

# RIHS to address racial disparity in discipline

By **Stephanie Massick**  
Staff writer

Black students made up 35 percent of the student population at Rock Island High School in the 2000-2001 school year, yet accounted for 57 percent of the suspensions. Officials say that is a problem.

"There's no question that there have been many more suspensions involving African-American students than white students," said superintendent David Markward. "That's a fact."

A parent raised concerns about the disparity during the public forum of Tuesday night's school-board meeting. This and other issues related to disparities between the performances of whites and blacks in the district already is the focus of a committee that has been working since February.

One of those issues is that of academic achievement. Last month the district released results of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which showed that, as a group, black students scored worse in all testing areas than any other ethnicity in the Rock Island/Milan School District.

Mr. Markward said that there may be a correlation between performance on schoolwork and

behavior in school.

"If students are not in class — being suspended from school — that is going to have an adverse effect on their learning," said Mr. Markward.

Jay Marino, assistant superintendent for instruction and school improvement, said the suspensions themselves are legitimate and not race-related. "We don't suspend any student without a good reason. All of those are legitimate."

He did agree that "there is an increased number of disciplinary problems with our African-American students."

School officials want to know why. So they have developed a Call to Action committee, designed to examine the disparity in achievement and behavior between black students and other groups.

The group is comprised of community members and school representatives. About half of the participants are white and half are minority, Mr. Markward said.



David Markward

"At this point, we can't specifically pinpoint contributing causes. That's one of the things that are being studied by the group. And eventually — hopefully as early as the beginning of next year — we'll have some action plans developed that will specifically address the issues."

A number of potential factors being considered, he said, include teachers' awareness of cultural differences, parental involvement, and the ways subjects are being taught.

Mr. Marino said some teachers simply may not know how to relate with students of various backgrounds. This lack of connection may lead to student frustration, which then manifests itself into disciplinary problems.

"Our intent," he said, "is to provide professional learning experiences for teachers that help better prepare them to deliver instruction that better meets the needs of those particular students."

In other words, he said, a one-size-fits-all approach is not an effective means of instruction.

"We want all teachers to be able to take any student that walks into their classroom and be able to reach that student."

He said he has experienced cultural differences in his own back-

ground as a teacher. While instructing at an inner-city school in Phoenix, Ariz., he worked with a great many American Indian students. He found that many of those students would not make eye contact with him. He learned, however, that these students were not being sullen or sneaky — their cultural behavior simply did not include looking someone straight in the eye.

Culture, family structure and income levels are just a few of the many variables a teacher must work with, said Mr. Marino. "There's a lot of different needs and expectations and standards that a teacher is trying to address."

The situation at Rock Island High School is being seen nationwide, he said, but it still is unacceptable.

"That's why we're being proactive and looking at the teacher training necessary," he said.

Mr. Markward agreed. "It's affecting a large number of our kids. The evidence is pretty clear that we've got disparity. We don't accept that in terms of allowing that to continue."

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