**Richmond schools use long-term suspensions far more often than neighboring counties. New policies aim to change that.**

Over the past five years, Richmond Public Schools issued more than 2,200 long-term suspensions at a time when the neighboring counties of Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico combined handed down that punishment fewer than 400 times.

The data, obtained by the Richmond Times-Dispatch through an open records request from the Virginia Department of Education, shows that Black students accounted for more than 90% of the city's long-term suspensions in that time period. Hispanic students comprised about 5%, according to state reports. White students account for a little more than 10% of the city's enrollment.

The penalty, issued for offenses ranging from trespassing to stealing money, pushes students out of school for between 11 and 45 days, according to RPS' code of conduct.

Richmond school officials adopted changes to the Student Code of Conduct they hope will be less geared toward punishment and more toward restorative measures, reducing the number of suspensions and missed classroom time. Even with a truncated year, in 2019-20 students across the district lost 18,000 school days to suspension, a number that includes short-term and long-term suspensions.

"I think the data helps us understand where we need to allocate our resources," said Harry Hughes, chief schools officer for RPS. "I'm very hopeful that our changes will significantly reduce long-term suspensions."

The data shows no long-term suspensions for white, Asian and American Indian students in the past five years, which could mean the division either didn't suspend those students long-term or suspended so few of them that providing figures could theoretically identify students in violation of student privacy laws.

The city's code of conduct breaks down discipline offenses by levels, with level one behaviors being the most benign offenses, while level five offenses would call for severe punishments like long-term suspension or expulsion. Some offenses, like alcohol and drug possession on school grounds, call for a referral to law enforcement.

Level one and level two offenses like cheating or tardiness no longer qualify for short-term suspensions under the changes suggested by the administration of Superintendent Jason Kamras and approved by the School Board on Sept. 21. The changes heartened members of the Legal Aid Justice Center, a group that has been advocating for reforms to the code of conduct for nearly a decade.

Level one offenses also call for more restorative practices like community service or community circles, where an adult facilitator might just check in with a student in hopes of building an affirming and positive relationship.

"The goal of our community circles is to build authentic relationships between teachers and students, and students amongst themselves," Hughes said. "We're talking about restoring a community. To restore a community, you have to build community, so we have invested in our community circles, which take place throughout all of our schools."

Lighter punishments that don't result in the loss of instructional time is part of Kamras' strategic plan to reduce suspensions. Students won't be suspended until they get to a level three offense, which ranges from refusing to comply with staff to cyberbullying.

More than half of the 18,000 days missed because of suspensions last school year were at George Wythe, Armstrong, Huguenot and John Marshall high schools and Martin Luther King Jr. Middle, where enrollment is predominantly Black and Hispanic.

The suspension data, reported by school systems to the state, records every suspension, not every student who is suspended, meaning it would include instances of individual students receiving more than one suspension.

While LAJC members are happy with many of the changes, they say there is still much more work to be done.

"The changes to the code of conduct is what I would call leveling down on responses," said Rachael Deane of the LAJC. "In place of those, the hope that I have heard the administration and the School Board say is that in place of those punitive measures, is that they are really investing in restorative measures ... that get to the root cause of those behaviors."

Deane said Richmond's challenges stem not only from implicit bias but also from concerns of crime and violence that date to the 1970s war on drugs.

"There was growing concern about crime and violence, and what was called juvenile delinquency," Deane said. "School policies themselves became much more punitive; the use of suspension started to skyrocket. We saw zero-tolerance policies come about in the '70s, '80s and especially in the '90s."

As part of their advocacy to address school pushout, the LAJC has also requested that RPS remove police from schools. Officers started being embedded in city schools in 1996 after a fight at Armstrong High. During the 2019-20 school year, RPS saw 121 arrests of students, most of them at schools populated mostly by students of color.

In July, Kamras said he would recommend their removal, but the vote has yet to happen. It was anticipated for a September vote. Now, a School Board with four newcomers will be sworn in beginning in January, and it's unclear when or if the board will take the vote.

Second District board member Scott Barlow, who kick-started the conversation of removing police from schools, said the discussion of suspensions and the school-to-prison pipeline doesn't just happen in a vacuum.

"A lot of people like to talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, and we have to do what we can to address it, but that doesn't happen in a vacuum," Barlow said. "What it largely displays is a symptom of problems that we have throughout the community and in our public education system. You can't talk about suspensions and what leads to them without talking about why we're seeing those behaviors."

Across the Richmond region, Black students were suspended 16,547 times, while white students were suspended 4,483 times in the 2019-20 school year. White students make up the largest share of students in the Richmond region, at roughly 40%.

In Richmond Public Schools, out of about 7,500 instances of suspension, whether in school or out of school, nearly 90% were Black students. White students in Richmond were suspended fewer than 120 times. Black students are also overrepresented in suspension data reported to the state by Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico counties.

In Hanover, spokesman Chris Whitley said the division made recent changes to its code of conduct.

"We completed a comprehensive update earlier this year, which the School Board approved during its meeting on June 9, 2020, effective for the 2020-2021 school year," Whitley said. "This was a multiyear effort that is in alignment with the VDOE's Model Guidance for Positive and Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension. This is also in alignment with our other efforts in this regard, such as the Virginia Tiered Systems of Support, equity, restorative practices and de-escalation techniques."

Henrico Public Schools spokesperson Andy Jenks said the district is aware of the disparities and has done significant work to reduce them.

"After a two-year conversation with the community through public hearings and other feedback, we adopted a revised Code of Student Conduct back in 2015-16," Jenks said in a statement. "Is there more we can do to address disparities in our suspensions? Of course. We must understand the causes, develop self-monitoring systems, implement our preventative measure with the utmost fidelity and keep an open dialogue about it. By now, this has become a deliberate and sustained aspect of our administrator and teacher training."

In Chesterfield, spokesperson Shawn Smith said the division often collects data on a monthly basis regarding discipline. It uses that data to identify schools with elevated risk of discipline and offer tailored support with evidence-based practices to help with positive behavioral change.

khunter@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6948

**Maggie Walker school's new 5-year plan addresses diversity. But with no metrics, critics question its utility**

While the 11-page plan adopted by the board of the Maggie Walker Governor's school Aug. 20 contains a reference to "underserved populations," it does not mention racism or Black or brown students. It also contains no benchmarks for actualizing language stated in the new plan's first goal, to "create a welcoming environment that celebrates and reflects the diversity of the school districts we serve and fosters a sense of belonging for all."

Alumni who hoped a five-year plan approved last week for a predominantly white magnet school would address systemic racism say the regional school board did not do enough to support students of color.

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"It's really hard to sign off on a strategic plan that doesn't have those specifics," said Rasheeda Creighton, who graduated from the school in 1995. "What is tangible? These are not smart goals."

The plan states that examining structural barriers such as transportation, technology and policies pertaining to clubs and mental health will move Maggie Walker toward that goal. It also says the school will work with districts on their intake processes.

About one in three of the 61,279 students that populate the 12 districts feeding into the regional gifted program is Black. However, just 7% of the gifted school is made up of Black students; only 1.1% are Hispanic.

Head of School Bob Lowerre acknowledged alumni members' concerns in an interview, explaining that the document was already in progress before George Floyd's death in Minneapolis police custody in May, sparking nationwide unrest over police brutality and racial injustice.

"We can see that the plan could go further, and there's areas where we could do some work on that," Lowerre said. "We need to make sure that we're not leaving any parts out, and if that means we need to put some specific language in there, that's something that we will have to look at doing and then take it back to the School Board."

Board member Scott Barlow, who represents Richmond Public Schools, said the plan should ensure the schools' demographics move in the direction of the feeder schools Maggie Walker draws from by 2025; an idea Creighton and Carrie Kahwajy, education chair of the Chesterfield NAACP, support.

"By setting a goal and drilling into that might help us focus on those key issues," Barlow said during the meeting.

A few board members said they thought the goal was too ambitious, with one questioning whether diversifying the school might call into question its rigor, a common stigma accompanying talks of diversifying gifted programs.

"We don't appeal to everyone, nor do I think we should," Hanover School Board chairman John Axselle said during the meeting. "I think it might change our vision, mission or our uniqueness if we try to look like a general public school. We're not. This is a gifted school."

Some who watched the meeting said Axselle's comments were rooted in implicit bias. He did not respond to interview requests.

"It really came across as very elitist, which is disappointing, but not surprising," Creighton said of Axselle's comments. "When people default to lowering standards when you talk about diversity, that is a reflection of their own feelings of superiority, because no one has ever said anything about changing the standards or lowering standards."

The lack of racial diversity in gifted programs like Maggie Walker is not uncommon in the United States. Black and Latino students across the country don't have equitable access to gifted programs, including in districts that are overwhelmingly made up of Black and Latino students, according to a study done by Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit working to close equity gaps.

The study also found that educator bias affects who is viewed as gifted, which widens the gap of who gets access to gifted programs. This is one reason the plan addresses the diversity of teachers and the need to hire more teachers of color.

In Richmond Public Schools, a district made primarily of Black students and an ever-growing Latino population, 30 out of the 39 students selected to attend the governor's school in the 2019-20 school year were white.

Hanover County has not sent any Black or Hispanic students to the magnet program since 2015, according to data previously sent by the county system. Of the 179 students Henrico County sent last school year, 15 were Black and three were Hispanic.

That same year in Chesterfield, 28 Black students applied to the school; three were accepted. Six of the 21 Hispanic students who applied were accepted; 45 out of 85 white Chesterfield students who applied were admitted.

Zoe Spencer, a Virginia State University professor who specializes in diversity, said research shows that implicit bias against students of color plays well into this issue.

"Access to [talented and gifted] programs and schools is impeded by the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender with Black, low-income, male students being farthest away from that access," Spencer said. "The board's discussion about ... what a more diversified school might look like and its masked comments about how diversifying may impact or necessitate a change to the academic rigor of the Maggie L. Walker Governor's School sit neatly within that context."

Creighton helped the school with a survey to outline cultural issues as protests over police brutality gripped the country. The results, from 75 Black respondents, Creighton said, showed that Black students didn't feel comfortable at the school in the past, and they don't feel comfortable now.

"Admissions, retention and pipeline are all connected," Creighton said. "[Black alumni] are honed in on the current student experience, which is why the strategic plan conversation is critical."

"I would like to see real, intentional, concrete steps to move towards a more diverse and culturally responsive, more diverse teaching staff, culturally responsive curriculum," said Kahwajy, the Chesterfield NAACP's education chair.

The school adopted the name Maggie L. Walker, for the first Black woman to own a bank in the U.S., after moving from the top floor of Thomas Jefferson High School in 2001 to a building overhauled to accommodate the program.

The building originally was home to Maggie L. Walker High School, which opened in the 1930s to educate Black students during segregation.

khunter@timesdispatch.com

(804) 649-6948

**'It has to be me': Mother who leaves work to teach child with autism encounters challenges experts say are too common**

Wendy Rufrano was working full time as a manager at C&J Auto Sales before the pandemic shuttered schools across Virginia and left her three boys home.

She went down to one shift a week. Her real work now is home schooling; a task she has embraced but struggles with some days. Cooper, one of her 7-year-old twins, is newly diagnosed with autism.

"[Leaving the job] was always up in the air when the pandemic started," Rufrano said. "Then when we had the meeting and they considered Cooper to be autistic, I was like, 'It has to be me.' "

Cooper is one of roughly 20,300 Richmond-area students and more than 175,000 statewide who receive special education services, according to state data, a group hard-hit by the unraveling of normalcy and structure.

People who work in disability rights say the net impact of the pandemic will be fewer supports for students who need them most. School officials say they're doing their best.

In Richmond, where the public school system was busy evaluating students' eligibility for special education services when schools closed, that meant sending more than 4,000 letters about the path forward, said Renesha Parks, the system's director of special education. The district sent more letters letting parents know that services are still available.

Some families never responded. Others said they were too overwhelmed to deal with navigating their children's needs and the school system's responsibilities, laid out in federal law.

"We're going to continue to try every week to get in touch with families that we aren't already in touch with," said Tracy Epp, the system's chief academic officer. "I think the barrier, frankly, is that folks are dealing with a lot right now."

Rachael Deane, the executive director of the JustChildren program at the Legal Aid Justice Center, said the nonprofit is monitoring the situation.

"We are hearing about [special education] services being reduced, sometimes without having a meeting or getting consent from the parent or the student," said Deane, who stressed there must be communication to change any part of the individualized education plans laying out those services, even in the midst of the pandemic. "What we're seeing is things being reduced in an arbitrary way or a broad way."

Rufrano is exhausted.

She bought a tablet to ensure Cooper would have access to speech therapy, only to realize it didn't have the right software. She's been setting him up on her iPhone, but it's not ideal.

"If I get a phone call or text message, we lose the therapist," she said.

With one computer in the house and three small children, she struggles to keep up with the school workload and give everyone the attention she'd like.

Her first two attempts at picking up a school-issued Chromebook failed. First, there was a shipping delay.

Then, more than 200 people showed up to E.S.H. Greene Elementary, where Cooper and his twin brother are students. There was little social distancing, Rufrano said, and most people weren't wearing masks. She left.

"There were cars double-parked in the street. The line was to the street, and everyone was just huddled next to each other. We had masks, but I'm not going to threaten the boys' lives," she said.

Rufrano said she has had limited access to the team of people who work to ensure the terms of Cooper's individualized education plan are met.

One of those people is his speech therapist, who Rufrano said used to see Cooper at least two or three times a week. After about a month with no therapy at all, he began receiving a lesson a week, for about 30 minutes.

Parks said there hasn't been any reduction in services. She said she hadn't heard of Rufrano's challenges but would reach out to her.

"There has not been a reduction of services at all," Parks said. "Actually, when we reached out to the families, they set up a schedule that would be accommodating for the family."

Deane said Rufrano's experience is not uncommon.

"We've heard similar stories from other families across the state and from other special education advocates," she said.

The public school systems in Richmond and Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico counties provide roughly 3,500, 7,900, 2,300 and 6,600 students, respectively, with special education services, state data shows.

Parks pointed to the system's one-on-one tutoring program for students with IEPs and the extension of hours for offering services from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. to accommodate families whose parents might work late hours as examples of RPS working to meet parents where they are.

Rufrano's difficulties with technology aren't uncommon either, according to Tonya Milling, executive director of the Arc of Virginia, an organization that advocates for people with disabilities.

"We've heard a lot of people say that they've had trouble getting technology," Milling said. "They don't understand it; it's new to them. For a lot of years, that's been a big learning curve. And then some of them just don't have the technology and even access to the internet in certain parts of the state."

Not all of the terms of individualized education plans can go online, and some aren't readily accessible now, she said.

"One of the biggest things is thinking and worrying about kids ... regressing in some of their skills, academic goals and social goals," Milling said. "I think that's probably a worry for all of our students in general. It's certainly more significant for students with developmental disabilities. The accommodations that they need for learning are just much more complex when you're trying to do it at a distance."

Rufrano believes her kids were already behind before schools closed, especially in handwriting and reading. The work, she said, is too much.

"We're not able to do what they're asking us," she said. "I printed out one week of the RPS homework for the twins. Everything I printed out was the week's worth of work, not counting the stuff that was done online. There was about 2 inches of paper. That's a lot of work that parents are expected to do with their children when they are not teaching."

The family is getting by on state unemployment supplemented by federal CARES Act dollars. Her husband works two full-time jobs. But the financial stability comes with an emotional cost.

She became so overwhelmed one day that she broke down while her sister was over at her house helping her with some housework. She really just wanted to give up on schooling the kids altogether.

"During the summer, it's different," she said. "Parents aren't expected to teach their kids. You still have your normal structure, but it's a free-for-all."

Advocates like Milling worry about what's to happen with special needs students if schools aren't open for in-person instruction next year.

"What works for one kid is not going to work for the next," Milling said. "Is it removed learning, distance learning through technology? Because for some kids, that's not going to work. For some families, that's not going to work."

Since the last computer distribution, Rufrano figured out how to get a camera on her computer working; a relief. Having only one computer still limits the one-on-one instruction time she can give the kids, but she's working on giving herself some grace.

[khunter@timesdispatch.com](mailto:khunter@timesdispatch.com)

(804) 649-6948