



City schools no longer will suspend youngest students

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

DEC 20, 2017

Beginning next fall, Pittsburgh Public Schools no longer will suspend its youngest students for minor infractions.

The school board approved the policy in a 7-2 vote Wednesday night, clearing the way to ban suspensions for nonviolent offenses for students in kindergarten through second grade starting next school year.

The policy passed after nearly two hours of debate and months of discussion and study. A dozen supporters rallied before the meeting to urge the board to pass the measure, then the meeting itself contained some tense moments as board members argued over how specifically to implement the change.

“It would be unfair to our children and staff to put this policy in place with having all of our T’s crossed and I’s dotted,” said board member Cynthia Falls, who voted with Terry Kennedy against the measure because there is not yet a concrete implementation plan or a guarantee about what other classroom supports will be provided to teachers and administrators.

But other board members said they were confident the plan would be formalized by the district administration by the Sept. 1 implementation date.

“We need to help these babies that need a little extra support to stay in class,” said board member Moira Kaleida.

The change comes in the wake of a specific recommendation to eliminate suspensions for the district’s youngest students in a January report from the Council of the Great City Schools. The findings revealed that Pittsburgh Public’s suspension rates were high relative to other city school systems and that its disciplinary actions disproportionately affected students of color.

Superintendent Anthony Hamlet noted that the district has made great strides in reducing suspensions across the board — by roughly 25 percent over last year— and restorative-practices training and other supports already have been put in place at a number of schools.

An estimated \$2.5 million will be necessary to provide training and other support for teachers as the suspension ban for younger students is implemented, he said. So far this year, seven students in those younger grades have received single-day suspensions for non-violent infractions.

The board also spent considerable time during the meeting debating whether the suspension ban should be expanded to include students in third through fifth grades, the subject of an amendment proposed by board member Sala Udin and supported by board member Kevin Carter.

“It’s beyond necessary that if we’re talking about doing things for black children, then let’s do it in full and do it all the way,” Mr. Carter said.

That motion ultimately failed in a 4-4 vote, with Ms. Kaleida abstaining. Mr. Hamlet said a district-level working group will begin studying how to expand the ban into grades three to five in the spring.

“It’s like this mountain that we have to do in chunks,” said board president Regina Holley.

In other business, the board unanimously approved a \$619.8 million operating budget for 2018 that includes no tax increase.