

Student penalties vary widely

City suspensions applied unevenly

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Suspension rates vary widely from school to school in Rochester, according to new data released by the district.

East High School has issued more than 1,000 suspensions so far in the 2014-15 school year, a number that principal Anibal Soler Jr. said is in line with last year's rate. East has 1,740 students on the books.

Early College International High School, meanwhile, has fewer than five suspensions among its 336 students, and School Without Walls has zero among its 326.

At four schools — Charlotte and East high schools and Northeast and Northwest College Prep — there have been more than 50 suspensions per 100 students so far in the 2014-15 school year.

Student discipline has become a

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compelling topic in the Rochester School District in the last several months. A communitywide task force convened by the district and the Rochester Area Community Foundation is rewriting the district code of conduct, and a recent data release by the district showed nine out of 10 student suspensions last year were for relatively minor infractions.

Collecting good data on student discipline has not been the district's strong suit, but a renewed emphasis this year allowed it to share more accurate building-by-building numbers.

The new data shows a stark contrast among schools, either in the way students behave or in how they are disciplined for misbehaving.

Among K-8 schools, School 19 has 35 suspensions per 100 students, compared to fewer than three per 100 at schools 1, 9 and 15. Among K-6 schools, Schools 12 and 28 had about 9 suspensions per 100 students, while five other schools had zero suspensions overall. "Some schools are doing well, but schools are different and we're providing all the support we can to schools that are struggling," Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Christiana Otuwa said.

That means making sure principals are relying as heavily as possible on social workers, mediation, restorative justice and other non-punitive measures before resorting to suspensions, she said. The district is also convening meetings with administrators over the winter break to examine data and share best practices, she said. Of the 4,500 suspensions across the district so far this school year, 94 percent have been for five days or fewer and 66 percent have been in-school.

The most prominent number is at East High, which accumulated 1,005 suspensions through Dec. 17. Soler said about 380 students are represented in that number, with the largest share coming from ninth grade, where many students are one or two years behind in credits and where the risk for dropping out is greatest.

Most suspensions are for students who are late to several classes in a single day, or are disrespectful toward staff, he said.

"There's a way to address it differently, it's just a matter of having the resources and capacity to do it," he said.

Soler also stressed the importance of keeping chronically late students from disrupting classrooms for students who are doing the right thing.

The New York State Education Department asks districts to report suspension data in a different way, counting students who have been suspended out-of-school, either once or more, and dividing that number by the total enrollment. The statewide rate by that measure is 4 percent; suburban Monroe County districts top out at 8 percent but are mostly lower. Eamonn Scanlon, cochairman of the Metro Justice education committee, called for better support of Rochester administrators and teachers and, in particular, a heavier emphasis on restorative justice. "The data shows there needs to be uniformity in how discipline is handled throughout the district," he said. "Certainly schools face unique circumstances that influence school climate, but the decisions of administrators and the guidance they give to teachers are also extremely important."

When the University of Rochester assumes control over East High next year, student behavior and discipline will be among its key challenges. Leaders are promising more restorative justice and a more respectful, nurturing atmosphere for students they hope will eliminate some problems in the first place. "Suffice to say this is one of the very serious challenges we will have to overcome," Steve Uebbing, the prospective East High superintendent under the new partnership, said via email. "It will require different approaches by all, including students, teachers, families, community partners and school leaders."

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STEVE UEBBING

PROSPECTIVE EAST HIGH SUPERINTENDENT