



School Safety Newsletter

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NYC School Suspensions Continue to Drop Sharply Under de Blasio

Chalkbeat, March 31, 2016

<http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2016/03/31/school-suspensions-continue-to-drop-sharply-under-de-blasio/#.VxUgJjGLzdd>

Suspensions in New York City schools are continuing to fall sharply, according to data the city released Thursday. Schools gave out 31 percent fewer suspensions in the first half of this school year than they did in 2014. Less-serious principal suspensions fell from about 23,000 last year to just over 16,500 during that period. The more serious superintendent suspensions also dropped slightly, from about 6,600 last year to 6,480 this year. The drop in suspensions is a victory for the de Blasio administration, which has aimed to reduce punitive discipline in schools. Last year, the city implemented a new discipline code that introduced a new review process for suspensions for insubordination and restrictions on handcuffing students. The Department of Education and City Council members have also put more funding toward training staff members in how to implement alternatives to suspension.

But the city is also facing criticism from advocates who have questioned the de Blasio administration's approach to school safety, and worked to publicize recent cases where students brought guns to school and state data pointing to increases in violent incidents. As the suspension numbers continue to drop, the city will continue to face pressure to ensure that teachers and school leaders have to the tools to deal with misbehavior without suspending students.

"The 31 percent decrease in suspensions is encouraging, but we have a lot more work to do to expand best practices and further support all students and staff in safe and supportive learning environments across the City," Chancellor Carmen Fariña said in a statement. The education department also reported that students were taken away by emergency medical personnel due to an emotional or psychological condition 601 times between July and December 2015 — the first time the city has reported that data.

Advocates have long criticized schools that resort to 911 calls to deal with disorderly students instead of employing other strategies to diffuse conflicts. A 2014 settlement barred schools from making 911 calls before trying to de-escalate the situation.

"This first batch of data on EMS referrals supports the call for expanding crisis intervention support for school staff and mental health services for students in our city's schools," said Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children of New York.

Education officials said Thursday that the department plans to make more changes to its discipline policies, expand mental health services for schools with the highest suspension rates, increase training in restorative practices for social workers and department staff, and put more counselors into schools in some districts.

While the report shows a 31 percent decline in suspensions between July and December 2015 and that period in 2014, the decline shrinks when more recent data is included. Suspension numbers from January to March 15 of this year looked more similar to last year's, bringing the year-over-year change to 22 percent.

Demographic data on suspensions are released every October. The last round of that data showed that black students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately suspended. Black students, who make up 28 percent of students, accounted for about 52 percent of suspensions in the 2014-15 school year. About 38 percent of suspensions went to students with disabilities, who make up about 18 percent of city students.

To View the NYC's Safety with Dignity - Complete Report by the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline Phase I Recommendations published July 2015 visit: <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/sclt/downloads/pdf/safety-with-dignity-final-complete-report-723.pdf>

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Unsafe Lead Levels Found in Water at Hundreds of Schools

CBSnews, April 11, 2016

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/water-with-unsafe-lead-amounts-found-in-hundreds-of-schools/>

Responding to the crisis in Flint, Michigan, school officials across the country are testing classroom sinks and cafeteria faucets for lead, trying to uncover any concealed problems and to reassure anxious parents.

Just a fraction of schools and day care centers nationwide are required to check for lead because most receive their water from municipal systems that test at other locations. State and federal lawmakers have called for wider testing.

Among schools and day care centers operating their own water systems, Environmental Protection Agency data analyzed by The Associated Press showed that 278 violated federal lead levels at some point during the past three years. Roughly a third of those had lead levels that were at least double the federal limit.

In almost all cases, the problems can be traced to aging buildings with lead pipes, older drinking fountains and water fixtures that have parts made with lead.

Riverside Elementary in the northern Wisconsin town of Ringle has lead pipes buried in its concrete foundation that used to leach into the tap water before a filtration system was installed. Replacing the pipes, which were installed when the school was built in the 1970s, is not an option.

"For the cost of that, you might as well build a new school," said Jack Stoskopf, an assistant superintendent. Instead, he said, school officials decided to rip out the drinking fountains more than a decade ago and buy bottled water for students, costing about \$1,000 a month.

Buying bottled water for drinking has been the routine at Ava Head Start in Ava, Missouri, even before lead levels spiked after the preschool moved into a new building in 2010. But it was not until February, after another round of high test results, that state regulators told the preschool to use bottled water for cooking and cleaning the toothbrushes for the 59 children, ages 3 and 4.

"The cost is not an option," said Sandra Porter, Ava's cook and water operator. "We're just doing what we have to."

Schools required to conduct lead testing represent only about 1 of every 10 schools in the country. Those receiving their water from city-owned systems -- an estimated 90,000, according to the EPA -- are not required by the federal government to do so.

In recent weeks, state lawmakers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania have proposed legislation that would require testing in all schools. Some members of Congress have called for more money and expanded lead sampling.

In March, some samples from the school district in Newark, New Jersey, came back with high amounts of lead. The district shut off sinks and fountains in 30 buildings and offered to test as many as 17,000 children for lead. The inconsistent testing leaves most schoolchildren in buildings that are unchecked and vulnerable because lead particles can build up in plumbing when water goes unused for long periods.

"In schools, that means almost every weekend," said Virginia Tech professor Marc Edwards, who helped expose the lead problem in Flint's water. His colleague, Yanna Lambrinidou, also notes that under EPA guidelines, schools and day care centers can report that an entire building is safe even if an individual drinking fountain is above the threshold.

Last year alone, lead levels exceeded the EPA limit of 15 parts per billion at 64 schools or day care centers that are required to test because they have their own water systems.

While no state is immune to the problem, half the high lead readings since the beginning of 2013 were in states along the East Coast. School buildings there are older and more likely to have lead plumbing. Pennsylvania, Maine and New Jersey topped the list.

Nationwide, the average age of school buildings dates to the early 1970's. It was not until 1986 that lead pipes were banned, and it was not until 2014 that brass fixtures were ordered to be virtually lead-free.

School leaders in Idaho Falls, Idaho, decided in February to remove two drinking fountains within a week of finding out about a recent high sample and another one from three years ago that the state failed to notify them about.

Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality acknowledged it should have followed up with more testing three years ago.

Still, regulators told school officials this year they could keep the two drinking fountains if they just flushed the water each day, said John Pymm, safety director with the Bonneville Joint School District in Idaho Falls. "It made the most sense to get them out of service and make folks feel at ease," he said.

Tyler Baum, whose three daughters attend the elementary school, said he was not too concerned because the school acted quickly on its own. "It certainly made me more aware of the water," he said. "We just assume we'll have clean drinking water."

**Monthly
Webinars!**

Normally first
Wednesday of
Every Month
at 10 am.

**Next
Webinar**

**Wednesday
May 4, 2016**

Each webinar
has a round
table discussion
at the end.
Questions are
always
welcome!

To participate, you
must be a vetted
member. For more
information please
email
schoolsafety@isp.
state.il.us

Michigan Proposed Policy for Gay, Transgender Students Debated

Lori Higgins, Detroit Free Press: Part of the USA Today Network, April 4, 2016

<http://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2016/04/02/lgbtq-policy-gender-neutral-michigan/82512236/>

When Mike Currie was making the transition from being the girl he was born as to the boy he identified with, he found support in an unlikely place: within his school. There, at Farmington High School, administrators did what a proposed policy being debated by the State Board of Education recommends: They made sure teachers referred to him as a male and that his student e-mail address reflected his male name — affirmation that was crucial to a teen going through a gender transition. Now 16 and a junior, he said he didn't think school administrators would be so accepting. Because of it, he said, his grades improved during that freshman year — from C's, D's and F's to A's and B's. "I wasn't expecting them to be like, 'OK ... you obviously are distraught by this. We're going to help make it better.'"

The proposed state policy is aimed at ensuring that students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their identity LGBTQ have a safe and supportive school environment. But it has quickly become a lightning rod for debate, notably the parts of the policy related to transgender students. Some Republicans lawmakers have strongly criticized it, particularly provisions allowing students to use restrooms and locker rooms that align most closely with their gender identity. Others have taken issue with language allowing students to be referred to by the gender they prefer, whether their parents are aware or not. And many of those who have commented on an official website have taken the department to task for the proposal.

Schools increasingly are being confronted with the needs of LGBTQ students. And increasingly, those needs are raising sensitive issues. The guidance from the state is designed in part to combat data that show LGBTQ students are more likely to commit suicide, be bullied or drop out of school. "It is a pretty active national conversation right now. It's something that a lot of districts are looking at," said Nathan Smith, director of public policy for the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, a national organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.

Already in Michigan, schools are providing training for their staff, designating gender-neutral bathrooms for transgender students who don't want to use the regular restrooms and updating their anti-bullying policies to ensure they cover sexual orientation and gender identity, state officials say. "We're pretty proactive with how we've been addressing things," said Naomi Khalil, director of instructional equity for Farmington Public Schools. "We're a community that prides itself on our diversity."

The proposed guidelines are similar to what exists in other states. Massachusetts, the top-performing education state in the nation, and New York have issued guidance that includes examples of how local districts have addressed such issues. They include a school that installed curtains that could easily provide privacy for a transgender student who was given access to a female locker room, a school that went from separate-colored graduation gowns for boys and girls to one color for all and a school that honored parents' requests that only a few people at the school know the biological sex of their transgender child.

The debate in Michigan schools mirrors debates reflected elsewhere. In North Carolina, Gov. Pat McCrory recently signed legislation that requires transgender people to use bathrooms that match their sex at birth and bars local communities from adopting anti-discrimination ordinances to get around the law. Last week, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal vetoed a bill that would allow individuals, businesses and faith organizations to deny services to people based on religious beliefs — a bill many said would allow for discrimination against LGBT people.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education has made it clear that Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects transgender students. In December, the department's civil rights division reached a settlement with a school district in Illinois, requiring it to provide access to girls' locker rooms to a transgender student.

Lilianna Angel Reyes, youth program manager at Affirmations, an LGBT community center in Ferndale, said the proposed policy will ensure that LGBTQ students can be "authentically themselves." "This allows people to be safe and to be honored in who they want to be without having lot of red tape stop that," Reyes said. Affirmations works regularly with school districts across the region, including Farmington, to help them address the needs of LGBTQ students.

How districts have handled LGBTQ issues varies. Many schools have gay-straight alliances — clubs for students who raise awareness of LGBTQ issues. In Van Dyke Public Schools in Warren and Center Line, staff members are being trained on how to provide a safe and supportive environment, respectful ways for students to speak with one another, and respectful ways for staff to address inappropriate behavior by students, said Piper Bognar, an assistant superintendent.

In 2013, Ann Arbor Public Schools updated its nondiscrimination policy to include sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Some of its schools have gender-neutral bathrooms as an option for students who prefer them. There, and in many other districts, the focus is on addressing LGBTQ issues on a case-by-case basis. "We've worked intentionally and quietly and respectfully with families to make sure we meet the students' needs," said Andrew Cluely, spokesman for the district.

Final step - Peter Tchoryk remembers clearly the day his son Jacq took the final step in his transition from being the girl he was born. Jacq — formerly Jacqueline — was already wearing boy clothes and had a boy's haircut. But on this morning, Tchoryk had asked his 4-year-old son whether he should tell day care staff to call him by his boy name. Jacq, who'd told his parents with no uncertainty when he was 2 1/2 that he was a boy, said yes. Then everything changed. "All the angst, all the pain, instantly went away. It was immediate," said Tchoryk.

Tchoryk and his wife, Sarah, had already made the difficult decision to allow their son to transition — a decision made after lots of research and trips to doctors and counselors. They were convinced that Jacq wasn't just going through a phase, that he wasn't just exhibiting signs of being a tomboy. "We decided that there's so much harm that can be done if you keep trying to keep a child that has their own identity in the wrong gender."

Proposed Policy for Gay, Transgender Students Debated (continue)

Mia Ray Langheim
School Intelligence
Officer



A key part of Jacq's transition has been his school, Cornerstone Elementary in Dexter Community Schools. Principal Craig McCalla, whom Tchoryk describes as "absolutely a hero," knew little about transgender issues when the Tchoryks came to him months before Jacq started kindergarten. But he didn't flinch from what could have potentially been a touchy issue, saying, "The principal's job is to advocate and take care of all kids. All means all."

He talked to teachers about Jacq, making sure they knew about his gender identity. He also is allowed to use the boy's bathroom. Now in the second grade, Jacq freely talks to students about being transgender. Recently he asked his father to come talk to his class because some students just didn't believe he'd been born a girl. Tchoryk is a strong proponent of the Michigan Department of Education's proposed policy, telling State Board members March 9 that it can mean the difference between life and death for transgender students struggling with their identity. "We are very lucky," Tchoryk said. "The problem is not everyone is lucky. Not everyone has a Craig McCalla."

Raising concerns - House Speaker Kevin Cotter, R-Mt. Pleasant, is among those raising concerns about the proposed policy. Allowing students to change their gender identity at school, but without their parents' knowledge, is wrong, Cotter said. "Here we're talking about students who are minors. Their parents have rights. In my opinion, they deserve to know if their child is changing their name and sexuality." LGBTQ advocates say it may be necessary in cases where students fear for their safety if their parents find out. "That said, we do think when it is safe for that student to be out and affirmed at home, we think parental involvement is very important," Smith said.

Cotter said it also would be an invasion of privacy if, for instance, a transgender student who is biologically a boy is allowed to use girls' facilities. And he worries that having such policies would be abused by boys who just want to get into the girls' locker rooms or restrooms. "My hope is the board will reconsider and change course," Cotter said. The MDE, in response to the recent criticism, extended the public comment period until May 11.

Concerns similar to Cotter's are echoed often at www.everyvoicecountsmi.org/, where people can have their say about the proposed policy. Nearly 6,000 comments had been logged by Friday evening, with opinions ranging from a parent who said, "We need to make the school a safe and comfortable place for all children including those who identify as transgendered," to a teacher who said, "I believe this legislation will create many more problems than it will solve."

Important issue - Some critics say the state board should be focused on more important issues, an argument Zandra Gibson, 21, of Ferndale challenges. "The suicide rates are kind of disturbingly high for LGBT kids," said Gibson, who describes himself as a gay transgender male. "Are our lives less important than some of those other issues? We're your future." Gibson, who regularly participates in programming at Affirmations, said the policy is just a first step.

Kourtney Hampton, 18, a high school senior who attends an alternative school in Ferndale, said training should definitely be done. Hampton, who is bisexual, said that when she first came out in her early teens, girls would be scared to be in the bathroom with her out of fear she'd hit on them. Teachers did nothing to change that, she said. "I'm not into every single girl in the world," she said. Another frustration, she and others said, is adults who tell them to "tone it down." "They say, 'maybe you really shouldn't be out there, maybe you shouldn't be so comfortable with it,'" Hampton said. "Why don't you hide it? Why don't you step back and stop being you?"

Jae'Lyn Ware, also a student at the alternative school, said there's too much of a "kids will be kids" mentality surrounding bullying of LGBT students. What adults don't understand, she said, is that kids who hear that message will continue to bully — even into adulthood. "It excuses their behavior," she said. Taylor Little doesn't get the controversy over whether transgender kids should be able to use the bathroom of their choice. To her, it comes down to one simple thing. "At the end of the day ... people just want to use the bathroom," said Little, 17, a senior at Harrison High School in Farmington. She describes herself as queer, which she said means "not straight."

Currie, the Farmington High student, said he usually avoids using bathrooms in school because he doesn't feel comfortable in either the girls' bathroom or the boys' bathroom, and the gender-neutral bathroom is too far from his classes. Outside of his school, he said navigating life as a transgender teen can be stressful. "If I'm in public ... I have to look at the way I walk, I have to look at the way I talk, I have to look at the way I'm dressing. You have to think of every little thing. Can they see my chest? Can they see it's not actually flat? Is my hair too long? Am I not passing?" Despite that, he feels strongly about educating the public. He often tells classmates to come to him if they have questions or are curious. "Nothing is off limits," he said. "I would rather them be informed and know than have a bad misconception."

Other State Resources:

Guidance for Massachusetts Public Schools Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment—Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity July 2012 document, visit: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ssce/GenderIdentity.pdf>

New York State Guidance to School Districts for Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students July 2015, visit: http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/documents/Transg_GNCGuidanceFINAL.pdf

Draft Michigan State Board of Education Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Students February 2016, visit: <http://everyvoicecountsmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SBE-Statement-on-LGBTQ-Youth-2-9-2016-v2.pdf>

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