

# Suspensions ... Schools Report Figures Up Despite Decline In Enrollment

By Sigrid Bathen,  
Bee Staff Writer

A substantial increase in the number of student suspensions — despite steadily declining enrollments — is reported in current statistics to be presented to the Sacramento City Unified School District board of education tonight.

The September 1980 suspension statistics, for the six high schools in the district, show a marked increase over the same figures for September 1979 — with 175 students suspended by high school principals for a total of 408 days during the first month of this year, compared to 28 for 49 days the previous September.

"I haven't found the answers," said board member Vernon Freeman, who has expressed particular concern about the high rate of suspension for black and Hispanic students. "The total number of days of suspension in some schools is the equivalent of one child being out one year."

A similar increase occurred in the seven junior high or middle schools: In September 1979, according to district figures, 88 students were suspended by their junior high principals for a total of 221 days. In September 1980 that figure jumped to 219 students for 504 days.

The suspensions were for a variety of sometimes vague reasons, according to the public statistics report — from assault and weapons possession to "disobedience" and "profanity." By law, more specific reasons are given on the actual suspension records, which are confidential.

A slight jump in suspensions also occurred in the city elementary schools, with 17 students suspended for 25 days in September 1980 compared to

14 for 25 days in September 1979. Suspensions are not a routinely used disciplinary measure at the elementary school level, and many schools reported no suspensions for either period.

District and school officials are concerned about the sharp increases at the junior high and high school level, and the matter is expected to be a major topic of discussion at tonight's regular board meeting. Their explanations for the increase vary, with some officials citing tabulation errors and others noting the increase in school violence everywhere.

Several mentioned the elimination of senior high guidance counselors in Proposition 13 cutbacks as a possible reason for the suspension increase.

And some said the schools are "cracking down" on disciplinary problems.

Of particular concern to district officials — and to the parents of minority youngsters — is the high level of suspension rates for black and Hispanic students, who constitute about 40 percent of the district's 37,000 students, but account for roughly two-thirds of the suspensions.

"I wouldn't categorize it as outright racism," said Freeman, the only black member of the board. "But I think there is a lack of sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of minority youngsters."

Among the 175 senior high suspensions in September of this year, 66 were for black students and 37 were for Hispanics; in the junior high figures, 66 of the 211 suspensions were for black students and 37 for Hispanics. Ethnic breakdowns for students in the district, most recently available for the 1979-80 school year, indicate that 22 percent are black and 17 percent Hispanic. The minority population districtwide is

approximately 52 percent of the students enrolled.

Asians, who constitute roughly 11.5 percent of district students, account for only a small percentage of the suspensions.

Expulsion statistics are of even greater concern to black and Hispanic parents, who have frequently told city board members of alleged school and district insensitivity to the problems of black and Hispanic youngsters, many of whom come from low-income households.

District records show no expulsions for this school year yet, but expulsion figures for previous years show heavily disproportionate numbers of black and Hispanic youths were expelled in the city schools. In 1977-78, nine of the 10 expulsions were of black students, and one was Hispanic. Last year, out of 19 expulsions, eight were black and three Hispanic.

Some schools in the district have particularly high percentages of blacks and Hispanics. Charles M. Goethe Middle School, for example, had a 56.6 percent black population in fall 1979, and John H. Still had 48 percent.

Not surprisingly, 15 of the 24 student suspensions at Goethe in September 1980 were black. At Still, 16 of the 31 suspensions were black students.

At the senior high level, Luther Burbank and John F. Kennedy have the largest percentages of black students, with 35 and 25 percent respectively. They also had the highest number of suspensions in the city high schools this past September.

Of the 31 suspensions approved by Burbank Principal Charles Jones, 13 were black. At Kennedy, which had the highest number of suspensions for any

high school, 12 of the 44 suspended were blacks, a figure roughly proportionate to the student population. Both principals said the recent addition of ninth-graders at both schools has raised the statistics.

Kennedy Principal Ron Morgan suspended only six students in September 1979, according to the district figures, and two of them were blacks. Comparison statistics for Burbank last year were unavailable and not included in the district figures to be presented to the board tonight.

Hispanic students are more evenly distributed among district senior high and middle schools. At C.K. McClatchy, with the highest concentration of Hispanic students at 21.9 percent, 13 of the 27 suspensions were Hispanic in September 1980. At Sutter Middle School, with 31.2 percent Hispanic students, 7 of the 10 suspensions in September of 1979 were Hispanic; by contrast, in September of 1980, the four suspensions included two blacks and two whites.

District officials attribute at least some of the huge suspension increase to simple paperwork delays. September 1979 comparison statistics for Burbank and Sacramento High School, for example, are not available, and only partial statistics are available on Hiram Johnson suspensions for that month.

Dr. John Smonk, director of pupil services for the district, said those schools apparently did not turn in their statistics in time for inclusion in that month's district printout.

But paperwork errors alone do not explain the increase, particularly in light of the district's inexorable decline in enrollment — down by 2,000 students this year from the more than 39,000 enrolled in January 1980.

Some suspension categories — such as assaults, weapons possession and drug use — are particularly bothersome to officials, who like school officials everywhere are concerned about the rise in student violence.

Of the 175 senior high school suspensions for September 1980, fully 75 were in the "assault or abuse" category, compared to 17 in that category the previous September; 33 were suspended for drugs, including alcohol, up substantially from four in September 1979; seven were suspended for possessing weapons, up from two the previous September; a whopping 69 were suspended for "disobedience," compared to five the previous September; 14 for profanity, compared to none in September 1979.

At the junior high level, 101 of the 211 suspensions were for assault or abuse, which includes verbal abuse, compared to 37 last September, and fully 142 were sent home for disobedience, compared to 54 the previous September. Two junior high students were suspended this past September for weapons possession, and four for drugs.

Even among the K-6 set, 10 of the 17 recent suspensions were for assault or abuse, one for weapons possession and 13 for disobedience.

The categories themselves are confusing, since a student can be suspended for more than one infraction, and hence may be reflected several times in the categorical breakdown.

Principal Morgan makes no apologies for the high suspension rate at Kennedy. He says it has always been thus. "It's the philosophy of our staff," he said. "It reflects that we are particularly diligent. We may have the highest rate of suspensions, but we also have the few-

est students in continuation school."

He said the majority of his suspensions "are for what you would call 'defiance' — a youngster, for example, who has been late persistently, or wandering around the halls." Kennedy's high September suspension rate this year, he said, was partly due to more than the usual amount of homecoming shenanigans.

Not always popular with students, Morgan nonetheless defends them. Contrary to many national pronouncements, he believes discipline is no greater a problem today than it ever was.

"Youngsters will try you," he said. "They will push. They will transgress. But that does not mean they are 'bad kids.' There are others who are, excuse me, little bastards and always will be.

"As educators, we haven't been consistent. We swing from one end of the pendulum to the other. First we're very humanistic, then we tighten up. We have to be consistent. Kids want to know what their boundaries are."

Morgan and Burbank Principal Jones, who are both white, do not believe racism is a factor in the vast majority of suspensions, although they do cite the proportionately lower economic status of black and Hispanic students as a reason for some behavioral problems. The issue is a sensitive one; teachers and school administrators approach it gingerly.

Burbank Principal Jones, who has been principal at several district junior high schools with heavy minority concentrations, believes the complaints of some minority parents are justified.

"I truly believe that professionally it is something we have to work on," he said.