

UNEQUAL SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Report: Black students 5 times more likely to be suspended

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Black students on Long Island are about five times more likely than whites to be suspended from their public schools, according to a report released Sunday by a coalition of education, civil rights and business groups that finds similar racial disparities across the state.

Overall, the analysis found, such out-of-school suspensions were experienced by more than 66,000 students statewide of all races and ethnicities, including nearly 11,000 in Nassau and Suffolk counties, during the 2016-17 school year, the most recent period on record.

The report, "Stolen Time," was prepared by The Education Trust-New York, a research and advocacy group, on behalf of The New York Equity Coalition. The Education Trust is based in Manhattan; the coalition is statewide.

Data for the report came from unpublished statistics on out-of-school suspensions by race, ethnicity and gender submitted by local school districts to the state Education Department.

Among the highlights:

- Statewide, outside of New York City, black students faced out-of-school suspensions at more than four times the rate of white students. In Nassau, black students were 5.2 times more likely to be suspended; in Suffolk, 4.7 times more likely.
- Black male students in high school generally had the highest suspension rates of any group. In Nassau and Suffolk counties, 15.6 percent of all black males were removed from their high schools at least once during the period reviewed.
- Suspensions tended to run highest in districts with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students, but blacks faced a disproportionate rate of out-of-school suspensions in districts both rich and poor. On the Island, the suspension rates in individual districts ranged from 9.5



James Hunderfund, superintendent of the Malverne school district, which focuses on building relations.

BY THE NUMBERS

5.2

Number of times more likely black students were to be expelled in Nassau County

4.7

Times more likely in Suffolk

15.6%

Percent of all black males removed from their high schools at least once during the period reviewed

percent of all students to zero.

"At the most basic level, suspensions deprive a student of classroom instruction — even though students who are suspended may be most in need of academic engagement," the report says.

Heading off conflict

It called on schools to find more constructive ways of dealing with student misconduct and heading off conflict before

it becomes violent. One suggestion to teachers was to take individual students into a hallway to discuss infractions, rather than reprimanding those students in front of classmates.

New York State is poised to take action on the suspensions issue. New statewide regulations, now in draft form, would use suspension rates along with other criteria, such as test performance, in determining which schools should be posted on "needs improvement" lists maintained by the state Education Department.

Emily DeSantis, a spokeswoman for the Education Department, said the report is being reviewed.

Lorna Lewis, superintendent of Plainview-Old Bethpage schools and president of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, said she has noticed that punishments for the same misconduct can range in different districts from in-school suspension to five days out of school.

"I think that for the same misbehavior, you will find students of color getting different forms of punishment from one district

to another," Lewis said. "That's something that's always bothered me."

On Long Island, some districts already have taken action.

Decadelong effort

The Malverne system, for example, has engaged in a 10-year effort to lower suspension rates, largely by building better relations between staff and students. The campaign began during the 2007-08 school year, when administrators reviewed records and realized that more than 500 suspensions had been imposed — often multiple times for the same student — in a high school with an enrollment of 520.

Superintendent James Hunderfund, in an interview, said that this year's suspensions at the high school have been held to 25.

"I think we had two fights last year, and it was usually over someone's girlfriend," the schools chief said. "The norms here have shifted to high achievement, good behavior and just getting along with each other."

On the Island, total elementary and secondary public school enrollment in 2016-17 was

about 423,000 students, the state data showed. Nearly 40,000 were black — 11 percent of students in Nassau districts and 8 percent in Suffolk systems.

Of the total 11,000 students of all races and ethnicities in the Island's schools that year with at least one out-of-school suspension, about 3,100 were black. That represented 35 percent of suspensions in Nassau, and 24 percent in Suffolk, according to the analysis.

The "Stolen Time" report notes that black students, though often suspended, frequently were penalized for nonviolent infractions such as loitering or excessive noise, based on subjective judgments of those imposing the punishment. It cites a study published by New York Law School Law Review in a 2009-10 volume, where researchers concluded there was no evidence that blacks engaged in higher rates of actual misbehavior.

On the Island, veteran educators pointed to such nonviolent incidents as underscoring the need to make sure that penalties are applied uniformly to students, regardless of race or gender, and to reserve suspensions for the most serious infractions, such as threats to student safety.

"To start the conversation, we really need to look at the act itself," said William Johnson, superintendent of Rockville Centre schools and a past president of the New York State Council of School Superintendents. "Was there an actual fight? Or was it food thrown around?"

The draft regulations on suspensions are part of a broader package scheduled for discussion Monday by the state Board of Regents, which sets education policy. The package, if approved, would take effect in the 2019-20 school year.

"Stolen Time" endorsed the draft regulations while suggesting that they be expanded to cover other forms of "exclusionary" punishment such as in-school suspensions.

The regulatory package would put into effect the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, which passed Congress with bipartisan support in 2015. Requirements dealing with student suspensions were a major priority at the national level among civil rights leaders.

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