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OPINION

# Wake's undefensible suspensions

BY JASON LANGBERG AND CARY BREGE



RALEIGH -- The diversity disaster, superintendent scandal and calendar chaos. Now pile on reports that the number of out-of-school suspensions - the feeder for dropouts and the "school to prison pipeline" - remains enormous and disproportionately devastating for students of color in Wake County.

Those who care about the Wake County Public School System must demand that the district take bold steps to address the shocking and egregious situation facing schoolchildren in our community.

The N.C. Department of Public Instruction recently released its annual studies of suspensions and expulsions and dropout rates. The reports show statewide progress during the 2008-09 school year in terms of reducing suspensions and dropouts.

Wake County has also made some progress: short-term suspensions declined by 9 percent, long-term suspensions declined by 8 percent and the dropout rate declined by 0.7 percent. Unfortunately, that's where the good news ends.

According to DPI, Wake County schools gave out 20,651 short-term suspensions and 1,015 long-term suspensions during the 2008-09 school year. Wake County accounted for an astounding 28.3 percent of all long-term suspensions in North Carolina (an increase of 7.2 percent from the previous year), even though Wake County has only 9.4 percent of the state's students.

In other words, more than a quarter of all long-term suspensions in the entire state came from just one of the 115 school districts: Wake County. Wake County long-term suspended more than four times as many students as the district with the second-most long-term suspensions (Hoke County, 246 long-term suspensions) and over 20 times as many students as Charlotte-Mecklenburg (47 long-term suspensions).

What is worse, even though state law and policies in most other districts define a long-term suspension as "more than 10 days," a long-term suspension in Wake County always means the student is excluded for the remainder of the school year. That means a student who is long-term suspended in October will miss the entire school year, as opposed to being back in a learning environment before Thanksgiving. As we all know, a year in the life of a child is a very long time, especially considering that the child will likely receive inadequate alternative educational services or none at all. The vast majority of long-term suspensions are for nonviolent offenses.

A four-year cohort graduation rate follows a group of ninth-graders across four years' time and reports on the percentage who graduate four years after they begin high school. DPI's news release read: "the four-year cohort graduation rate is considered a more comprehensive picture of this issue." Sadly then, Wake County's picture is bleak.

While Wake County's four-year cohort graduation rate was 6.6 percent higher than the state average last school year, it is declining while the state average is improving. Over the past three years, Wake County's four-year cohort graduation rate dropped by 0.9 percent overall and by an appalling 9.1 percent for economically disadvantaged students.

Racial disparities in Wake County's school-to-prison pipeline remained staggering in 2008-09, despite studies that have shown that those disparities cannot be accounted for by the economic status of minority students.

## By the numbers

- 28.3** The percentage of long-term suspensions in North Carolina that were in Wake County in 2008-09
- 9.4** The percentage of North Carolina's total number of public students who are in Wake
- 20** The number of times more long-term suspensions that Wake hands out than the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system

Nor is there evidence that minority students misbehave to a degree that would warrant higher rates of punishment. African-American students made up 26.1 percent of students in Wake County, yet they received 62.3 percent of short-term suspensions and 67.5 percent of long-term suspensions. Over the past five school years, 34 of the 36 expelled students in Wake County were African-American. Finally, last school year, the four-year cohort graduation rate for Caucasian students was 26 percent greater than the rate for African-American students and 38.3 percent greater than the rate for Latino students.

Earlier this year, several school board members publicly expressed concern over school discipline practices in Wake County. However, nothing at all has changed. Sluggish progress, empty rhetoric, one step forward and two steps back.

The current zero tolerance approach to issues of school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline isn't cutting it, and the situation is getting worse. What will the data look like for the current school year given that Wake County eliminated its contracts with the four remaining alternative schools? How many years of embarrassing, heartbreaking data must we endure until the Wake County Public School System undertakes comprehensive, sustained, proven reforms to dismantle its shameful school-to-prison pipeline?

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