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Schools chief is firm on expulsion

Toledo removed students more often

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When new Cleveland schools Chief Executive Eugene Sanders says he's not going to tolerate disruptive students, he has a track record to back it up.

Student expulsions in Toledo, where Sanders was superintendent until he came to Cleveland in July, were more than three times the rate in Cleveland over the past three years, according to Ohio Department of Education records.

Last year, Cleveland expelled 126 students, according to data that Cleveland sent to the state, while Toledo -- with half the enrollment -- expelled 204.

Cleveland spokesman Alan Seifullah said his inspection of district records shows 199 students actually were expelled last year.

Even if that's the right number, Toledo's expulsion rate was still substantially higher. But Sanders has signaled that Cleveland's approach to discipline problems is changing.

Only about a month into the school year, 14 students are in various stages of the expulsion process. Twelve of those students were nabbed at East Tech High on Sept. 13, after fighting in a hallway between classes.

Sanders won the admiration of many in the community when he stood on the sidewalk in front of the school that day and said he would not stand for such "foolishness" and "stupidity."

That's not the only time he has made it clear that troublemaking students have no place in the schools.

In-school suspensions may be adequate for students who are chronically tardy or who commit other minor infractions, he said this week. But he favors out-of-school suspensions and expulsion for violence or other serious acts.

That contrasts starkly with the philosophy of his predecessor, Barbara Byrd-Bennett. Early in her administration, Byrd-Bennett forbade out-of-school suspensions or expulsions of students in kindergarten through third grade, saying they were too young to understand. She also preferred in-school suspensions or other interventions for older students, except in the most serious cases.

Byrd-Bennett's position put her at odds with many teachers, who said disruptive students need to be removed from school to keep classmates safe and allow them to learn.

Joanne DeMarco, president of the Cleveland Teachers Union, supports Sanders' get-tough attitude. But she said the district needs more services to help students before serious offenses occur. Social workers and guidance counselors who were laid off a few years ago have been sorely missed, she said.

While Sanders' tough talk went over well with a lot of people, it makes the staff at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland nervous. Tomar Brown was just hired through a grant to help represent and find educational options for expelled students.

"When you expel a child from school, you are severely restricting that child's future opportunities to be educated appropriately," Brown said.

"They've missed school, they fall behind, they're at risk for future disciplinary action. They get discouraged, they drop out, they are more likely to have a criminal record."

While she acknowledges that expulsion can be necessary in some cases, Brown said that sometimes special education or behavior interventions are a better fit. Legal Aid urges testing for all expelled students.

The county's Juvenile Detention Center has teachers and holds class for incarcerated students, but Brown wishes there were more options in the neighborhoods.

A few years ago, local YMCAs offered the Phoenix program, which held classes for expelled students. But the program, which the district paid for, was eliminated in budget cuts.

State data for the past three years show Cleveland expelled far less than 1 percent of students, but in several cases, Seifullah came up with different numbers than those in state records. For example, in the 2003-04 school year, the state database says Cleveland expelled fewer than 10 students. But Seifullah's inspection of district records showed 226 students expelled that year.

J.C. Benton, a spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education, said the state simply compiles the numbers that districts submit.

Neither Benton nor Seifullah knew why the numbers vary, but Benton suggested that Cleveland may have tried to make changes after the deadline for records submission.

Benton said the state Education Department has created a "data integrity team" of employees to deal with suspect statistics - a move spurred by recent problems with attendance and bus ridership numbers in Cleveland.

The team targets anomalies in data submitted by districts. Last year, it looked at financial data from districts, and this year it will look at all types of data.

If problems are found, the team is authorized to issue reports or go to district officials to correct the numbers. Benton said no districts have been the subject of a report or other action yet.

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