

# The Hour

## Curbing school-to-prison pipeline: Advocates say to stop the trend schools must look at the numbers

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NORWALK -- Norwalk Public Schools has made significant gains in lowering the number of suspensions and expulsions among minority students over the years. But a disparity still exists, where minority children make up a small number of the student population while accounting for a large percentage of disciplinary action in the city's schools.

"When you look at Norwalk as a school district, black students make up 19 percent of the Norwalk school district yet they represent 43 percent of students with at least one out-of-school suspension or expulsion," said Leon Smith of the Center for Children's Advocacy.

Smith, an attorney who specializes in juvenile delinquency and education, has represented a number of Norwalk students in education matters. He recently obtained district-wide data of suspensions and expulsions during the 2013-14 school year from the state Department of Education.

"At Norwalk High School, black kids are 20 percent of the student body, yet they are 45 percent of the students who received at least one out-of-school suspension or expulsion. At Brien McMahon, black students make up 25 percent of the student body, and account for 35 percent of suspensions and expulsions," he said.

"It's one of those situations where I heard the anecdotes but the numbers and the data certainly back it up," said Smith. "The level of disproportionality district-wide, particularly at the high school level, is definitely stark."

During the 2002-03 school year, black students accounted for 47 percent of suspensions at the high school level while minority students, as a whole, accounted for 69 percent of suspensions, according to data provided by Norwalk Public Schools. The data did not include expulsions.

During a three-year period from 2001 to 2003, black male students made up 53 percent of suspensions at the elementary school level. Black female students made up the second highest number of elementary school suspensions during the same timeframe with 19 percent.

"The numbers that we have today in terms of disproportionality are concerning," said Bruce V. Morris, the school district's human relations officer.

"However, the district has improved significantly over the past 10 years. I would say the disproportionality was at least two to three times greater than it is currently. There are a myriad of causes that we need to address. It's something that is systemic in Norwalk, throughout the state and the entire country. It ultimately feeds into the school-to-prison pipeline," said Morris.

Morris credits the implementation of programs like PBIS and SBRI for helping Norwalk's numbers improve over the years.

PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) is a program aimed at improving behavior and rewards for students for meeting certain expectations. SBRI (Scientific Research-Based Interventions) identifies academic challenges and mental health issues.

"With all the positives, the data tells us that there's still more work to do," said Morris. "I'm extremely confident that our disproportionality is not comparable to our surrounding urban towns but we still have so much more to do until we have statistics that mirror the demographics of our school district."

At the Center for Children's Advocacy, Smith primarily works with Fairfield County children in the areas of education, juvenile justice and immigration. For the last two years, Smith has been involved in the organization's work in Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC).

"In doing DMC work, we look at the percentages of particular racial or ethnic groups of the overall student population and what percentage of the punishments are they making up," said Smith. "As a school district in Norwalk, it's more than double for black kids. I think decision makers in Norwalk need to drill down and explore this. You clearly have kids of color making up this disproportionate number."

School districts with disproportionate discipline data in other cities such as Bridgeport and Hartford have established DMC committees, where community stakeholders come together to review data, have conversations and explore ways to reduce disproportionate numbers.

"It would be interesting to see if that's a step Norwalk would take, because it's something that has worked in other Connecticut cities," said Smith.

Rev. Lindsay Curtis, pastor of Grace Baptist Church, said the disproportion in Norwalk's minority suspensions and expulsions was one of the biggest issues he faced when he served as president of the city's NAACP chapter.

"We do not support any issues around weapons or drugs but many of the suspensions have nothing to do with either. That's a problem," said Curtis. "I think the solution is greater sensitivity and greater understanding. We're going to have to sit down and have those tough conversations. It seems to me that you can't narrow the achievement gap, while students are being suspended and expelled."

Morris, a state representative for District 140, is looking to help curb the problem at the state level. He's been involved in the introduction of a number of bills that he would like to be signed into law.

He recently proposed a suspension reform bill that seeks to eliminate school suspensions for children, eight years old and younger. "To deny a child their education and put them behind, there's a greater likelihood that child is not going to succeed and will act out," said Morris.

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