

Suspend fewer, MPS urged

Report rips discipline tactics; change promised

By ALAN J. BORSUK
aborsuk@journalsentinel.com

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A team of national experts has urged a major overhaul in the way Milwaukee Public Schools handles behavior issues in schools, saying MPS does not do enough to deal with problems short of suspending students and may have the highest suspension rate of any urban school system in America.

"District staff members need to mobilize to meet this challenge" of dealing with behavior issues in ways that don't involve suspensions but are more effective in improving both a student's behavior and academic work, the team said in a report to MPS officials.

Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said in an interview that changes in line with the report's recommendations are under way, including a new policy in which every parent will be given a written statement this fall on the disciplinary practices that will be used in a child's classroom.

The report, submitted several months ago, is the second in two years by a team from the Council of Great City Schools that was critical of major aspects of what goes on in MPS classrooms. In both cases, the reports were not made public until a Journal Sentinel reporter asked for them. In 2006, a report from the council criticized academic practices and low achievement by students, called for more direction from the central administration of what was being done in schools, and said people involved in MPS, from the School Board to the classroom, "appear fairly complacent."

The new report also says there is not enough of a sense of urgency in MPS about improving student behavior.

"The district will continue having difficulty building public support when the community views the schools as places filled with poorly behaved students and where alternative programs do not meet the needs of students not in regular schools," the report says.

MPS

By The Numbers

26.4%

MPS students suspended at least once, many of them multiple times, during the 2007-'08 school year.

86,675

Total number of suspensions during the same school year, just short of the number of students in the district.

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Andrekopoulos said there was truth in the criticism in both reports about the need for more urgency and that changes are being made in both academic and behavior policies, as well as in the culture in MPS, that reflect the pressing need to improve.

"We were appalled at the data" about student suspensions, Andrekopoulos said. "We've got to improve. . . . We've got to create a greater sense of urgency around these issues."

Suspensions have been rising year by year, according to MPS data. In the 2007-'08 school year, 26.4% of students were suspended at least once, many of them multiple times. The total number of suspensions - 86,675 - was just short of the number of students in MPS.

The national team said, "The number of suspensions is higher in the MPS than it is in any other urban district that the Council has visited."

MPS is also under pressure from a federal judge to reduce suspensions and do a better job of dealing with students who are suspended often. The judge, Aaron Goodstein, ruled against MPS recently in a decision that called for broad changes in the way MPS identifies special education students and what it does for students who are not doing well in school.

The team from the urban schools council concluded, "The discipline process within the Milwaukee Public Schools is oriented toward setting forth punitive consequences, rather than toward reinforcing positive behavior."

"Energy being devoted to numerous minor infractions is diluting efforts to address most disciplinary issues or to develop more focused behavioral interventions for the students in greatest need," the team wrote. "It is counterproductive, moreover, for the school system to deal with issues like truancy by suspending students, thereby compounding the length of time students are out of the classroom."

Suspensions - often for three days - are used as a routine response in many schools, whereas they should be used as a last resort, the team said. The team said that in a more effective behavior model, 1% to 5% of students would receive "intensive interventions," such as suspensions.

"The team's recommendations . . . begin with shifting the district's orientation from one that uses suspension as the primary disciplinary tool to one that is more systemic and puts greater emphasis on prevention and intervention."

The kinds of programs envisioned include more use of detentions or of in-house suspensions in which students stay in school and receive more help dealing with academic issues as well as behavior problems. The team recommended more programs to encourage positive behavior. And it said MPS needs more effective and successful alternative school programs.

Andrekopoulos and Kristi Cole, who heads an MPS Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative begun in the last two years, said that new programs in several schools built around "restorative justice" and partnerships with community organizations that work on

building better relationships with troubled students should be developed further. The "Violence Free Zone" project that involves the community groups reported in the spring that problems had declined at schools that were part of the effort

MPS is also expanding its programs for disruptive students, and it opened a "transition school" earlier this year for students who are coming back into the school system from juvenile correctional settings.

Andreopoulos said there needs to be more uniformity in discipline procedures and more training of teachers and other employees in dealing with behavior issues.

One step, he said, will be to give parents a clearer picture of what to expect when a child acts up.

That means every teacher needs to have a discipline plan and every parent needs to know it, he said. "Every parent should have in their hand sometime in the fall a discipline plan from the classroom teacher," he said.

Andreopoulos said it will take a year to develop the "three-tiered" plan called for in the report, which is built around prevention, interventions that deal with groups and major discipline actions when needed. He is aiming to implement such a plan in 2009-'10 school year, he said.

Cole said, "We're trying to build a lot of prevention into the process. . . .The focus of the district now is working on prevention."

As for the kid who just mouths off so much in class that the teacher wants him or her out of the room, Andreopoulos and Cole said that in the old model, such a student likely would be suspended. In the new approach, the goal would be to get at causes. Is there a problem that can be identified? Perhaps the student can't read, or needs glasses, or is hungry, or is affected by major problems at home. Cole said the idea is to understand what causes the action and deal with those causes.

The Council of Great City Schools is a coalition of 66 urban districts, including MPS.

The team that was sent to Milwaukee included administrators with strong backgrounds in dealing with behavior issues and who work or previously worked for schools in Chicago; Denver; Newark, N.J.; and Louisville, Ky.

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