

Local rates of discipline declining

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Despite local superintendents agreeing that methods of data collection differ from district to district, area administrators are pleased by the low rates of offenses shown in student discipline data over the last four school years.

"The first year's data [2012-13] I would basically say is trash data because everyone was putting in what they wanted at any time they wanted and it was different from district to district," said Fitchburg Superintendent Andre Ravenelle. "By next year I think things will be worked out, and we'll be comparing apples to apples."

Leominster Superintendent Jim Jolicoeur agreed that ways in which schools classify and report student offenses to the state can vary between communities.

"It's up to the individual districts to interpret a protocol that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has promulgated across the districts. People tend to interpret it differently and that's what causes some of the discrepancies in the data," he said. "I can say for assurance that we have consistency across our district, but I can't speak to consistency with other urban districts."

However, some trends can be seen in the last four years of data. Compared to area rural districts, schools in Fitchburg and Leominster have reported higher rates of students being suspended or expelled for physical fights and physical attacks. Over the last four years Fitchburg has averaged 115 a year and Leominster has averaged 92 a year.

However, these numbers represent only a small percentage of the student population. For the 2015-16 school year, 80 Leominster students were reprimanded for physical fights and physical attacks, representing roughly 1 percent of the district's total 6,390 students.

"I think the cultures within the schools has changed dramatically for the last few years, and a lot of that has to do with our shift in trying to form a connection with every individual student," Jolicoeur said. "I think just the fact that kids are connecting with an adult in the building is making a dramatic change in terms of disciplinary issues."

Fitchburg reported a total of 72 students reprimanded for physical fights and attacks last year, equaling roughly 1 percent of Fitchburg's 5,720 students. It was the lowest number of incidents in either category the district has seen in the four years data has been submitted to the state.

"I would say that the incidents of occurrence has not increased, but what we're doing about it, how we're handling them, and how we're reporting them has probably changed," Ravenelle said. "The offenses that we're now reporting are more of your run of the mill offenses and not the high level ones."

One trend that can be seen in every local district is the most common offense that is being reported to the state.

The vast majority of student offenses recorded in Ashburnham, Ashby, Fitchburg, Lancaster, Leominster, Lunenburg, Shirley, Townsend, and Westminster fall under the broad category of "non-drug, non-violent, or non-criminal-related" offenses, which encompasses minor offenses.

What gets classified as a minor offense is one part of the data reporting process that can slightly vary from district to district.

"A lot of those would be from negative student to student or student to teacher interactions. It could be if, for example, somebody said something to another student, used foul language, or threatened someone," said Dr. Gary Mazzola, Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School District's superintendent.

In Lunenburg, Superintendent Loxi Jo Calmes said these disciplinary actions for minor offenses typically stem from students not showing up for after-school or weekend detentions.

"It could also be from things as simple as inappropriate comments or talking back to a teacher," she said.

All area districts also reported low numbers of illegal-substance offenses, which encompass not only narcotics but alcohol and tobacco.

Since 2013, the highest number of illegal substance related offenses reported in a local district was in Fitchburg, where 35 of the district's 5,512 students were disciplined in some way during the 2012-13 school year. However, the district has averaged only 26 students disciplined every year for the past four years.

The last four years have also seen low numbers of illegal-substance offenses in Leominster, where the annual average is 24, Lunenburg, where the annual average is 3.75, and Ashburnham-Westminster, where the average is 7.5.

"What we're seeing is our students are impacted by parents who have opiate addictions, but it's not something that we're finding in the schools ourselves," Ravenelle said. "In terms of other kinds of substance abuse, it's not really moving up or down. It's just steady."

Both Lunenburg and Ashburnham-Westminster saw only 2 percent of their students committing offenses in the 2015-16 school year with no sharp increases in specific offenses.

Low numbers in Lunenburg have been credited to initiatives against specific offenses the district has struggled with, most recently tackling the topic of cyber bullying and student confrontations on school buses.

"Incidents on buses are decreasing and one of the reasons for that has been because this year we got a security camera system installed and they provide amazing information for us," Calmes said. "The kids know that everything on the bus isn't just he-said-she-said anymore."

In Ashburnham and Westminster Mazzola said that annual events like Oakmont Regional High School's Harmony Week help keep student offense numbers down. The five-day event features guest speakers, activities related to promoting friendship and compassion, and a student cookout.

"I think when you have these kinds of activities and programs it builds a repertoire of internal social skills that helps kids learn to be better behaved and more respectful," he said.