

W07 – Education writing

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**Black students are suspended more often than their white peers in Newport News. A task force is working to solve the problem.**

<https://www.dailypress.com/news/education/dp-nws-newport-news-student-discipline-data-taskforce-20190307-story.html>

Last year, 70 percent of the 6,000 Newport News Public Schools students involved in some kind of disciplinary matter were black, according to data collected by the state and school division.

The report, compiled by NNPS, found that of those 4,215 students' 16,082 infractions, students were removed from instruction — in- or out-of-school suspension, or expelled — 53 percent of the time.

The disproportionality of the numbers — where a black student is more likely than his or her white peer to be involved in an incident, therefore more likely to be removed from the classroom — is one of the focuses of a new group of educators, administrators and community members.

The student discipline task force started last week, and will spend the next year discussing and defining the problems, then recommend solutions.

The goal is “to have the conversation around discipline, and how we respond to student behaviors, and how do we protect instructional time,” said chief of staff Rashard Wright, who is helping lead the effort. “How do we equip our teachers with the resources to respond to student needs? ... The vision, obviously, is to ensure that all of our students are treated equitably, with respect and with empathy and that we understand all different cultures and backgrounds.”

There are three main goals: reducing the number of incidents that lead to suspensions; closing the disproportionate gap between the number of suspensions of black males and their peers; and maximizing classroom time for all students.

The data first was presented to the School Board in September, and again to the task force last week. It laid bare the realities of the situation: black students and males are more involved in disciplinary incidents compared to their peers and to their overall enrollment percentage within the division, Joseph Ellis, academic data analytics supervisor, said last year.

Black students make up 53 percent of the overall population, with white students at 24 percent and Hispanic/Latino students at 13 percent. While black students make up 70 percent of incidents, white students represent 14 percent and Hispanic students 10 percent.

Male students are 51 percent of the overall population, and represent 63 percent of incidents.

The top five incidents that lead to a student being removed from a classroom are failure to comply with staff; various disruptions; hitting; an altercation or confrontation for fourth- through 12th-graders; and fighting without injuries for middle and high schoolers.

Major offenses (alcohol, drugs, sexual offenses, tobacco and weapons) made up just 1.6 percent of the overall incidents last year.

The disproportionality continues with a deeper dive into the punishments for such infractions. For secondary — middle and high school — black students, failure to comply resulted in an average out-of-school suspension of 6.15 days last year. That figure was 2.75 for white students, and 3.38 for Hispanic students, according to the report.

Superintendent George Parker touched on some of the cultural gaps between a diverse student body and its less diverse teachers during the September presentation that might lead to a teacher less effectively dealing with a student of a different background.

He said that while the division would “never” be able to perfectly match the demographics of its teacher population to the student body — a goal, but hard to achieve — but that teachers have to be taught to best work with students of all backgrounds.

What other outcomes from the task force’s work may look like is still to-be-determined, Wright emphasized, as the efforts to figure them out are still underway.

Wright helped with a similar task force several years ago in Virginia Beach, where he previously worked as chief schools officer. He and Parker joined Newport News in July.

Measures put in place in Virginia Beach included adding more school counselors, social workers and psychologists; hiring a director of opportunity and achievement; and adding professional learning for teachers around equity and cultural proficiency.

Those measures can help with “getting to the root cause of behaviors and putting support around our students socially and emotionally so that they can be successful in the classroom,” Wright said. Parker’s proposed budget for next year includes funding to hire two licensed social workers.

The aim is for the task force to make any recommendations with budgetary impacts, such as new hires, early enough next year so it can be considered for the 2021 fiscal year budget.

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**Chronic absenteeism was threatening Heritage High's accreditation. Here's how it's changing the trend.**

<https://www.dailypress.com/news/education/dp-nws-heritage-high-attendance-improvements-20190402-story.html>

Students will return from spring break on Monday with two months to go until the end of the school year.

Soon enough, senioritis will hit its peak. Warm weather will beckon students to the beach, a far more appealing prospect than being stuck in school for seven hours. Showing up for final exams becomes harder.

A team at Heritage High School — which includes administrators, teachers and a dedicated community volunteer — plan to keep those feelings at bay through its comprehensive approach at improving attendance numbers.

Members of five subcommittees come together monthly to talk about issues across grade levels, working on solutions to have fewer students missing class time.

“We started doing that last year, because when we were talking about the new standards and attendance being an issue, we kind of stop, dropped and rolled,” said principal Shameka Gerald, in her fifth year leading the school. “We said what we’ve been doing isn’t working, we aren’t seeing any progress, and we need to attack the problem differently.”

Heritage is accredited this year under the old statewide standards; 82 percent of students passed English, 73 percent passed math and 74 percent passed science. Over 93 percent of seniors graduated, got their GED or are still enrolled, and 10 — 2.87 percent — dropped out.

The only barrier to accreditation is the new chronic absenteeism measure. A school needs to have 25 percent (or less) of students missing more than 10 percent, or 18 days, of school to be considered

Thirty-one percent of students — 376 of 1,212 — were chronically absent last year.

Figures were better at each of the other Newport News high schools last year: 6.51 percent chronic absenteeism at An Achievable Dream, 17.22 percent at Denbigh, 15.86 percent at Menchville, 23.67 percent at Warwick and 17.84 percent at Woodside.

Schools meeting the old accreditation criteria were allowed to be accredited this year without conditions, but if the trend continued next year, Heritage would not meet the standards.

The monthly team meeting includes reviewing data, talking about big-picture plans and a bit of team building. The subcommittees, including grade-level teams of assistant principals, graduation coaches and other administrators, meet weekly to talk about specific students or issues to pinpoint.

A recent team meeting featured a scavenger hunt throughout the school in which teammates had to ask a teacher and a student how many days is considered chronic absenteeism. It was lighthearted fun, with teams Hulk and Black Panther playfully bantering with one another.

The work was serious, though. Only one team quickly found a poster about attendance — because it was located outside assistant principal Lisa Egolf's office. The idea of moving that information and making it engaging for students came out of the meeting.

As did sending notes home and calling families to thank parents for working on helping make sure students are coming to class every day.

"The big build up is to the attendance party that we're having at the end of the year," Gerald said. "There are lots of things going on that we're going to be doing. We're still going to be monitoring the kids, but right now we're more in the place of motivation and encouragement for kids that are right there at the bubble."

Focusing on attendance is not new. What used to be chasing excuses for absences in order to comply with the law — still an issue legally, but not in assessing academics — is now making sure students are in seats as many days as possible, no matter the reason, in order to learn.

Gerald and her team have worked on the issue for several years, but the new approach began in earnest last year. Gerald credits focused help from the central office for helping create the new structure.

The school support team brings district-level leadership together with principals, assistant principals and teachers to discuss targeted action steps focused specifically on a schools' need.

In Heritage's case, Gerald said, that meant working closely with Michele Mitchell, executive director of student advancement. It also meant having a conversation with Menchville principal Bobby Surry to learn about the training his attendance secretary had undergone. Gerald was then able to send her own secretary to learn about practices working at other schools. Groups who didn't often talk to one another now meet and share ideas.

"It opened the lines of communication for building administrators," Gerald said.

At the same time, the school opened its doors to volunteers willing to help support students. Joe Baker, pastor at Refuge Nation Church, came to Gerald hoping to reach students before they ended up in juvenile detention, where he had been volunteering his time.

He founded the Triple A — attendance, academics and actions — Scholars program for about 45 freshmen, sophomores and juniors. They talk weekly with Baker and others about what issues might be going on at home or elsewhere that keep them out of school.

Field trips to help feed the homeless, visit local colleges and enjoy movies such as Black Panther help build a strong connection with one another, Baker and their school.

The group expanded this year to about 75; the Triple A Plus Scholars for those who improved over last year, with a younger group of Triple A newcomers.

“I will check on them with their grades, their behaviors, their attendance,” Baker said. “If they miss school for a few days or something like that we’ll call their house or even go as far as going to their house with the truancy worker. Maybe it was a problem at home, something that was going on, a private matter or something, and we’ll try to help out from that angle as well, which will just get the kid back to school.

“The success rate of the program has been great because out of that group of 45 kids about 35 of them their grades went up to As and Bs and Cs. Their attendance — they’re no longer in the red zone — and only two of them got expelled during the time we’ve been working with them, which was great.”

There are other big returns showing in the attendance team approach. Gerald told the School Board during a work session in February that as of January, 196 fewer students had five or more absences than the same time last year. The school missed the 25 percent cut last year by 69 chronically absent students.

Last month’s team meeting also showed promising data: 187 students had 15 or more absences, compared to 332 this time last year. About 80 more students had fewer than two.

With a field day for all students who do well over the fourth marking period on the horizon, Gerald said she hopes those numbers stay solid for the rest of the year.

“It’s easy at the end of the school year to say, ‘Well I worked hard, (Standards of Learning tests) are coming up, exams are coming up,’ seniors with senioritis, but it’s important you’re still here every single day,” Gerald said. “We try to make school fun. It can’t be fun all the time, but we try to make it fun as possible for our students.

“We’re just trying to keep them engaged differently with the building so they’d want to come versus staying at home.”

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### **Grimm lawsuit moves forward as Gloucester reconsiders school restroom policy**

<https://www.dailypress.com/news/gloucester/dp-nws-gloucester-transgender-policy-hearing-preview-20190213-story.html>

Nearly a year and a half after graduating from Gloucester High School, Gavin Grimm continues his lawsuit against the school division with a bench trial on the books for this summer and discovery due next month.

And Tuesday, the Gloucester County School Board is holding a hearing for public opinion on amending the policy that first barred Grimm from using the restroom of his gender identity.

Grimm, a 19-year-old transgender man, first contended in a 2015 lawsuit during his sophomore year that a policy requiring him to use an alternative restroom — rather than the boys room — was discriminatory and turned him into an outcast at the school.

The proposed policy up for discussion “would allow transgender students to use the restroom consistent with the student’s asserted gender identity” when certain criteria have been met, according to a news release from the School Board.

“If this policy had been in place when I was a sophomore at Gloucester High School, I would have been able to continue using the same restrooms as other boys without being singled out and isolated from my classmates and friends,” Grimm said in a statement provided by the American Civil Liberties Union, which is representing him in the lawsuit.

“I have fought this legal battle for the past four years because I want to make sure that other transgender students do not have to go through the same pain and humiliation that I did.”

### **Case background**

At the beginning of the 2014-15 school year, Grimm, then 14, was allowed to use a single-stall restroom at the nurse's station and some of the staff restrooms. That arrangement, he told the principal, left him feeling alienated and isolated. The principal then allowed Grimm to use the boys restrooms.

Board member Randy Burak said he began receiving phone calls about Grimm from constituents in October, prompting the board to request to be briefed on the situation at a work session on Oct. 23, 2014. The board held a special closed meeting the next week.

At a November meeting, the board postponed action on a motion that would require the division to provide alternative restroom facilities for transgender students. The motion, from School Board member Carla Hook, read: “It shall be the practice of the GCPS to provide male and female restroom and locker room facilities in its schools, and the use of said facilities shall be limited to the corresponding biological genders, and students with gender-identity issues shall be provided an alternative private facility.”

The proposal was not exactly what Grimm was seeking. He told the School Board that he is "not a girl" and did not feel comfortable using the girls restroom or locker room. He said it was "alienating (and) humiliating" to use the alternative facilities.

After further public comments, the board approved that policy in a 6-1 vote at its December meeting.

Grimm filed suit the following year, arguing that the school division’s policy violates Title IX and the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Title IX, a federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in schools, requires school divisions to provide equal restrooms for male and female students separated on the basis of sex.

The School Board argues that Title IX does not include gender identification in the definition of sex.

According to court documents, Grimm was diagnosed with gender dysphoria, which is a mismatch between an individual's gender identity and physical sex at birth. He has undergone hormone therapy and chest reconstruction surgery, according to court documents, as well as obtaining a state I.D. card and an updated birth certificate that list his sex as male.

The case and Grimm gained national attention. In 2017, shortly before he turned 18, he was named one of Time magazine's most influential people in the world.

"It's inconceivable. I still haven't really registered it. To have a place immortalized through Time, literally, and in the sense of the publication, is such an honor," he told the Daily Press at the time. "To have a transgender youth activist on a list of influential people is a hugely important step forward for transgender advocacy. It sends the message that the story is being told and the message is being heard."

Since graduating, he has moved to California, where he advocates for transgender rights.

### **New policy**

The new policy would replace what has been in place since 2014.

Here is the amended policy that will be discussed Tuesday: "The policy to be discussed would allow transgender students to use the restroom consistent with the student's asserted gender identity when the following criteria have been met: (1) the student has appropriate medical documentation from a licensed, treating healthcare provider who specializes in the treatment of transgender individuals; and (2) the student has consistently asserted the student's gender identity for a period of at least six months; and (3) the student has undergone treatment recommended by the student's healthcare provider, which may include social transition or hormonal therapy for at least six months."

Vice chairwoman Robin Rice said that the board's attorney in the case, David P. Corrigan, would present an update on where the case stands now, what got the board to this point and what the options are for the board. She said she could not discuss the presentation or the impetus behind revisiting the policy due to it being a legal matter.

Corrigan declined to comment on the hearing. One of Grimm's attorneys, ACLU senior staff attorney Josh Block, also declined to comment.

"This policy is far from perfect, but would represent an important first step for Gloucester," Grimm said in the statement. "If approved, it would also send the message to school districts across the Commonwealth and the country that discrimination is unacceptable, and every student must be respected and supported."

James Parrish, executive director of Equality Virginia, an advocacy group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Virginians, agreed that the proposal was not the ideal solution but a step in the right direction.

“On the front end, it is wonderful that schools are having conversations about policies, making sure that all students are using the facilities that align with their gender identity. That’s a good thing,” said Parrish, who advocated on Grimm’s behalf in the past. “Just on hearing (the policy), though, it seems like we’re putting a lot of burdens on transgender students that we don’t put on other students.”

He said across the country there have been policies put in place by school districts to cover all issues that might arise for a transgender student: allowing genders to be changed on documents, making sure correct pronouns are used and names are recognized, and allowing restroom access. He said some require a letter from a licensed medical provider, but he was not familiar with a six-month requirement.

Grimm’s case has, in a way, “put on hold” what other Virginia districts might do, Parrish said, as they await legal precedent set by the lawsuit. The Stafford County School Board is currently considering a policy that would allow a student to use the restroom, locker room or changing facility of his or her gender identity “upon a showing of consistent and uniform assertion of the student’s gender identity or other evidence that the student’s gender identity is sincerely held as part of their core identity,” according to the draft policy.

The case has gone through various appeals and orders. A bench trial is set for July in Newport News, with all discovery — the act of obtaining evidence before a trial begins — due in March. In December, Grimm filed a motion to add to his complaint the issue of not being able to update his gender on his high school transcript.

The School Board, in return, argued that it is not an issue of Title IX or the 14th amendment and that Grimm did not use his right to a hearing on the initial denial.

U.S. District Judge Arenda L. Wright Allen ruled in Grimm’s favor Thursday, allowing the new complaint to be added to the lawsuit.

The public hearing is set to begin at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in the auditorium of the Thomas Calhoun Walker Education Center, 6099 T.C. Walker Road in Gloucester. Comments will begin at approximately 7 p.m.