

Suspension rate deemed too high

MPS superintendent seeks alternatives in minor matters

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Accompanying the release of a mass of data about the performance of schools in Milwaukee, Superintendent William Andrekopoulos is calling for substantial changes in the way teachers and schools handle the suspension of students for behavior problems - suspensions that come by the thousands.

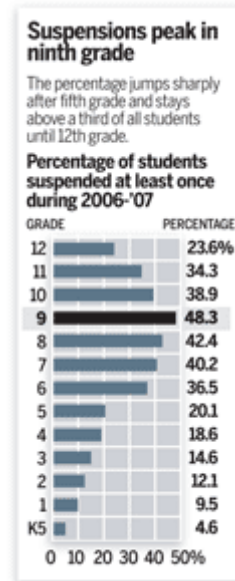
"We're doing a lousy job of sending kids out of the classroom," Andrekopoulos said in an interview. He added that Milwaukee Public Schools may have the highest suspension rates in the country. Nearly half of all ninth-graders, for example, are suspended at least once a year, and many of those students are suspended multiple times.

Andrekopoulos said he has asked the Council of Great City Schools to analyze suspension practices in Milwaukee and make recommendations on how to reduce the rate. The organization, which has 66 large urban districts as members, provides consulting services on such issues.

Too many suspensions, which usually involve ordering a student out of a school for one to three days, are for minor matters, he said, such as routine classroom disruption.

The dilemma of suspensions is that while teachers often seek them to deal with disruptive students, those students can't be educated while they are out of school. While many teachers say they spend too much time dealing with a handful of misbehaving students rather than teaching the bulk of their students, Andrekopoulos argues that ways can be found to keep many of those students in class or, in the alternative, at least keep them in school.


"The suspension data is terrible," he said. "This is a grave concern that I have as superintendent."



Source: Milwaukee Public Schools
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He said he wants to see a big push in coming months for improvements in how teachers handle classroom behavior issues and how students are led to become engaged in school. This could take more professional development work for teachers, different approaches to instruction, more counseling for students, and creation of more alternatives within schools for misbehaving students, he suggested.

His comments came as the "report card" for MPS for the 2006-'07 school year was released and posted on the MPS Web site. The report will be presented to a School Board committee Tuesday night.

Overall, the report, which would run to well over a thousand pages if printed out in full, paints a portrait of an urban district that is making progress on some fronts and struggling on others while remaining immersed in difficult issues. Similarly, information for each of 218 schools shows some with impressive records of success and others making little headway in changing their status among Wisconsin's worst performing schools.

"We're making progress academically," Andrekopoulos said. "Are we where we need to be? Absolutely not."

A few items from the report:

- The ninth-grade "parking lot" problem remains big. In 2006-'07, the percentage of eighth-graders promoted to ninth grade was 97.1%, a slight increase from earlier years. But many kids get stuck there - there were 9,002 freshmen that year, more than 2,000 more students than in any other grade in MPS. Thirty percent of ninth-graders were repeating that grade. Academic success among freshmen overall was not good. Forty percent had grade point averages of a D (1.0) or worse. Only 33% had averages of C (2.0) or better. Ninth-grade attendance was 76%, the lowest of any grade in MPS. "We're leaving too many kids behind at ninth grade," Andrekopoulos said.
- Attendance overall showed little change and remains a serious problem. The average attendance, when all grades are put together, was 87.7%, with elementary grades the highest (92.6%) and high school grades the lowest (79.4%). Attendance overall was down slightly from the prior year.
- The number of MPS students taking college-level courses while in high school has increased, but still trails the state averages substantially and is below what MPS officials want to see. Andrekopoulos said he was particularly concerned that while 2,409 students took Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses in 2006-'07, less than half - 1,184 - took the exams at the end of the course that can lead to getting college-level courses. In total, 2,382 exams were taken - many students take more than one - but students got scores that earned college credits only 37% of the time.
- The indicators that point to tough going for schools and school districts continue to rise in MPS. The percentage of MPS students who get free or reduced-price lunch - the measuring stick for how many come from low-income homes - continues to rise. Overall,

it went from 71% in 1996-'97 to 77% in 2006-'07. "Individually, 59 (35%) of the 166 traditional MPS schools had rates over 90% in 2006-'07, and two-thirds of all schools had free/reduced lunch rates over 80%," the report said.

- The percentage of student with disabilities, including physical, emotional and learning issues, continues to rise. It was 14.6% in 2000-'01 and 17.0% in 2006-'07. Among middle school and high school students, the rate was about 19% in 2006-'07. Andrekopoulos said he foresees that a quarter of all high school students will have disabilities within several years.

- Three decades after a federal court ordered racial desegregation of MPS schools, the students in a large number of schools are predominantly of one race or ethnicity. The district as a whole is 12.4% white, compared with more than 60% in the 1970s. The report said black students made up 80% or more of the 2006-'07 enrollment in 99 of the 218 schools included in the report. Hispanic students made up 80% or more of 14 schools, and white students made up 50% or more of 12 schools, a sign that white students tend to be concentrated in a short list of schools.

The report did not include new graduation rate data for MPS because the state has not released figures for 2006-'07.

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