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Daily News-Record (Harrisonburg, VA)

March 15, 2012

Section: News-Local

Information Overload?

EMILY SHARRER

HARRISONBURG - Legislators want disciplinary records in Virginia schools to be more transparent.

But administrators with Rockingham County Schools want to make sure that does not lead to misinterpretation of the data.

A bill that unanimously passed both the House of Delegates and state Senate last month would require the Virginia Department of Education to post statistics on its website about short- and long-term suspensions and expulsions.

The data would be broken down by race, ethnicity, gender and disability.

During a short-term suspension, a student is banned from school for up to 10 days. A long-term suspension is one of more than 10 days.

According to local administrators, divisions submit individual incident sheets annually to the VDOE, which further breaks down the data into those subgroups. That information, however, is never released publicly.

The total number of expulsions and suspensions for each school is already posted online, without the demographic information.

The bill will not change anything about the way schools report data to the VDOE.

Supporters of the legislation say making the data public will reveal any disparities in the way punishment is meted out among children of different races and ethnicities.

"If we already require school divisions to provide this, why aren't we making it public?" said Del. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, who sponsored the bill.

According to Jeff Caldwell, Gov. Bob McDonnell's press secretary, the legislation is still under review. McDonnell has until April 9 to decide whether to sign it into law.

Easier Identification

Because Rockingham County's population is predominantly white, says **Oskar Scheikl**, director of information management for county schools, breaking down data could make it too easy to identify children classified in different race or ethnic groups. The data also could be misleading, said county schools administrators.

"If you have a school with a small subgroup, where you have 10 students in one race category and it just happens that two or three of those have high suspension rates, you can't really draw a conclusion about that race category," Scheikl said. "As the groups get smaller, it gets tricky to draw good conclusions."

Rockingham Superintendent Carol Fenn said that is especially true if percentages are used. If a school reports that 100 percent of Pacific Islander students were expelled, for example, but the school only has two Pacific Islander students, the percentage could lead the public to make incorrect assumptions about the county's discipline practices.

"If you didn't have all the information, or a false understanding of the school's dynamics, you could [be] misled in your interpretation," Fenn said.

Numbers

In Rockingham County, 10 of the county's 11,921 students were expelled in 2010-11, 58 had long-term suspensions - the most in the past five school years - and 721 received short-term suspensions.

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"If we notice a discrepancy, the way we approach it is to say, 'What are the possible explanations,' not just jump to the conclusion that ... we're treating one group differently than another," Scheikl said. "If it's used the right way, more information is always helpful ... as long as people approach it with a good mind."

Scheikl said he will be interested to see how the VDOE will ensure that individual students cannot be identified.

"In the past, for [Standards of Learning] testing, that's usually meant that a subgroup has to be a certain size before it has been shown," he said. "If you have one Asian student at [Turner Ashby] for example, well, you can't show suspension data for that [group]."

The introduction of the bill was spurred by a study of Virginia public schools completed by JustChildren, a Charlottesville public education advocacy group.

The study shows that in 2010-11, 708 students were expelled, 5,761 received long-term suspensions, and 152,648 were suspended for less than 10 days. According to the study, black students and students with disabilities faced disciplinary action more often than other students in Virginia.

In Harrisonburg City Schools, no expulsions or long-term suspensions were reported last year. Of the city's 4,822 students in 2010-11, 382 received short-term, out-of-school suspensions.

"[I'm] not sure what posting on the website will do to help reduce discipline issues, but the more the public understands the profiles of their schools, the more the public can assist in our mission of making sure all children are successful learners," Superintendent Scott Kizner said in a message.

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