

# THE BAY STATE Banner

## State calls out 5 Boston schools for disparate & excessive suspensions

Jule Pattison-Gordon | 6/29/2016, 10:26 a.m.



JP Academy schools were cited for misuse of discipline and will be required to work with DESE and other schools to make plans for reforms. Banner photo

State officials are putting a spotlight on several schools, including four Boston charter schools and one school run by Boston Public Schools, all cited for excessive or inappropriate use of long-term suspensions or expulsions. The state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education identified Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, City on a Hill Charter School in Dudley Square, UP Academy Charter School of Dorchester, UP Academy Charter School of Boston and BPS's Mary Lyon Pilot High School, along with dozens of other schools and districts across the state, as having mishandled discipline in the 2014-2015 school year. This includes handing down such punishment disproportionately to students of color or students with disabilities.

Teams from DESE and all identified schools will come together to examine what drives those disciplinary patterns, identify alternative actions that can be taken before resorting to suspension or expulsion and discern methods for improving school climate, according to a DESE release. Data for 2015-2016 discipline rates are expected to be available by the fall.

## **Boston's five**

On average in the 2014-2015 school years, schools across the state disciplined 1.7 percent of students with out-of-school suspensions for offenses falling into the category of “non-drug, non-violent or non-criminal related,” according to DESE data. At UP Academy Dorchester and UP Academy Boston such discipline was given to 11.9 percent of students and 16.5 percent, respectively. At Mary Lyon Pilot High School 13.1 percent of students with such offenses were suspended out of school.

Even more striking: City on a Hill handed such suspensions to 33 percent of students and Roxbury Prep to 38.6 percent. For Roxbury Prep, this represents a decrease: In the 2013-2014 school year, the school suspended out of school 42.7 percent of all students for minor offenses.

Statewide, suspensions are disparate. While one percent of white students received out-of-school suspensions in the 2014-2015 school year for non-violent, non-criminal, non-drug related offenses, that rose to 3.3 percent of Latino students, 3.6 percent of students with disabilities and 4.3 percent of black students. Most dramatically, Roxbury Prep delivered such sentences to 41.7 percent of black students and 55.8 percent students with disabilities, according to DESE data.

## **Knee jerk suspensions**

For months, accounts have surfaced from Boston students and parents about schools where suspension seems to be the instinctive first response to any minor misbehavior.

Khalid, then a sixth grader at UP Academy School of Boston, was suspended for tossing a can out a bus window, after a bully threatened to hurt him if he did not.

“An older kid turned around and said, ‘If you don’t throw that goddamned can off the bus, I’m going to beat the living crap out of you’,” his mother, Rita Ben-Cherqui, told the Banner. So Khalid complied.

Although a friend on the bus independently backed up Khalid’s account, teachers could not locate the bully, Ben-Cherqui said. They slapped Khalid with a three-day suspension instead.

“They could conveniently never find him [the older kid]. So my son had to take the suspension,” she said.

Elizabeth McIntyre, an Equal Justice Works Fellow with Greater Boston Legal Services, who represents students in school discipline disputes, has handled cases from all five cited schools.

In her work she has seen children suspended for incidents such as pretending to fence with pencils or for saying they did not want to do something a teacher asked. Her clients range from ages four to nineteen. Most of them have been suspended four to eight times.

The vast majority of suspensions she sees are for non-violent, non-drug related, non-criminal offenses: “Everything we would think of as talking back, essentially,” she told the Banner.

### **At what cost?**

Even when the offense does warrant discipline, it is unlikely that being sent home will reshape behavior, McIntyre said.

“Cursing at a teacher is not behavior we want to see in a classroom, but sending a student home is not going to change that behavior. If you send a student home they’re going to sit on the couch and play Minecraft all day and come back and act in the exact same way.”

Another thing it can do is drive them to drop out.

“I’ve had a fifth grader say he didn’t want to go to school anymore because they were just going to send him home,” McIntyre said.

Tito Jackson, chair of the city council’s Committee on Education, said that having to pick a child up from school can place an untenable burden on parents. Frequent suspensions can force the parent to withdraw their child.

“Many of our students come from single parent households, and multiple suspensions can mean a single parent could possibly put their job in jeopardy and often times will move their child from an institution that has these draconian zero-tolerance policies,” he told the Banner.

Not only do children miss valuable class time — without necessarily learning the behavioral lesson the punishment was meant to teach — but their relationship to school and sense of whether they truly have a place in it are affected.

“Kids start to label themselves as ‘problems,’ as kids where school is not going to be a thing that they’re good at,” McIntyre said. “Even with really young kids, if they don’t understand — a kindergartener or first grader does not understand the concept of suspension — it’s hard for them to be removed from their friends and their community.”

In its release, DESE noted that students who receive suspensions are more likely to drop out.

### **Change in the wind?**

DESE’s announcement indicates new focus on the issue, and some schools say they are making changes already.

According to a statement provided to the Banner, BPS is prioritizing the reduction of suspension rates. Jean-Dominique Anoh, the headmaster of Mary Lyon Pilot High School, has started the process. Initial work includes doubling the number of school therapists and placing them at entrances in the morning to identify and de-escalate tension between students, creating a team of teachers

who work to develop individualized intervention strategies and sending staff for training at Suffolk University's Center for Restorative Justice.

The efforts may be yielding fruit: During school year 2014-2015, Lyon's out-of-school suspension rate was 17.5 percent, and suspension rate for black students was 41 percent. This includes all suspensions, not just those given for non-drug, non-violent or non-criminal related offenses. As of June 9, 2016, those rates had dropped to 10.7 percent overall and 25 percent for black students for school year 2015-2016.

When asked for comment, UP Education Network President Tim Nicolette pointed to a statement by Marc Kenen, executive director of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association. Kenen said that charter schools are implementing new restorative justice strategies and emphasizing social emotional learning to promote positive behavior and safety. The effect has been a significant reduction in overall suspension rates, he said.

### **Fueling the fire**

High suspension rates have become a hot-button topic in the debate over charter school expansion.

On the same day that DESE cited schools for excessive or inappropriate use of suspensions and expulsions, the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools' Equity Coalition posted a statement calling for charter schools to ensure all students get a good education by acknowledging that needs differ among students and that discipline may not be the answer. The statement focused particularly on treatment of children with disabilities.

"Effective instruction includes effective behavior management that should significantly reduce the need to introduce disciplinary actions," the statement read.

A week later, a press release from Save Our Public Schools, the campaign against lifting the charter cap, highlighted the fact that four Boston charter schools appeared on DESE's list and charged that charter schools apply severe discipline practices to push out many students before they graduate, then do not fill vacancies.

"Hundreds of students ... are pushed out of charter schools with harsh disciplinary policies before they reach their senior year," the press release stated. It also referenced a study that found that the percentage of freshmen enrolled in BPS high schools who continue on to graduate is twice that of freshmen enrolled at charter high schools.