principals) are very cautious about that, because they know it’s scrutinized and looked at, and they know it’s crucial to a kid’s education,” he said. “I think there are more people looking in depth at whether the suspension came from something that could have been avoided. ... If we don’t have to send kids home because we have the resources in the building, then we won’t have to suspend anyone.”

Edison Career and Technology and Monroe high schools and School of the Arts were the buildings with

The best-performing schools included Children's School of Rochester (School 15), at 13 percent chronic absenteeism. School of the Arts was the best high school, with a mark of 22 percent.

The unduplicated suspension rate — that is, the percentage of students who were suspended one or more times during the school year, whether in-school or out-of-school, was 10.8 percent. That continues a multiyear downward trend.

That improvement comes as part of a concerted effort in the district to make suspensions a last resort. In turn, some teachers have complained either that some students are being allowed to disrupt the school without consequence, or that administrators, who ultimately sign off on suspensions, are failing to record them properly.

Owens alluded to that belief in responding to the apparent improvement in 2017-18.

“For those who are reporting accurately, this is indicative of improved school culture,” she said. “But with any self-reporting system

the greatest number of suspensions, while schools 17, 19 and 8 had the highest numbers among K-8 schools.

School Without Walls, meanwhile, had only 13 suspensions on the books for the entire year.

Kodak Park School 41, which was in its final year of operation after being ordered closed by the state in October, nonetheless managed to sharply reduce chronic absenteeism from 2016-17 and also had one of the lower suspension numbers among all buildings.

East High School had 125 suspensions in grades 9-12 and 244 in grades 6-8. Chronic absenteeism was 51 percent in the upper school and 38 percent in the lower school, both higher than the district average but better than most secondary schools.