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IN STYLE

IN 2012, **ROUGHLY A THIRD** OF BREVARD PUBLIC SCHOOLS' SUSPENSIONS WERE GIVEN TO BLACK STUDENTS, THOUGH THEY MAKE UP ONLY **15 PERCENT** OF THE STUDENT POPULATION. IN FILING A FEDERAL COMPLAINT, THE NORTH BREVARD NAACP CALLED IT A ... **'DISTURBING TREND'**

BY MACKENZIE RYAN
FLORIDA TODAY

READ THE FULL STORY, PAGE 6A

VIDEO ONLINE
Mackenzie Ryan discusses the NAACP's actions. Scan the code for more at floridatoday.com

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS BISTLIINE / FLORIDA TODAY / THINKSTOCK IMAGE

Orion test flight is on track despite heat shield concerns

Fears of cracks have diminished, NASA maintains

By James Dean
FLORIDA TODAY

For astronauts hurtling back to Earth with a batch of asteroid samples in 2021, a spacecraft with a heat shield prone to cracking could be a worrisome scenario. According to a recent government watchdog report, concern about that possibility held up production of the heat shield for NASA's first space-bound Orion capsule, threatening to delay its uncrewed flight test next year. NASA knew its chosen heat shield material could crack before atmospheric re-entry and



NASA says a test flight of the Orion spacecraft is on schedule for September 2014. CRAIG RUBADOUX/FLORIDA TODAY

has been studying whether any cracks could be serious enough to "threaten the safety of the crew and success of the mission," the Government Accountability Office report said. NASA says the mission known as Exploration Flight

See ORION, Page 2A

IN SPACE COAST



ART FEST FUN
Artists, fans flock to Melbourne Art Festival through today. **Page 1B**

IN BUSINESS



BUYING CLASSY
With less-expensive formal wear, many opt for a tux of their own. **Page 1D**

IN SPACE COAST



PAYING RESPECTS
Brevardians return to the Vietnam Traveling Memorial Wall in an annual ritual. **Page 1B**

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'A DISTURBING TREND'



Bill Gary, president of North Brevard NAACP, Willie Smith, president of Central Brevard NAACP, and Gloria Bartley, North Brevard NAACP Education Committee chair, talk about their investigation into the high rate of African-American student suspension rates in Brevard schools. TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY

'INEQUITIES'

NAACP seeks answers in a federal discrimination complaint, noting high rate of black student suspensions in Brevard

By Mackenzie Ryan
FLORIDA TODAY

Black students in Brevard Public Schools are being disciplined with suspensions 2½ times more often than their white peers, despite the fact that they make up a smaller percentage of the overall student population.

The North Brevard NAACP filed a complaint and called on the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to investigate the school district for what they believe is racially based discrimination.

"The data suggests there are some inequities," said North Brevard NAACP President Bill Gary, who filed the complaint. "One infraction usually leads to another and another. ... There's a disturbing trend."

In addition to the frequency at which black students are being kept out of school for disciplinary reasons, the complaint also criticizes the district for not hiring and promoting black teachers often enough and for closing high-minority and low-income schools.

The suspension rate for black students stands out, though, as especially troubling, black leaders said. Across the nation, NAACP chapters are looking into the issue as part of a coordinated effort to break the so-called school-to-prison pipeline.

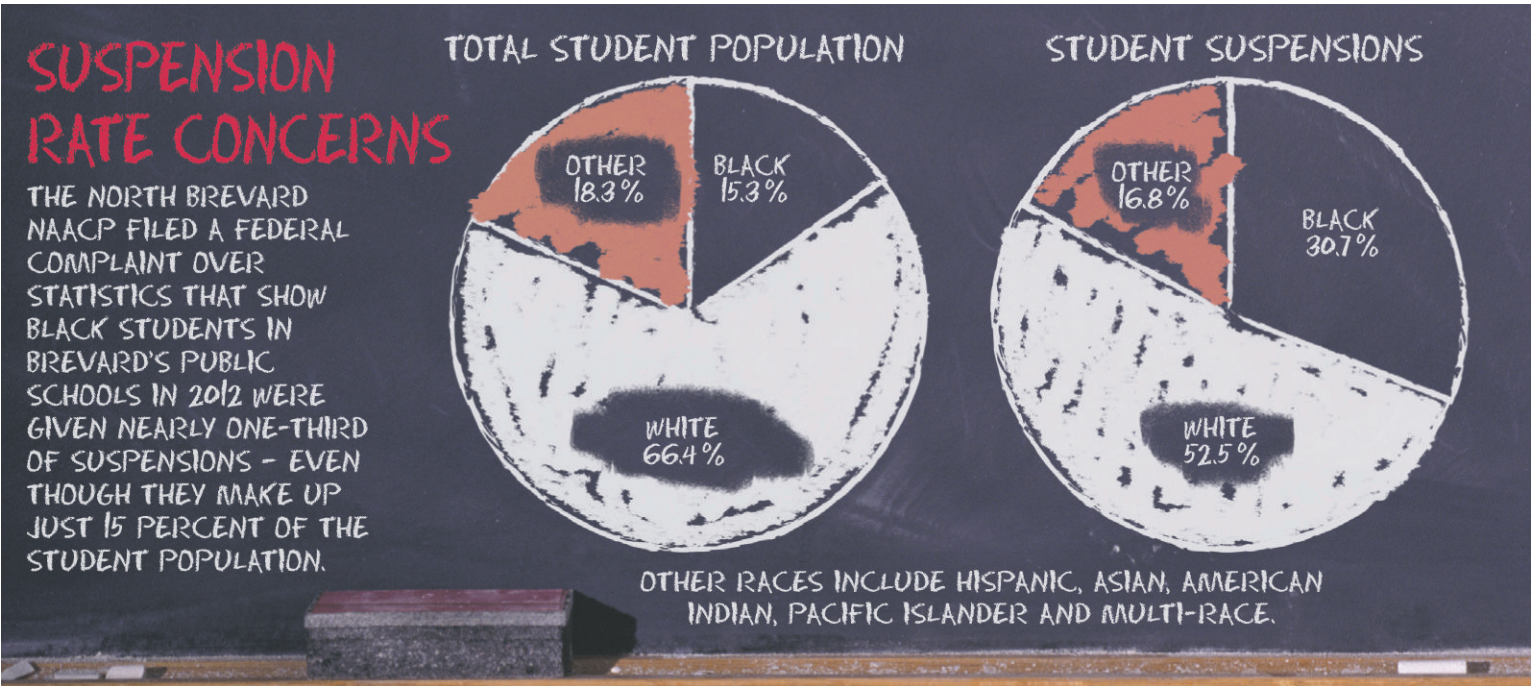
Suspension rates mirror the incarceration rate in the United States. A 2011 study found that a student who was suspended or expelled became three times as likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system the next school year.

"It directly affects the community," said Gloria Bartley, North Brevard NAACP education committee chair and coordinator of the CARE program, which helps coordinate alternative punishment in North Brevard schools. "The district has to be the front line on this."

Brevard Superintendent Brian Binggeli said they've been working to reduce the suspension rate for all children. "Part of that is creating a culture of engagement and success," he said.

Assistant Superintendent for Student Services Beth Thedy, who has been meeting with NAACP chapter leaders, said that staff training and school-based programs are designed to help.

"We are working diligently, and we're making progress," she said. "We've had an open dialogue with different branches of the NAACP and we



SOURCE: 2012 BREVARD PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUSPENSION REPORT

CHRIS BISTLINE / FLORIDA TODAY

consider them partners."

The practice of essentially punishing students out of school prompted the Southern Poverty Law Center to file complaints with the Office for Civil Rights against five school districts in Florida last year. Brevard was not among them.

In Flagler County, one of the districts the agency investigated, black students made up 16 percent of the student population, but accounted for 31 percent of the in- and out-of-school suspensions in the 2010-11 school year, according to the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*.

In Brevard last year, black students made up 15 percent of the student population, but accounted for 30 percent of suspensions. In comparison, white students account for 66 percent of the population, but 52 percent of suspensions.

"This is not atypical, it happens across districts" in Florida, said Michelle Irwin, spokeswoman for Brevard Public Schools. "This is not unique to Brevard. While it's something we want to work on, it's not an anomaly in Brevard County."

The issue is of national concern. Studies show that one out of every six black students is suspended, compared to about one in 20 white students. Researchers believe it has more to do with differences in discipline by teachers and principals than by differences in behavior.

While Brevard does not track first-time suspensions or otherwise differentiate the number of suspensions per student — meaning one student could be suspended multiple times in the data — the differences are stark.

NAACP leaders said their main concern focuses on suspensions for non-violent behavior: The punishment keeps students out of school or labels them as troublemakers. And sometimes the decision on whether to suspend is very subjective, say for insubordination or disrespect. "When students are labeled early, this can hinder their learning in future years," said Willie Smith, president of the Central Brevard NAACP.

Last school year, a fifth grader at Mims Elementary was suspended for asking why he received a certain grade, Gary said. Typically an A and B student, he performed lower than expected. His punishment? Three days out of school for being insubordinate to the teacher. "We sat down and talked with the young man," said Gary, who met with the boy's family and school leaders after being asked to help. He began to wonder: Did the discipline have more to do with a sibling, who had gotten into trouble, than the child himself?

"I was impressed by his manners. He had self control and was assertive," he said. "I believe the teacher felt challenged by him."

Thedy declined to comment on specific student cases, but did say that most discipline is progressive.

"That's one situation out of 72,000 students," Irwin said. "If parents were unhappy with that three-day suspension, it can be appealed."

Addressing the issue

The high rate of black student suspensions is nothing

new in Brevard County.

Almost 20 years ago, FLORIDA TODAY reported similar statistics: 32 percent of suspensions were given to black students in secondary schools, even as black students made up 14 percent of the school population.

At the time, the analysis drew mixed responses. Some thought schools, through suspending students, were not fulfilling their duty to educate.

Others believed the numbers were a reflection of racism in the community. And still others argued that student behavior, not discrimination, was the root cause.

Today's statistics look strikingly similar.

Black students made up 15 percent of the student population in 2011 and 2012, but accounted for 30 and 31 percent of the suspensions respectively.

Local NAACP leaders said they want to get to the root of the issue: Are educators harder on black children who break the rules? Are certain teachers dishing out more discipline than others? Are school principals setting a strict tone for administrators?

Gary said sensitivity training, which would give staff a better understanding of cultural differences or nuances, might help. He hopes the federal complaint will be a wake-up call.

"We don't believe this has been on the superintendent's radar," he said.

District leaders said that's simply not true: They've had staff trainings and launched

BLACK HIRING AND PROMOTION IN BREVARD SCHOOLS

Leaders of Brevard Public Schools track the employment and promotion of minority workers. In recent years, the number of black principals have fluctuated between six and eight — roughly 6 to 8 percent of all principal positions. Within the last year, four black employees have been promoted to principal, assistant principal or dean positions. Brevard employs a minority recruitment and retention specialist, who focuses efforts on college job fairs, state and local career fairs, and other venues that target minority educators, said Debra Pace, Brevard's associate superintendent for human resources.

About 5 percent of all teachers in Brevard are black, a percentage that has remained consistent in recent years. According to recent census information, blacks make up 10.5 percent of Brevard County's population.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Interested in volunteering with the CARE program? Contact coordinator Gloria Bartley at gloria0642@att.net. Volunteers must pass a background check.

MORE ONLINE

What do you think of the rate of black student suspensions? Join the conversation at [Facebook.com/FloridaTodayEducation](https://www.facebook.com/FloridaTodayEducation).

'A DISTURBING TREND'

Answers

Continued from Page 6A

programs even before the NAACP approached them about the issue last summer.

School Board Chair Barbara Murray declined to comment on the complaint since it was still pending. She did say that she had a “positive” meeting with NAACP leaders on the issue. “The district is looking into this, as well as academic areas and other areas to make sure opportunities are there for all students,” she said.

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Education said the Office for Civil Rights is evaluating the NAACP’s complaint to determine whether to investigate. If it does — and finds the district is not complying with civil rights laws — the agency negotiates a resolution to address and fix the issue.

In virtually all cases, school districts work with the agency, the spokesman said.

Fairer discipline

NAACP leaders say they want fairer discipline. They cite instances where a black child is provoked until he or she snaps — and the white provoker isn’t punished.

Stephanie Brown’s daughter Kyra was egged on by a white girl using racial slurs and disparaging comments until Kyra burst, Brown said. “She kept poking and poking and poking and poking,” the Titusville resident said.

Kyra, now 16, was physically smaller, but got the upper hand in the fight — and beat her classmate badly. Kyra was sent to an alternative school, a typical punishment for fighting; the other girl was allowed to stay with a one-day suspension, her mother said. Before the fight, Brown said her daughter was never in trouble. She was an A and B student.

Brown wishes school officials reacted differently and looked deeper to find the reason for the sudden change in her daughter’s behavior. She wishes they offered help.

Stephanie Brown and daughter Jasmine, 15, a James Madison Middle student, praise the school’s CARE program, after initially having issues with discipline.

TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY



Brown believes her daughter’s problems were related to the conviction of her husband and Kyra’s father, Leon Booker, on charges of sexually abusing another child. Booker was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

“You don’t know all that has gone on and what has happened with a child,” said Brown, in tears over what she believes Booker put their daughter through. “I want to kill him, Jesus forgive me.”

Seeing a family in crisis, Bartley offered her support. She had gotten to know the family through the CARE program, which NAACP leaders are coordinating in an effort to find an alternative to suspensions. The program’s aim is to keep students in school. The students and their families are matched with a mentor and an in-lieu-of-suspension plan is put in writing. It’s agreed to by the school’s dean and signed by the student.

North Area Superintendent Ron Bobay saw the program as an opportunity to try something different. It’s being offered at all north Brevard middle and high schools.

“It’s obvious to me that the CARE program has significant

adults who want to help make a difference. And they do,” he said. “I’m personally very supportive and appreciative.”

Since the start of this semester, the program has so far taken on 17 North Brevard students, with parent permission. Volunteer mentors work with both the student and the family, and program leaders try to pair families with someone they already have a relationship with, like a pastor or community leader.

“It’s easy to act out and get suspended if you don’t like school,” said Rev. Vernon R. Clay of Antioch Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, who substitutes in Brevard schools and also volunteers with the CARE program. “We need to look at other alternatives. The CARE program is one.”

Volunteers work with parents and school administrators to come up with an alternative discipline that addresses the reasons for the child’s behavior. If it’s an anger problem, for example, they might agree that the child will attend anger management classes. If school work is the problem, and students are acting out because they’re behind, it might be tutoring ses-

sions.

NAACP leaders hope to expand the CARE program to middle and high schools in Central and South Brevard. It serves students of all backgrounds, although the majority of referrals right now are for black students.

Brown said she’s seen a difference in her children. Jasmine, a younger daughter, was recently suspended for cussing out another girl, who Brown said was calling her racial slurs and making fun of her health issues. Jasmine uses a wheelchair.

When she couldn’t take it any more, Jasmine, like her older sister, snapped, her mom said.

Since working with Bartley, the CARE program and the school, they’ve found a solution for Jasmine to temper herself. Now, if she feels an outburst coming, she has permission to go to the front office and take a quick breather to calm down.

“We know kids can be harsh,” Brown said. “She needs to be in school.”

Contact Ryan at 321-242-3664 or mryan@floridatoday.com. Follow her on Twitter @Mackenzie_Ryan or at Facebook.com/FloridaTodayEducation

ABOUT THE COMPLAINT

A federal complaint by the North Brevard NAACP lists four Brevard Public School policies, practices and decisions that they believe are discriminating against black students and teachers. District action or, at times, inaction led to the discrimination, the complaint says. It was sent to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights in Atlanta.

» HIGH SUSPENSION RATE OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Black students are suspended 2½ times more frequently than white students, yet make up a smaller percentage of the population, said North Brevard NAACP President Bill Gary, who filed the complaint.

» LACK OF PROMOTION OF BLACK TEACHERS.

In the past 25 years, only one of the area’s 16 public high schools has had a black principal. At one point, only six principals out of 86 schools were minority, it says. “The school district has made no concerted effort to change these numbers, with the usual response being, ‘we can’t find qualified candidates,’ ” the complaint says.

» INFREQUENT HIRING OF BLACK TEACHERS.

“It’s an ongoing concern that hasn’t been addressed,” said Gary, explaining that there’s been little movement forward under the current administration. A program developed under the former superintendent’s leadership never got off the ground because of lack of funding. Its goal was to raise money and award scholarships to black males who wanted to earn an education degree on the condition that they teach in a Brevard elementary school for four years.

» SCHOOL CLOSINGS.

In the last two years, school board members have voted to close four schools — all in high-minority, low-income areas. Schools in less diverse and higher-income areas have remained open.

Source: North Brevard NAACP complaint

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