

H-F will implement plan to reduce racial disparity in discipline

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The number of Black students who were expelled or suspended at Homewood-Flossmoor High School in 2018 and 2019 was higher than their proportion in the student population, so the district is among 20% of school districts that are required by the state to address racial disproportionality in disciplinary actions.

The District 233 Board of Education approved the framework at its Dec. 14 meeting. The plan must be placed on the district website and submitted to the Illinois State Board of Education by June 1.

District officials expressed some dissatisfaction with the way the state determines which districts must file plans, but Superintendent-elect Scott Wakeley said implementing the plan represents an opportunity.

"The benefit of this process is for us to examine what our practices are and what we can do to continue to build a program that is not simply exclusionary and punitive but really looks at building stronger relationships with staff and students, establishing classroom norms and embedding social/emotional learning into our instruction," he said.

The state determines which districts must create a plan by dividing the number of expulsions and out-of-school suspensions by the total district enrollment by the last school day in September for the year in which the data was collected, multiplied by 100, according to the Illinois school code. The program does not include districts with fewer than 50 white students or fewer than 50 students of color.

Disciplinary racial disproportion, for purposes of the law, is defined as "the overrepresentation of students of color or white students in comparison to the total number of students of color or white students on October 1 of the school year in which data are collected, with respect to the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions."

A report to the board noted that during the data collection period in 2018 and 2019, there were 252 student suspensions. Of those, 86% were African American, 7.5% were white, 29% were special education students, a little more than 5% were Hispanic and just less than 4% identified as multiple race.

Of the 73 special education students suspended, more than 86% were African American, 8.2% were multiple race, 6.8% were white and almost 1.4% were Hispanic.

According to the Illinois Report Card, during 2018 H-F's Black population was 68.9% of the student body. In 2019, it was 70.1%.

"The identified trend is that the greatest percentage of students suspended are African American and the greatest number of special education students suspended are African American," the report to the board stated. "Thus, there is significant disproportionality of African American students suspended benchmarked against the total number of suspensions."

The Plan to Reduce the Use of Exclusionary Discipline and/or Racial Disproportionality includes:

- Further develop the MTSS Program as a means of identifying and supporting behaviors before they reach the level of suspension.
- Build stronger relationships with students.
- Establish classroom norms.
- Embed social emotional learning into instruction
- Reinforce restorative practices.
- Greater utilization of behavior management plans.
- All staff presentation on Senate Bill 100 (the authorizing legislation).

- Facilitate weekly Student Support Team meetings.
- Training on impact of positive staff/student interaction.
- Be purposeful in using suspensions as a last resort.

Wakeley said the law seems designed to affect almost any large, diverse student population, and he noted that a number of fairly elite schools are in the top 20% with H-F, including Evanston, Oak Park, River Forest and Downers Grove.

"There's always going to be a top 20%," he said. "If most everybody reduces their suspensions to 0 and somebody has 1, they will be in the 20%."

He said the focus on making H-F better is something to embrace, though, and he hopes the process "helps students having more voice and more ownership in the process."

Suspension should be a last resort, he said, but that goal has to be balanced with concern for school safety.

"We certainly need to make sure the school environment is as safe as it can be, but we need to be thoughtful in looking for ways to deter behavior and provide that restorative piece," he said. "They are students and they will make bad choices. We need to be here to support them."




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