

City School District suspensions dip 38%

Trend

Adjustments made in student discipline and data collection

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Student suspensions in the Rochester City School District were down 38 percent in the first three months of the school year, continuing a promising trend as the district commits more attention to the problem of heavy-handed student discipline.

There were 1,905 suspensions issued from September to November 2016, compared with 3,073 in 2015 and 4,313 in 2013.

There was also a large drop in the number of weapons found or confiscated: 44 in 2016, compared with 154 in 2015.

In a presentation to the school board's

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Nosym Tillmon, a student at the Rochester Early College International High School, speaks in support of the code of conduct before a Rochester City School District board meeting in June.

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Excellence in Student Achievement committee in December, Deputy Superintendent Kendra March attributed the improvements to the continuing rollout of restorative justice practices and the institution of “help zones,” where students can spend a few moments to collect themselves before they do something they’ll regret.

There are some troubling points embedded in the larger numbers. In particular, about 36 percent of suspensions were issued to students with disabilities, a proportion that has been rising steadily even as the state continues to sanction the district over the issue. In 2012-13, just 19 percent of suspensions went to students with disabilities.

There is also a great deal of variance among schools. Sixteen elementary schools had fewer than 10 suspensions; on the other hand, Enrico Fermi School 17, in which the district has invested heavily, suspended far more students (129) than any other primary school.

Among high schools, Edison Tech students lost nearly 2,100 days to suspensions, more than twice the number at any other school. East High School continued to post good numbers, while Monroe High School and School of the Arts both did relatively poorly.

The emphasis on student discipline was jumpstarted in 2014 by the release of data to the *Democrat and Chronicle* and Empire Justice Center, showing that suspensions were doled out excessively and prejudicially. It was also noted that the district was doing a poor job of collecting data, a problem that has been greatly improved upon.

At that point, 50 percent of suspensions were chalked up to “other disruptive incidents.” National studies have shown that such vague accounting increases the likelihood that students of color will be disproportionately impacted.

In the first part of 2016-17, suspensions in that category were down to about 30 percent.

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