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State wants to curb student suspensions

New school regulations would move away from zero-tolerance policies

By Liz Bowie, The Baltimore Sun

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Concerned about the high numbers of student suspensions, state school board members are proposing an overhaul of discipline codes that would move away from zero-tolerance policies.

School board President James H. DeGraffenreidt Jr. said Tuesday that the board will propose a series of regulations next month that will require school districts to form a plan to reduce nonviolent offenses in the next three years as well as the number of suspensions of special education and minority students.

The board wants to "get everybody to focus on the fact that this is part of our educational mission" and that "we are clear that every kid counts," DeGraffenreidt said.

In addition to reducing suspensions, the board is proposing to eliminate expulsions except in the case of students who have a firearm.

Eight percent of students in the state were suspended last school year, DeGraffenreidt said, and half the suspensions were for nonviolent offenses, such as disrespect or defacing school property. Minority and special education students are far more likely to be suspended than their peers. Board members believe there is a link between the high suspension rate for those groups and low achievement.

"In disproportionate numbers, the very students who are lagging behind are those who are being suspended," DeGraffenreidt said.

Education advocates from the Open Society Institute and the Maryland Disabilities Law Center who attended Tuesday's board meeting praised the board's action.

"I certainly applaud the board's stated objective — that suspensions be used as a last resort and not as the go-to option," said Jane Sundius, education director for Open Society, which has worked for the past five years to get school districts to reduce suspension rates.

John Woolums, director of governmental relations for the Maryland Association of Boards of Education, called the state board's approach balanced because it gives school systems the freedom to come up with their own plans to reduce suspension rates. But he said there are likely to be questions about whether the disparities can be eliminated in three years.

The proposal is likely to draw criticism from many teachers, parents and school leaders who believe in tough punishment for students who misbehave.

"It is not an issue that can be corrected by regulation," said Carl Roberts, executive director of the state's superintendents association. "It requires a lot more study. I would hope the board would share their concerns with the superintendents and work through the issues before coming up with any proposal."

The state board said it will make districts adhere to more consistent reporting of data and will come out with common definitions, including what constitutes a weapon. One board member noted that an elementary school student was suspended for bringing a plastic gun to school. And board member Kate Walsh said two lacrosse players from Easton High School were suspended last year for having a lighter and pen knife in their lacrosse bags. The items, which are commonly used to repair lacrosse gear, "were never intended to be used as weapons," Walsh said.

The board also will redefine a short-term suspension as one to three days and a long-term suspension as four to 10 days. Currently, a short-term suspension is a maximum of 10 days and a long-term suspension is more than 10 days.

Each school system would be given a year to come up with a plan to reduce suspensions and three years to bring the numbers down.

The school board took up the issue of student discipline about a year ago, after a Dorchester County student was suspended for nearly an entire school year without being given access to public education and a Fairfax County, Va., student committed suicide after being out of school for months over a relatively minor infraction.

After a year of testimony from educators and advocates across the state, the school board has written a draft report on suspensions but said it was not ready to be released Tuesday. That report, along with proposals for regulations, is expected to be presented at the next board meeting in late February. It is expected to include recommendations on how long a student can be out of school during an appeal of a suspension.

After the presentation, the public will be able to comment on the proposed regulations before the board makes a final decision this spring.

DeGraffenreidt held up Baltimore as an example of a district that has reduced suspensions. He noted that city schools CEO Andrés Alonso has reduced suspensions for nonviolent offenses significantly since arriving in 2007, though the numbers rose slightly last year.

"These changes will bring more scrutiny to suspensions, which I think is a very good thing,"

Alonso said. But he acknowledged that the district is "far short of where we need to be in terms of reducing suspensions." liz.bowie@baltsun.com