



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

RESPONSE TO MDR LISTENING SESSION

Rochester, MN – July 18, 2018 - Rochester Public Schools is proud of its ongoing efforts to ensure student behavioral issues are handled in a fair and equitable manner. As has been widely reported in the Rochester area, Rochester Public Schools and the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights ("OCR") have been working together to review and improve the school district's student discipline policies and procedures since late 2015 pursuant to a comprehensive written agreement. The school district is fully compliant with the terms and conditions of the 2015 agreement with OCR and is on track to complete its compliance reporting later this year.

Rochester Public Schools continues to implement a variety of measures designed to ensure student behavior standards are consistently and fairly applied across the school district. For example, in the months leading up to the 2017-2018 school year, Rochester Public Schools overhauled its Student Behavior Handbook and School Board Policy 506 with the goal of more clearly defining the types of behavior that could lead to discipline, removing vague or subjective offense categories such as insubordination, disrespect, disorderly conduct, attendance and "other", and emphasizing the expectation that teachers address minor behavioral incidents in the classroom by setting uniform standards as to when a student should be removed from the classroom and referred to an administrator due to behavioral concerns. These policy and handbook changes were accompanied by hours spent training and educating administrators, staff, students, and parents on the school district's behavioral expectations.

Based on a preliminary review of data from the 2017-2018 school year, Rochester Public Schools is seeing positive returns on its efforts to ensure students are not unnecessarily being removed from the classroom. The preliminary data, which were presented to the School Board on June 19, 2018, show the following positive trends:

- Ninety two percent of the school district's 19,641 students were not removed from the classroom due to a disciplinary issue during the 2017-2018 school year.
- The total number of incidents in which a student was referred to an administrator due to a behavioral issue dropped from 12,361 during the 2016-2017 school year to 4,336 during the 2017-2018 school year.
- The number of students who were referred to administration dropped from 2,807 during the 2016-2017 school year to 1,562 during the 2017-2018 school year.
- Of the 1,562 students who were referred to administration during the 2017-2018 school year, 888 students were referred to administration only one time during the entire school year.
- A small group consisting of 196 of the 19,641 students enrolled in the school district's schools accounted for nearly 50 percent of the 4,336 referrals from the 2017-2018 school year. An even smaller group of 20 students accounted for approximately 10 percent of the 4,336 referrals.

- Suspensions declined from the 2016-2017 school year to the 2017-2018 school year. During the 2016-2017 school year, the total number of suspensions was 1,341 compared to 976 during the 2017-2018 school year.

These statistics show that Rochester Public Schools is making meaningful progress in its efforts to reduce unnecessary removals from class and to provide teachers with the guidance and support needed to address minor student behavior issues in the classroom.

Despite these successes, Rochester Public Schools acknowledges there is still significant work to be done on the issue of disparities. The school district has seen some improvement in addressing this issue. For example, there was a slight decrease in the disproportionality for black students from the 2016-2017 school year to the 2017-2018 school year and a significant decrease in the disproportionality for Native American students over the same time period. The disproportionality for Hispanic students remained the same. This is an issue across the country. Earlier this year, OCR and the U.S. Government Accountability Office released reports showing disparities in the rates at which different student populations are disciplined continue to be a nationwide problem for which there is no simple or well-defined solution. These disparities are an ongoing concern in Rochester, as well as many other Minnesota school districts. Effecting change at the local, state, or national level with respect to these disparities will take more than a few school years.

With respect to Human Rights Commissioner Kevin Lindsey's statements about the status of discussions between Rochester Public Schools and the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, the school district informed the Commissioner and his staff many times that it would like to work collaboratively with the Department of Human Rights on issues related to student discipline. Unfortunately, Commissioner Lindsey and the Department of Human Rights have not responded to the school district's repeated inquiries as to what the Commissioner believes Rochester Public Schools should be doing to address student discipline disparities in addition to what the school district is already doing pursuant to the OCR agreement. Rochester Public Schools is hopeful that it will receive a response from the Commissioner soon and remains willing to continue discussions about working collaboratively with the Department of Human Rights.

Rochester Public Schools encourages parents and community members to share any concerns they may have related to student discipline issues. The Student Discipline Supervisor serves as a resource for parents, guardians, students and other individuals who have questions or concerns regarding the school district's student discipline policies and procedures. In addition, the ongoing Community Focus Team was elevated in status to an official Task Force of the School Board in December 2017. The Community Focus Team is comprised of numerous community and school district representatives. It was initially formed in 2016 to create a partnership between Rochester Public Schools and community stakeholders with the goal of reducing student discipline disparities and increasing school success.

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