

## RCSD suspension data shows mixed success

### Data

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Eighteen months ago, when the Rochester City School District released data showing sky-high student suspension rates, then-Superintendent Bolgen Vargas publicly promised the problem would get his administration's full attention.

There have been significant changes since then: A new code of conduct was passed; the district contracted for comprehensive anti-racism training; and the last two years' budgets have included additional money for social-emotional supports.

Student discipline data from the 2015-16 school year, however, shows only pockets of progress, with

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gains in some areas being offset by apparent regression elsewhere.

The number of overall suspensions across the district decreased by about 3 percent. There were 40.8 suspensions per 100 students in 2015-16, down from 41.4 in 2014-15.

Those numbers conceal significant differences across buildings. For example, suspensions at the secondary level have dropped sharply — in particular at East High School — while suspensions in primary schools have risen.

At high schools, suspensions are down 27 percent from 2014-15, a reduction of more than 2,000 suspensions. More than 80 percent of that difference can be attributed to East High School, where suspensions plummeted from 2,541 in 2014-15 to 909 last year.

Northeast and Northwest College Prep high schools, at the Frederick Douglass campus on Fernwood Park, also made significant improvement, from a combined 1,021 in 2014-15 to 754 this year. Northwest Principal Barbara Zelazny attributed it to a concept called the “help zone,” a kind of intermediate space between the classroom and the principal's office where a student can calm down when he is upset.

“You can buy yourself some time,” she said. “It's like a triage place.”

Other high schools have not experienced the same success. Leadership Academy for Young Men, for instance, more than quintupled its number of suspensions, from 77 to 415. Principal Wakili Moore said about 40 students accounted for nearly all those suspensions. He attributed them to a necessary installing of expectations. “The main reason is that we took a stance on certain (types of behavior),” he said. “What people aren't seeing is that you're trying to protect instruction and the kids who are actually seeking out learning.” At K-6 and K-8 schools, the picture was more bleak. A number of schools saw major spikes in suspensions. School 52 went from two suspensions to 52; School 17 went from 470 to 719. School 17

Principal Caterina Leone-Mannino said that was partly a matter of recording incidents more thoroughly, and partly a matter of “drawing lines for what is appropriate and what is not.” “It was retraining students for what the behavioral standards were,” she said. “It was kind of a shock in the initial phase, that no, we’re not playing these games anymore,” she said. Deputy Superintendent Christiana Otuwa said she doesn’t believe the primary school numbers constitute a trend, but rather reflect principal turnover at several buildings. She pointed to an encouraging pattern in the data: of the 15 schools that received training in restorative justice practices, 11 of them had reductions in the number of suspensions. East and Northeast/Northwest were among them.

“People are learning together to gain a better understanding of what works,” she said. “I’m very encouraged and hopeful about what is going on.”

Another way to track discipline and student behavior is through VADIR (violent and disruptive incident report), a state reporting category. There, it was found that several schools were too frequently classifying events as “other disruptive incidents” rather than more descriptive categories like assault, minor altercations or drug use. That is problematic because the ambiguous “other” leaves a great deal of room for subjectivity, something that often results in disproportionate discipline for students of color. In 2016-17, several more schools will get comprehensive training in restorative justice, meant to reduce reliance on suspensions. Three schools will also get training in Joy DeGruy’s antiracism program.

Metro Justice has been a strong advocate for changes in discipline policies in the district for several years. Its education organizer, Eamonn Scanlon, said he wasn’t surprised at the lack of progress. “With the instability in leadership last year and the fact the code of conduct was not passed until the end of the year ... I would not expect a big change in suspension rates,” he said. “There’s still a serious problem.”

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