

ACLU report finds disparities in discipline for minority, disabled students

November 14, 2013 2:21 PM

By Eleanor Chute / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania released a report today which highlighted disciplinary practices that remove students from school across Pennsylvania.

The ACLU report, called "Beyond Zero Tolerance: Discipline and Policing in Pennsylvania's Public Schools," points to high rates of suspensions and disparities in how black and Latino students and students with disabilities were treated.

"Part of the problem is that under zero tolerance, a wide range of behaviors, from dress code violations to talking back, are now being punished as disorderly conduct, disruption and defiant behavior," the report's author, Harold Jordan, said.

The report found that, in 2011-12, school districts issued more than 166,000 out-of-school suspensions, or 10 suspensions per 100 students. In addition, 1,808 students were expelled from school, and police arrested 5,261.

While black students account for 13.6 percent of Pennsylvania's students, they made up nearly half of the out-of-school suspensions. One of 10 Latino students was suspended at least once, which the ACLU said is one of the highest Latino suspension rates in the nation.

Students with disabilities had a suspension rate of 11.1 percent. They were nearly twice as likely to be suspended than other students, for whom the rate was 5.7 percent.

More schools use police officers inside the building without monitoring their impact, the report stated. The number of school districts using school resource officers grew from 26 in 2003-04 to 87 in 2011-12.

"Expanded student conduct with police raises troubling concerns about whether officers become

involved in routine discipline matters that are not safety issues," said Mr. Jordan.

The report suggested schools and districts review their suspension and legal referral practices, remove students only when there is a "real and immediate safety threat," minimize the use of law enforcement, use evidence-based strategies to improve school climate, and review misconduct and incident patterns in schools with police officers.

Some school districts in Allegheny County were singled out of the 500 school districts across the state based on 2011-12 data.

Seven school districts are among the top 20 for highest out-of-school suspension rates per 100 students:

Sto-Rox, 78.3

Woodland Hills, 70.4

Wilkinsburg, 59.3

Pittsburgh, 58.1

Penn Hills, 37.9

East Allegheny, 37.8

and Cornell, 28.2.

Both Wilkinsburg and Duquesne were in the top five for the highest expulsion rate per 100 students, 1.00 and 0.73, respectively.

Northgate ranked seventh highest for its arrest rate of 1.57 students per 100 students.

Districts among the 26 top-suspending for black students were Sto-Rox, Woodland Hills, Pittsburgh, East Allegheny, Wilkinsburg, Penn Hills and Highlands.

Sto-Rox was the highest in Allegheny County with a rate of 101.8 per 100 students.