

Student behavior not making grade at EAA schools

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Karen Tillman, program facilitator for the Black Caucus Foundation of Michigan, teaches Mumford High School students in a life skills class. Her goal, she says, is to listen to students and help them deal with anxiety in positive ways instead of with violence. (David Guralnick / The Detroit News)

— authorities documented more than 5,000 discipline-related infractions across 15 school buildings in Detroit, ranging from fights to truancy to gambling and disorderly conduct.

The number of incidents skyrocketed in the second quarter, from mid-November through the end of January, when 4,000 infractions piled up, including 1,000 truancy cases, 986 disorderly conduct incidents, 63 drug possessions, 33 firearm possessions and 22 physical assaults against staff.

Also reported were 876 cases of insubordination and 52 cases of threats of violence or coercion.

"When you take over the underperforming school, sometimes the reason they were failing is some of the behaviors," said Tyrone Winfrey, chief of staff to EAA Chancellor John Covington. "Our thing is to track the behavior along with academics to work on it simultaneously."

The data represent the first assessment of behavioral problems among the 10,000 students at the EAA schools, which were under Detroit Public Schools management until last fall.

The report's release comes after the Detroit Police Department disbanded its Gang Squad and sent officers into jobs outside schools and neighborhoods. At the same time, Michigan lawmakers are debating bills to expand the reach of the EAA and codify it into state law.

The state requires districts to collect data on 21 types of student infractions. EAA school officials have chosen to make quarterly assessments to the board in an effort to be "transparent," Winfrey said, but it uses a slightly different list, including some new categories such as gambling, student demonstration and consensual sexual misconduct.

Winfrey said the dramatic change from the first to second quarter underscores the need for mentoring and behavioral

Detroit — Officials with Michigan's statewide school district released some stunning statistics that show the challenges to reform the worst-performing schools are not just academic — they are behavioral, too.

In the first five months of the school year in the Education Achievement Authority — the statewide system for failing schools

intervention at the schools.

The EAA is working with the Wayne County Mental Health and Juvenile Assessment Center as well as the Black Caucus Foundation of Michigan to give ninth-grade students life coaching on topics such as anxiety and alternatives to violence.

"Right now each student will get a behavioral assessment. That will lead to a behavioral plan with an academic plan," Winfrey said. "We want to clean up the numbers."

Gov. Rick Snyder created the EAA in 2011 to give the state a mechanism to take over the lowest-performing public schools in the state. Snyder spokesman Ken Silfven said the schools run by the EAA have put an emphasis on safety and security.

"The EAA's efforts to partner with state and local agencies to develop individualized behavioral plans, to go along with a student's academic plan, is another example of the innovative thinking taking place at these schools to put kids in the best position to succeed in and out of the classroom," Silfven said.

Winfrey said he takes issue with the way the infractions are counted and is having EAA staff undergo training to better understand the methodology of counting cases. The data are compiled by EAA staff and turned over to the Department of Education.

Meghan Everett, a teacher at Denby High School and its student government adviser, said the number of incidents at her school is lower than those at other EAA schools — for a reason.

"We don't see kids being aggressive because of our staff consistency and zero tolerance policy on discipline rules. ... They understand the community already. The kids really see the genuine interest we have in them," she said. "We drive them home and escort them to the bus stops."

The northeast Detroit school is in one of the city's most violent neighborhoods. It had 470 truancy cases, 281 insubordinations and 173 fighting incidents. Hall sweeps are up and the number of truantries was down in the second quarter, EAA officials said.

The main focus of educators and staff, she said, is to get the students in class. Home visits and parent nights at the school help build a connection, too, she said.

"To change the mindset of these kids, we need to show them we are here for the long haul. Their behavior reflects how they've been treated. These kids desire consistency and to have a structured environment. When they aren't structured you see this behavior grow," Everett said.

EAA officials said they have had some success reducing incidents through the intervention programs, by having EAA security staffers collaborate with DPS Public Safety, and through more frequent meetings by administrators to talk about incidents.

At Bethune Elementary-Middle School for kindergarten through eighth-graders, officials saw the number of fights drop from 134 in the first quarter to 25 in the second.

Winfrey said security officers at Henry Ford High School have rid the school of the 22 Band Crew, a west-side street gang. Cases of insubordination went from 106 to 4 in the second quarter, EAA officials said.

At Mumford High School, about a dozen ninth-grade students sat in their twice-weekly "life skills" class. Facilitator Karen Tillman asked the teens to think about what makes them anxious and how they can reduce anxiety through breathing and coping techniques.

Many teens in Detroit can talk about knowing a friend or family member who was shot and killed, while others are quietly coping with joblessness at home and shut-off utilities. Add peer pressure and demands from gangs to the mix, and teens need help learning how to cope.

"This is to make sure they are heard. The situation is: no one really listens. So if someone is listening here, they are acting good," Tillman said.

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