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SCHOOL SYSTEM UPDATES SUSPENSION POLICIES

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Mark Trustin can finally claim a victory in his push for more rights for suspended students.

Students with physical or mental impairments have more treatment-based alternatives if school officials were notified of their condition before the students get into trouble.

Also, those without impairments, when facing suspension, now have the appeals process spelled out on paper.

The changes were ones **Trustin**, a lawyer who represents suspended students, and others on the City-County Violence Prevention Committee had sought for about eight years.

"I think people don't realize how big of a deal this is, how many people this really affects," he said.

About 7,000 students in Durham schools were suspended in 2007-08, representing 21 percent of enrolled students, according to the most recent state numbers. Black males made up 57 percent of suspended students.

The numbers do not detail how many of those students have disabilities, but **Trustin** thinks many students, especially those with a mental-health condition, drop out of school because of multiple suspensions.

Over half of Durham students with impairments graduate from high school but about 9 percent drop out, which is slightly above the state's average of 8 percent.

Determining if a student's negative behavior may be connected to a diagnosed condition is now a part of the appeals hearing, **Trustin** said. Depending on the severity of their condition, students can be given in-school alternatives, such as smaller classrooms.

"Even if a kid is not yet determined to be disabled, but all the signs of a problem are there - mom has complained to an exceptional child coordinator or to an administrator that something is wrong with my child, or a teacher or administrator makes that plea to a parent, or mom asks for an evaluation of her child, or the teacher or administrator asks for an evaluation - all those situations should be considered," he said.

The city-county group's push for changes to the district's suspension policy coincided with legislative efforts in Raleigh, something Debbie Pitman, assistant superintendent for student services, called a "win-win" for the group and the schools.

Parents of any student recommended for long-term suspension must receive written notice from school officials, according to a bill that became law earlier this year. Parental rights, including the right to

representation and requesting student records, were also spelled out in the legislation.

The new law put on paper things the school district was already doing, Pitman said.

"It really did not have significant impact on the work of our schools but it really tightened up the notification and written communication to families," she said.

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