



Isabella Harris, left, witnessed fights in her first-grade class at Lakewood Elementary. Her father, Anthony Harris, says he was afraid to send his daughter to school. “Anything can happen there,” he said.

Violence spiked. No one responded. Now, every day, kids at five St. Petersburg elementary schools are getting

Lessons in fear

By Lisa Gartner and Michael Laforgia
Photographs by Dirk Shadd

Salimah Bullock started second grade at Campbell Park Elementary in the fall of 2013. She didn’t make it 10 minutes before a classmate punched her in the face.

Every day after that brought new threats.

“They cursed at me, called me ugly and threatened to put their hands on me,” Salimah said.

Just months later, the 8-year-old got caught between two boys fighting.

She left school that day in an ambulance.

Salimah’s story speaks to a jarring reality: In Pinellas County’s most segregated elementary schools, violence has become a part of daily life.

A *Tampa Bay Times* investigation has found that incidents of violence

and disruption have soared as district leaders neglected programs meant to make the schools safer.

At Campbell Park, Fairmount Park, Lakewood, Maximo and Melrose, children like Salimah have been shoved, slapped, punched or kicked more than 7,500 times since 2010 — the equivalent of eight times a day, every day, for five years straight.

Times reporters spent a year taking an unprecedented look at safety in the five schools, reviewing hundreds of thousands of discipline records and police reports, and found:

- Last year, there were more violent incidents at the five elementary schools than in all of the county’s 17 high schools combined.
- Incidents at the schools have more



Robert Ovalle, principal of Campbell Park Elementary, talks to fourth-graders in April. Desperate to reduce behavior problems at his school, he used \$35,000 from the school's budget to hire trainers because so many of his teachers were new to the profession.

than doubled since 2010, even as other schools in Pinellas saw a drop in violence.

- For years, district leaders gave the schools the same number of employees to handle eight times the amount of violence faced at other elementary schools. Teachers at the schools describe calling for help in their classrooms only to be ignored because no one was there to respond.

- Teachers are overwhelmed. Many said they had little training and no idea how to get students under control. More than half the teachers at the schools requested transfers in 2014. Several have been taken away in ambulances after suffering panic attacks or being injured by their students.

- Until recently, district officials under-reported serious incidents to a state clearinghouse that tracks dangers in the classroom — an apparent violation of state law that made the schools seem safer than they really were.

Violence went on a steep rise a year after the School Board abandoned integration in 2007.

That decision, coupled with years of neglect, transformed the schools into five of the worst in Florida, the *Times* reported in the first installment of this series.

It also concentrated the county's

poorest students in a small number of schools, leaving teachers and principals to be overwhelmed.

"I don't know if the district really understands what the behaviors are there and how extreme they can get," said Jenna Strickland, who taught kindergarten at Lakewood from 2008 to 2014. "The district doesn't have any idea of what's really going on at these schools."

At Campbell Park, a second-grader threatened to kill and rape two girls while brandishing a kitchen knife he carried to school in his backpack.

At Fairmount Park, a 9-year-old hit a pair of kindergartners in the head with a souvenir baseball bat.

At Maximo, a group of kindergartners pinned a classmate down on the playground, pulled off her pants and fondled her.

On the day Salimah was hospitalized, there had already been more than 1,100 violent incidents at the schools in 2013-14. The experience left her mother, Tammy Bullock, so disturbed that she moved the family back to Philadelphia. She said she would rather take her chances in that city's public school system than remain in St. Petersburg.

"I've never seen anything like this in my whole life," Bullock said of Campbell Park. "It led me to believe that God didn't want my family in Florida."

In interviews with the *Times*, principals at the schools described dealing with alarming behavior.

“I do see an increase of kids doing things that you would not think happens in elementary schools,” said Lakewood principal Cynthia Kidd. “It’s hard to imagine, when you’re not here every day.” They said hiring and keeping motivated teachers is a constant challenge and that training them in how to control their classrooms is critical.

“You can’t teach anything without classroom management,” said Campbell Park principal Robert Ovalle.

But the principals also said most students at their schools are safe. And they point to a recent decline in violent incidents as evidence that they’re on the right track.

Last year, teachers and principals at the schools wrote about 1,900 referrals for violent behavior, which includes fighting and striking another student. That’s down from more than 2,400 the year before. Maximo saw referrals drop from 1,068 to 254 in the same period.

In an interview with the *Times*, superintendent Mike Grego said he took stock of how schools were managing behavior when he was hired in 2012.

He said he discovered that the district lacked a plan to guide teachers in how to respond to behavior problems.

“It’s a prime example of trying something five, six, seven years ago

and just letting it kind of, I’ll say, fizzle out, fade away,” Grego said.

Last year, Grego made improving the schools a “major focus,” adding staff and teacher training sessions.

“There’s been no lack of urgency in terms of the investment and the time and the staff development,” Grego said. “It is on our agenda on a regular basis.”

One former teacher was unconvinced.

Lovell Blue, who left Melrose last year, said School Board members feel little pressure to fix the problem.

When needy students are concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods, middle-class parents don’t have to confront the problems associated with poverty, Blue said.

“They don’t have to deal with these low-income black kids coming into their schools, bullying their kids,” said Blue, who is black and who also has taught at Lakewood and Campbell Park. “It’s not a problem for them anymore. They’re satisfied with how it is.”

Dangerous places

Every year, the Pinellas County School District collects tens of thousands of records on misbehaving students.

Using public records laws, the *Times* obtained a database of more than 800,000 referrals written between 2009 and 2015. Then, in a first-of-its-kind review, *Times* reporters analyzed the records to compare



Allana Crawford, now at Ridgecrest Elementary, was routinely bullied by girls at Melrose, her mom says, until one day she said she didn’t want to live anymore.



Third-grader Allana Crawford exits the building between classes at Ridgecrest Elementary in Largo. Allana moved to Ridgecrest from Melrose Elementary, where her grades had slipped after she was bullied.

the district's elementary schools.

Teachers and administrators at the five schools wrote up students about 21,000 times in the past five years.

More than 40 percent of the referrals were categorized by the district as violent incidents. Most of those were for students caught striking other students.

It is impossible to tell from school district records how violent the attacks were. Students and teachers say most incidents amount to minor scuffles, not bloody confrontations.

But in dozens of cases uncovered by the *Times*, students threatened to kill one another, committed sex assaults, drew blood, broke bones or sent one another to the hospital.

At Maximo in 2012, an 11-year-old repeatedly harassed a female classmate, telling her he wanted to have sex with her. Then he threatened to kill them both so they "could be married in hell," according to a police report.

The next year, at the same school, a 10-year-old was slapped, punched, choked, body-slammed, stomped and kicked in the face in a cafeteria fight over a Lego action figure.

At Campbell Park in 2010, a second-grader took a 6-inch, serrated kitchen knife to school and told classmates he was going to stab a girl in the back because she liked another boy.

"Even if you're not being beaten daily, if you have been beaten, or if you're in an environment where that seems like it might be imminently possible, the effects that that has on you as a child are profound."

Dr. Matthew Biel, director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Georgetown University

Teachers, too, are regularly punched, kicked, shoved and groped by elementary school students.

On a single day at Fairmount Park in 2009, two teachers were injured by students in separate incidents. The first teacher, a thin-framed 58-year-old woman, was slammed into a door. The second was beaten in the ankle with a heavy wooden doorstep.

Loretta Evans was hurt even worse than that.

A 50-year-old substitute at Campbell Park, Evans was trying to break up a fight between two girls in 2014 when one of them pushed her down a flight of stairs, she said. She was driven away in an ambulance and hospitalized for a torn thigh muscle.

"We had a very rough fifth-grade class," Evans said, recalling her time

at the school. “They were always pushing each other around.”

Evans finished the rest of the year using a walker, afraid every day of being attacked again. She hasn’t worked since.

Constant stress

The effects of disruptive behavior and violence reach beyond just the children involved.

Classmates who cause no trouble lose out on valuable instruction time if teachers are constantly acting as disciplinarians.

Students who might otherwise behave in class start to pick up bad behaviors and become less likely to learn.

Decades of research have shown that misbehavior is contagious, said Marc Atkins, director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

If disruptive behavior becomes the norm, Atkins said, “You want to be a part of that group. You don’t want to be a victim.”

And a mounting body of evidence shows that a daily drumbeat of bullying creates high levels of stress, which can affect a student’s health and ability to concentrate, said Dr. Matthew Biel, director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Georgetown University.

“Even if you’re not being beaten daily, if you have been beaten, or if you’re in an environment where that seems like it might be imminently possible, the effects that that has on you as a child are profound,” Biel said. “And the effects are biological. They impact physical health, mental health and the ability to learn.”

Kids like Allana Crawford have suffered amid the stress of going to Melrose.

Tormented by a handful of girls about her weight, her shoes, her family, how she wore her hair, the second-grader at Melrose saw her grades steadily slipping in 2014.

One day after school, the 7-year-old sought a way to make it end, said her mother, Candice Billingsley.

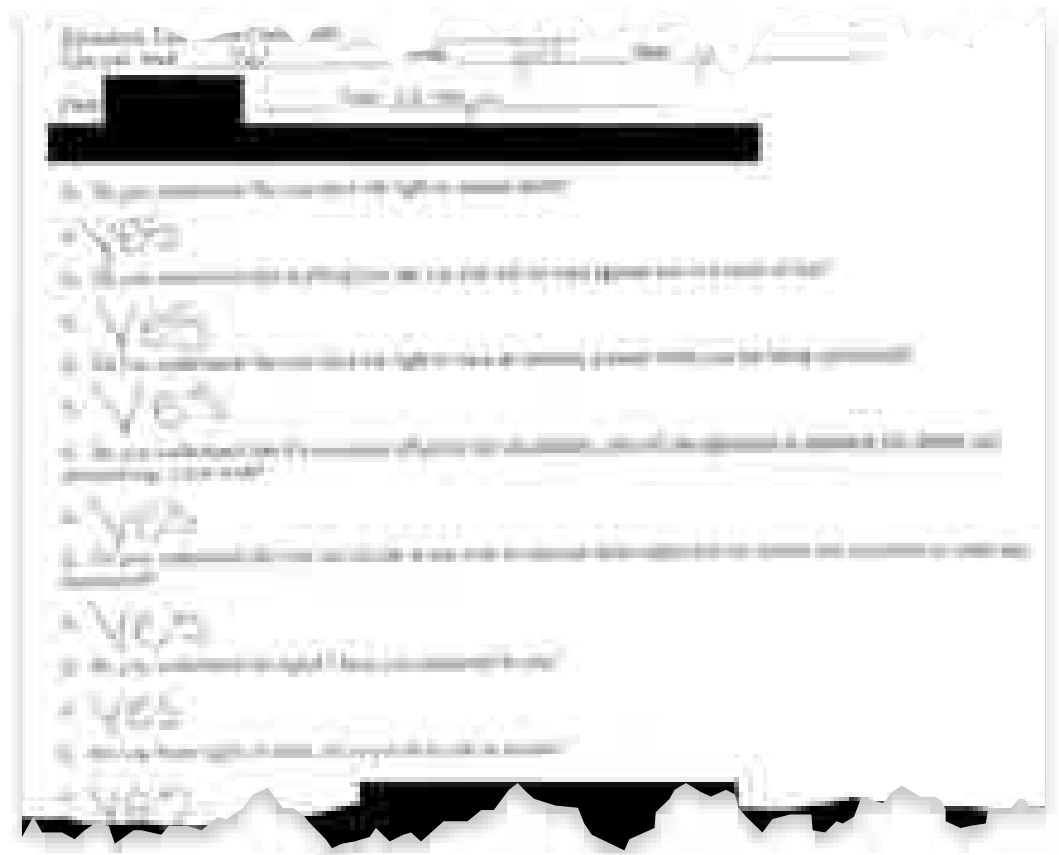
She stepped off the sidewalk into the car line and lay down on the asphalt. “I don’t want to live anymore,” she told a school employee.

That’s when Billingsley decided she had to get her daughter out.

Soon after, they got lucky: They were approved for subsidized housing in Largo.

The family moved to a neighborhood zoned for better schools. Allana ended up in C-rated Ridgecrest Elementary.

Today, the little girl is on the honor roll.



A 10-year-old acknowledges his Miranda rights.

Basic steps not taken

In 2007, School Board members approved sweeping changes to school attendance boundaries.

They decided to abandon decades of racial integration efforts in favor of neighborhood schools.

Ahead of the vote, parents, teachers and community leaders predicted schools would suffer in south St. Petersburg. The decision, they said, would concentrate the county's neediest children at a handful of schools, where counselors and specialists would quickly be overwhelmed.

"We are getting ready to dump some problems into south county," the board's sole black member, Mary Brown, said before the vote. "We need more counselors. We're going to need more social workers, more psychologists. Where's the funding going to come from?"

In public meetings, the other board members and district leaders promised to send extra money and staff to the schools, even if it meant giving other schools less.

"We need to look at some of the educational initiatives and what we can do to serve students at our schools that are under-served or are struggling," Peggy O'Shea said before voting for the plan. "And there are things we can do. There are things that are going on now, and there are things that we can plan to do in the future to assist that."

Here's what really happened: Until 2012, board members and district administrators left the schools with the same basic resources as they had before, even as discipline problems increased.

Many school districts across the nation have taken aggressive steps to curb disruptive behavior, including hiring security experts to draft safety plans at high-risk schools.

And though there is no single solution to fit every school, experts agree there are basic steps districts can take: train teachers to spot trouble and calm rowdy students; hire more counselors and behavior experts to respond to problems; and add security officers taught to build relationships with students.

In Pinellas, they gave the five schools the same staffing as other, far less violent schools.

In 2013-14, more than 60 elementary schools started the year with the same number of guidance counselors

as the five schools.

More than 25 schools started that year with one behavior specialist. That's the same staffing as at Campbell Park, Maximo and Melrose and better than at Fairmount Park and Lakewood — which had none.

District leaders understaffed the five schools for years.

It wasn't until last year that they added extra counselors and specialists. As part of a plan to improve the schools, Grego steered them social workers, psychologists, mental health therapists and "navigators" to connect families with help outside the district.

'He wants to kill us'

Lacking training and without extra support, teachers often make up solutions as they go along. Sometimes that leads to questionable decisions.

Elyse Mermelstein faced a daunting situation at Lakewood in November 2013, when a troubled new boy started in her first-grade class.

In his first week, the boy made a list of people he planned to kill and named Mermelstein at No. 8, she recalled.

"The first day, my kids came in in the morning saying, 'He wants to kill us!'"

Mermelstein said. "They were crying and freaking out, rightfully."

"I asked the kid, point blank, 'What's going on?' A lot of the kids were scared. I said, 'Are you going to kill us?' He said, 'I don't think I'm doing it now,'" Mermelstein said.

The next day, her students came to her again, "but this time they're saying, 'He's got a gun!'" she said.

Not sure how to react, Mermelstein made the children sit by the door, apart from the boy with the kill list. Quietly, she told them that if he pulled a weapon, they needed to run from the room as fast as they could.

Then she moved to the other side of the classroom and, rather than call for help, talked to the boy until her classroom aide came on duty — about 45 minutes later.

After the aide ushered the boy to the office, school staff opened his bag and looked inside. He was carrying a toy gun.

Mermelstein's classroom was equipped with an intercom call button that day, but she said she knew better than to push it.

"It often took 30 to 40 minutes to

get the office to come and help,” Mermelstein said.

No classrooms in Pinellas County have panic buttons. But that’s changing, district officials said.

As part of a plan to update intercom and communications systems, 11 schools are getting emergency buttons that will alert principals, secretaries, resource officers and school police to problems in classrooms.

None of the schools in south St. Petersburg are in line for the upgrade.

Among the schools that did make the list: A-rated Ozona Elementary, where teachers last year wrote about 35 referrals for bad behavior.

The district is installing emergency call systems in schools based on the age of their intercom systems, officials said, not on how safe the schools are.

Campbell Park, Fairmount Park, Lakewood, Maximo and Melrose should get panic buttons within five years, they said.

Undercounting incidents

Ten-year-old Myles Bradley was eating lunch in the cafeteria when the other student came at him swinging.

He slapped Myles in the face and put him in a chokehold. Dragged him out of his chair, threw him to the floor and punched him three times. Then he straightened up and started kicking Myles in the face. He was stomping Myles again and again when a cafeteria worker stepped in and pulled him away.

The attack was serious enough that the school principal called St. Petersburg police.

To the officer who drove to Maximo that day, Oct. 5, 2012, the incident was a battery. He forwarded the case against the young assailant to the state attorney’s office, records show.

But administrators required to record it in Florida’s mandatory incident reporting system coded it as a “campus crime” — a subsection of a discipline category called “other.”

It isn’t the only example of the district mishandling the reporting of school violence in the past 10 years.

Since 1995, Florida law has required districts to report basic information about serious incidents that occur on school grounds. The reports allow the state to keep tabs on violence and crime in schools.

But when *Times* reporters com-



Jordan Blakeney leads her third-graders in a reading exercise in April at Campbell Park Elementary. When a female student acted out, Blakeney used her training in Positive Behavior Supports to defuse the situation.

pared Pinellas County’s internal discipline records with numbers the district sent to the state, they found the district was under-reporting incidents in a way that made the five schools appear safer than they really were.

Of the thousands of discipline referrals issued at the schools over the past five years, the district determined that more than 550 met the standard required for reporting to the state, district records show.

But the district actually reported fewer than half that number.

For the school year that ended in spring of 2011, the district flagged 76 serious incidents at Melrose. It reported zero incidents to the state.

Lakewood reported three serious incidents to the state in 2009-10. The *Times* found seven noted in district records.

Campbell Park reported 12 incidents in 2011-12. The *Times* found 32.

In 2012-13, Fairmount Park reported 16 incidents. The *Times* found 41.

District spokeswoman Melanie Marquez Parra blamed the discrepancies on district employees who were using a computer program incorrectly.

The district updated the software in the 2013-14 school year, she said, and accuracy has improved.

Fix left to languish

When 7-year-olds threaten to rape and kill one another and 10-year-olds throw punches unprovoked, it’s almost always a sign of how tough they have it at home.

High-poverty neighborhoods like those in south St. Petersburg have higher rates of substance abuse and



Melrose Elementary's behavior specialist, Ben Williams, goes over expectations with students in the cafeteria before the start of the 2014-15 school year.

child neglect, which can lead to children who misbehave in extreme ways, said Jason Gold, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Institute for the Study of Child Development at Rutgers University.

Faced with children who molest one another and fight constantly, it's not enough to call parents, hand out suspensions and hope for the best.

"They came to school wanting to fight, wanting to kill each other, every day," said Blue, the former Melrose teacher. "I called the parents. They said they'd whip them or beat them or whatever. They would come back and act the same way."

In 2007, the Pinellas County School District committed to a new way of improving student behavior and increasing safety.

Working with experts at the University of South Florida, the district would train teachers to identify children for help before their behavior got out of control.

Florida's Positive Behavior Supports Project drew from nationally recognized best practices that have been embraced by districts across the country.

When the program is done right, teachers are happier, children are punished less harshly and they do better in school, Heather Peshak George, the program's co-director, said in an interview with the *Times*.

But after signing on to the program, district officials let it languish.

A series of superintendents, includ-



Melrose Elementary principal Nanette Grasso talks about behavior expectations with students in the cafeteria at the beginning of the 2014-15 school year.

ing Clayton Wilcox and Julie Janssen, never put an administrator in charge full time.

Schools were left on their own, with no one to monitor how teachers were trained or whether they followed program outlines for helping students with behavior problems.

As teachers quit or retired, no one made sure their replacements learned to follow the program.

USF got so frustrated with the district in 2014 that project leaders called a tense meeting and threatened to pull support.

"You will get nothing until you build

the infrastructure,” George told district officials then.

In response, Grego appointed a manager to oversee the program countywide.

By summer 2014, the district hadn’t offered training in positive behavior supports for at least five years. Since then, the district has held seven training sessions.

Those led to a dramatic drop in referrals for misbehavior, said Parra, the district spokeswoman.

Many teachers told the *Times* they had no idea how the program was supposed to work.

Rose Robbins taught in Melrose in the fall of 2013. She said the behavior program was talked about occasionally, but she never saw it in action.

“I can’t recall the meetings occurring. I think we talked about a few of the students, and how nothing had been done, and maybe getting them a psychological evaluation,” Robbins said.

Desperate to reduce behavior problems at his school in 2014, Campbell Park principal Robert Ovalle used \$35,000 from the school’s own budget to hire trainers. He said he had no choice because so many of the roughly 40 teachers at his school were rookies.

“I hired 29 brand-new teachers out of college,” Ovalle said. “They take maybe one class on behavior and then most of these new teachers are getting jobs in schools like Campbell Park.

“That’s like taking one course and being expected to overhaul an engine.”

Referrals for violent incidents at the school dropped from about 500 in 2013-14 to about 300 in 2014-15, records show.

Other schools have had to rely on their own behavior plans, drawn up in isolation so that they vary wildly from one place to the next.

Fairmount Park’s 2013-14 plan encouraged teachers to give disruptive students the “evil eye” as a first strategy to combat misbehavior.

Fending for themselves

The *Times* interviewed two dozen instructors who have worked in the five schools. Most described feeling helpless.

“Teachers would cry in front of students, in their classrooms,” said Jennifer Butkus, who taught journal-

ism in Melrose and a nearby middle school between 2005 and 2013. “It was a concentration of behavior problems that made it very difficult for teachers to do their jobs, even veteran teachers.”

Some teachers suspended students repeatedly, only to have the children return to disrupt class again.

Others called police or had children committed to a mental health center under Florida’s Baker Act, which empowers police to detain anyone deemed a threat to themselves or others.

In 2013, a 6-year-old kindergartner at Fairmount Park was committed twice in two weeks for throwing temper tantrums, according to police reports.

In a few cases, teachers resorted to even more desperate measures.

On May 4, 2009, at Fairmount Park, a child with cerebral palsy began screaming and thrashing. Rather than deal with him herself, his instructor sent him to a classroom for disruptive kids run by teacher Jerilyn Brown.

Confronted with the still out-of-control boy, Brown called the front office for help about 10 a.m. Thirty minutes passed before any help arrived, according to district police reports.

When an assistant principal and a behavior specialist got to the classroom, they found the door barricaded from the inside with a heavy piece of furniture.

When they got inside, they found that Brown and her assistant had tied the disabled child to a wooden chair.

His nose was running and his face was covered in drool. Balled up tissue lay at his feet, unused.

Reached by the *Times*, Brown said she tied the boy down because he was flailing wildly and in danger of hurting himself. She said she only made the decision after calling repeatedly for help.

“I was afraid he was going to break an arm or something,” said Brown, who now is teaching at Kings Highway Elementary in Clearwater. “I did it to protect the child.”

School district police officers showed up about an hour later to investigate the incident. Assistant principal Nicole DiBenedetto told the officer that she had heard the call for help but was too busy dealing with other incidents to answer it.



Ivan Rivera-Otero lifts his little brother Derek out of the minivan for an appointment at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg. Their mom, Ermarie Otero, in the background, says Derek gets fewer therapy sessions now that the family has moved to Largo and Ivan attends Clearwater Intermediate. She said Ivan was attacked at Campbell Park Elementary and she feared for his safety there.

The child's first teacher, the one who sent the boy to Brown's classroom, had little idea of how she was supposed to handle his behavior, police concluded. She said she didn't bother to call the front office for help because "they either don't show or don't do anything," according to district police reports.

Hard choices

Many parents who send their children to the neighborhood elementary schools in south St. Petersburg are constantly anxious. They worry their children will be hurt. They worry the bad behavior will rub off on their kids.

Kaheima Williams hopes her son doesn't get hurt again, like he did when a classmate swung a chair into his face at Campbell Park.

Karen Rarick prays that her daughter won't again be groped by a classmate.

Alicia Davis wondered at the swear words her son came home saying as a kindergartner at Fairmount Park.

Ermarie Otero couldn't sleep for worrying over her son.

Otero and her husband moved their family from Kissimmee to St. Petersburg three years ago to be close to All

Children's Hospital.

The plan was to send their younger child, who had suffered brain damage in a car crash, to regular therapy sessions while they enrolled their older child, Ivan, in public schools.

Ivan started third grade at Campbell Park in 2012.

Right away, kids from the neighborhood started picking on him, Otero said. The stories he brought home made his mother sick with worry until, on a Tuesday in April, she got the phone call she had been dreading: Ivan had been hurt in a fight.

According to police, he was eating lunch in the cafeteria when a classmate tried to slam his head into the table. Then the other boy punched him in the face repeatedly.

After that, Ivan's grades slipped. The 11-year-old didn't want to go to school anymore.

His mother said she felt torn between doing what was best for her disabled child and keeping her oldest child safe.

"I cried every day," Otero said. "I even got dreams. One time I had a dream that somebody came with a knife and stabbed my son with it at the school."

Wracked by anxiety, Otero and her



Ivan Rivera-Otero works on sketches in his bedroom in Largo. After Ivan was bullied at Campbell Park Elementary, his mom said, the family moved away from St. Petersburg. Ivan now attends Clearwater Intermediate, where he is working to recover the grade level he lost.

husband faced an unthinkable choice at the end of the year: Move farther north where Ivan was assured a safer public school or remain in the south, where his brain-damaged brother could keep getting regular treatments.

They decided to move to Largo.

"It was hard," Otero said. "I sacrificed some things to give the best to my other son."

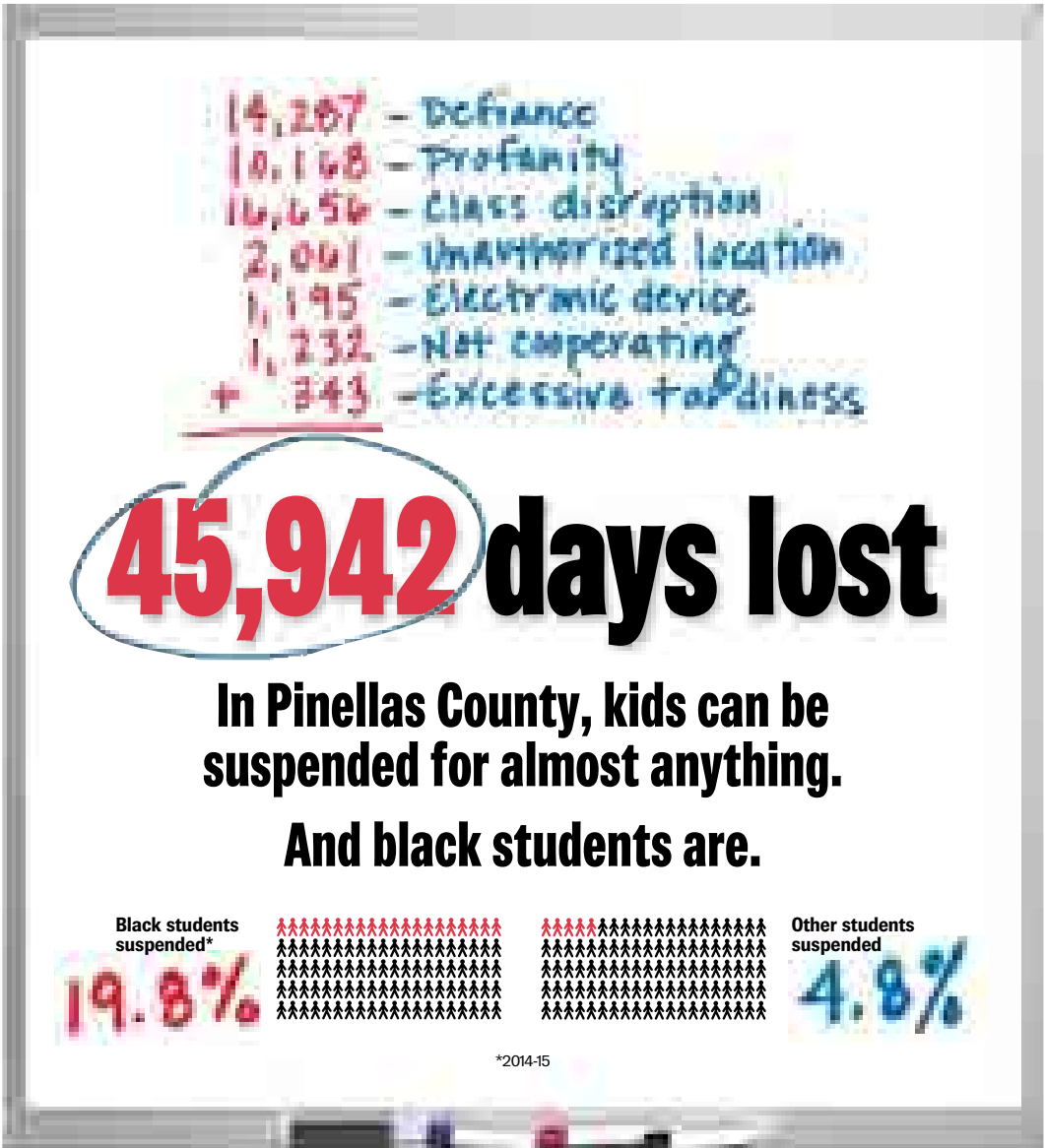
Now about to turn 14, Ivan goes to Clearwater Intermediate, where he is working to recover the grade level he lost.

For his brother, the drive from Largo means the disabled boy only gets a fraction of the therapy sessions he used to get. But Otero said she knows she made the right choice.

"I thank God," she said, thinking of Ivan. "Because right now we are in a good position."

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This article was written while Times reporter Michael LaForgia was participating in the National Health Journalism Fellowship, a program of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism.



By Lisa Gartner, Michael Laforgia and Nathaniel Lash
Photos by Dirk Shadd

Most large Florida school districts are moving away from suspending children for nonviolent misbehavior — part of a nationwide consensus that harsh discipline falls unfairly on black kids and leaves struggling students too far behind.

The Pinellas County School District is an outlier.

Its leaders say teachers and principals know best, and they should be free to suspend students as they see fit.

The result: Black children in Pinellas are suspended at rates seen in virtually no other large school district in Florida.

They are regularly kicked out of class for vaguely defined infractions like “defiance,” “excessive tardiness” and “electronic device.”

The *Tampa Bay Times* analyzed

a database of more than 600,000 punishments given to children in the district from 2010 to 2015. Then reporters interviewed leaders of the 20 largest school systems in Florida and examined state records to compare them to Pinellas. Among the findings:

Pinellas County suspends black children at higher rates than the six other large school systems in Florida. Black students in Pinellas were 17 percent more likely to be suspended than blacks in Hillsborough, 41 percent more likely than blacks in Palm Beach and 85 percent more likely than blacks in Miami-Dade. They were six times more likely to be suspended than black children in Broward.

- More than half of the suspensions given to black students are not for the



Gibbs High School has the greatest racial disparity for discipline in Pinellas County. Nearly two-thirds of the 1,300 students are black, and they are seven times as likely as other students to be suspended.

violent offenses detailed by the *Times* earlier in this series. They're not even for borderline cases. They're for hard-to-define infractions such as "not cooperating," "unauthorized location" and minor "class disruption."

- In five years, black students lost a combined 45,942 school days to suspensions for these and other minor offenses. White students, who outnumber black students 3 to 1, lost 28,665 days by comparison.

- Pinellas schools give out-of-school suspensions to black children disproportionately. They suspended blacks at four times the rate of other children based on their respective shares of the population. That's one of the widest disparities in the state. Sixty-three of Florida's other 66 school districts hand out suspensions more evenly among races.

- The School Board and district leaders have repeatedly rebuffed calls to adopt a discipline matrix, a tool that other districts use to make discipline more colorblind and to keep more kids in the classroom. Just two of the 20 largest school districts in Florida don't use a discipline matrix. One is Brevard, whose discipline practices are under investigation by the federal government. The other is Pinellas.

- Pinellas leaders have stuck with policies that make it harder for suspended students to catch up. Pinellas doesn't staff in-school suspension sessions with certified teachers, as other



Marilyn Ospina explains Broward County schools' system for comparing academic and behavioral data on students.

districts do. It cut all funding for suspension centers where kids could do school work rather than stay home while being punished. And it prohibits suspended high school students from earning full credit for make-up work, a practice most other large districts have abandoned because it needlessly sets kids back.

Keeping order in the classroom isn't easy. The task is made even harder when teachers and administrators are dealing with children who have emotional problems, who are being raised in extreme poverty or who come from broken homes.

"You have to understand that many of these children come in angry," said Myrna Starling, who retired in 2010 after nearly 30 years teaching at Maximo Elementary. "Some days I would just have to turn the lights off and say, 'I guess you don't want to learn.' Sometimes we would go 10 minutes with the lights off and heads



MONICA HERNDON | Times

The Duval County School District has an In School Suspension Program. At Westside High School in Jacksonville, students Javier Ramos, 16, left, and Johnny Messer, 14, study in the In School Suspension room.

down.”

But there is a growing consensus among national education experts that suspending children for minor offenses is not the answer. Instead, schools should clearly define each infraction and its appropriate punishments. Experts say that leaves less room for teachers and principals to be influenced, even unconsciously, by racial biases.

In an interview with the *Times*, Pinellas school superintendent Mike Grego acknowledged that unconscious bias plays a role in how often black children are suspended in Pinellas.

But he balked at a one-size-fits-all system, saying teachers and principals must have discretion to do what they think is best. “They know the kid. They know the intent, they know the surrounding issues around that incident,” Grego said. “I believe the way we’re going about it in an intelligent, research-based way is how we’re going to build a different culture. And I see that culture being established school by school.”

Grego noted that, after years of inaction, the district has launched a program to reduce suspensions countywide.

He pointed to a drop in referrals and said suspensions for black chil-



MONICA HERNDON | Times

TimesDuval County school superintendent Nikolai Vitti says that removing students from class “sends a message that you really don’t care.”

dren are down 13 percent in the first 60 days of the school year.

He also said that, as of four months ago, the district is compiling the latest research on bias and using it to train principals, so they can avoid bias when punishing children.

But the authors of much of that research told the *Times* the district should do more to curtail suspensions.

“If they were really serious about addressing this issue, they would follow the examples like L.A., like Oakland, like (Broward), and stop suspending kids for minor offenses,” said Daniel Losen of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, whose work was cited five times in a recent Pinellas

research report. “There’s no justification for doing this. If they were really serious they would change the written policy as well.”

Countering bias

Education experts across the nation agree that the most fair discipline systems are the ones that are most objective.

Research has shown that teachers and administrators, even if unintentionally, tend to punish black children more often and more harshly if the process is left to their discretion.

The reason is implicit bias — unconscious discrimination against black children by teachers and principals of different cultures, said Russell Skiba, director of the Equity Project at Indiana University and a leading expert in school discipline disparities.

Teachers might interpret a black student’s way of speaking as combative or argumentative, Skiba said. Fear can also play a part, leading teachers who associate black children with danger and threats to overreact to minor misbehavior.

For these reasons, Skiba said, other school districts in Florida and across the nation have adopted discipline systems that put less weight on the judgment of individual teachers and principals and create checks and balances to head off inequitable punishments.



Gibbs High School principal Reuben Hepburn said black students break the rules more. His school follows a get-tough philosophy to bring students in line.

“The less well-defined a discipline system is, the more opportunity there is for differential interpretation and possibly bias to be creeping into that,” Skiba said.

Florida offers several examples of carefully defined discipline plans that calibrate punishments to minor offenses. Some do away with harsh punishments altogether.

“If you just throw them out, we think it sends a message. But it sends a message that you really don’t care,” Duval County school superintendent Nikolai Vitti said. “When students are given out-of-school suspension they start to run with the wrong crowd, become truant, commit crime.”

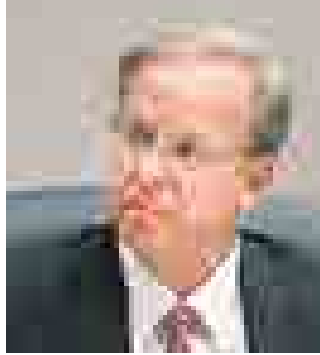
Students can’t be written up for “defiance” in Duval.



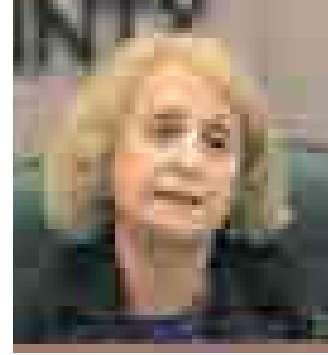
Naomi Gaines transferred to Gibbs High School in 2013. She struggled to make up missed assignments and to graduate after getting a referral last year.



School Board member Rene Flowers opposed the NAACP's calls for a discipline matrix.



Superintendent Mike Grego said educators must have discretion to discipline students.



School Board member Linda Lerner's stance on discipline frustrated religious leaders.

Pinellas punished children more than 100,000 times for that offense in the past five years.

The harshest punishment a student in Palm Beach County can get when they disrupt class for the first time is Saturday school.

Pinellas has pulled kids out of regular classes and given them in-school suspensions for that infraction more than 35,000 times since 2010.

Hillsborough County students are not disciplined simply for being in an "unauthorized location." Pinellas suspended children more than 1,700 times for that offense.

Broward County teachers and principals use a computer system that won't let them select a punishment that is too harsh for certain minor infractions.

Miami-Dade no longer gives children out-of-school suspensions, opting instead to send students to "Success Centers" staffed by teachers and counselors.

The latitude Pinellas teachers and principals get is supposed to empower them to do what's best for children. But in a school system where eight in 10 teachers are white, black kids are punished far more often than other children.

There were 19,300 black students in the district last year, but blacks were disciplined more than 52,000 times.

White students, who outnumber blacks 3 to 1, were punished 42,000 times by comparison.

The *Times*' analysis of district data found that the disparities go further than how often black students get sent to the office compared to whites. When children of various races are written up for the same offense, black children are more likely to get harsh-

How they compare

Pinellas suspends black children at higher rates than other large Florida school districts. In Pinellas, black students are:

17% more likely to be suspended than in Hillsborough.

41% more likely to be suspended than in Palm Beach.

85% more likely to be suspended than in Miami-Dade.

er punishments, the *Times* found.

Take students who got in trouble for "excessive tardies," which the district defines as "the act of arriving late to class or to school on a repeated basis."

White students were punished for that offense about 5,800 more times than blacks in the past five years. Yet blacks got 79 more out-of-school suspensions for tardiness than whites.

They were three times as likely as whites to be assigned to a work detail — a punishment that requires students to pick up trash or do other odd jobs that might otherwise fall to janitors.

Extreme case

Gibbs High School is ground zero for the disparity in punishments of blacks and whites.

The district opened Gibbs as an all-black junior and senior high during the segregated 1920s. Today, nearly two-thirds of the school's 1,300 students are black. The majority are enrolled in traditional classes, while most of the school's white and Asian students attend a separate arts magnet housed on campus.

The school has struggled with student behavior, including some high-profile episodes of violence. Last year, a video recording of a vicious classroom fight between two girls at the school went viral on the Internet.

A year before that, a teen was arrested at the school for allegedly carrying a loaded gun. Those types of incidents have led parents and district leaders to call for a harder line on discipline at Gibbs.

But the vast majority of discipline referrals go to students who commit minor offenses. And measured by how often black students are suspended compared to other children, Gibbs is the most unfair school in Pinellas County.

Black students at Gibbs are more than seven times as likely as other students to be suspended out of school.

For common, minor infractions, black students often faced harsher punishment than white students written up for the same thing. A *Times* analysis of discipline records showed they were twice as likely as whites to be suspended last year for causing a minor class disruption — an infraction that is not defined or described in the school's discipline guidelines.

Every school in Pinellas writes its own discipline plan. The one created by Gibbs allows students to be removed from the classroom for 32 of 34 listed misbehaviors.

Under the Gibbs guidelines, a student who talks back to a teacher can get the same punishment as a student who injures a classmate in a violent fight.

Naomi Gaines was struggling to make up lost time at Gibbs after transferring in midway through high school in 2013. She said she quickly came to know the school as a place where black students could land in serious trouble for the smallest things.

Gaines said she saw students written up for laughing too loudly, for wearing tights and for being seen in the hallway holding a cellphone.

She recalled getting a referral last year for having a pair of headphones — not plugged into anything — on her desk.

The offense listed on her discipline slip was possession of an electronic device, she said, and the punishment was three days on an “alternate bell schedule” — a form of suspension that requires students to miss their normal classes and instead come to school at 2:30 p.m. and spend five hours sitting in a classroom.

The altered schedule posed problems for Gaines. She didn't have access to a car. She lived nearly an



Jaden Lee, left, was accused of stealing a 50-cent brownie at Joseph L. Carwise Middle School. He received a day of in-school suspension. Here, he walks home with a friend near his subdivision in Palm Harbor.



Avontrell Hazzard, 13, was singled out for being too loud during lunch at Mount Vernon Elementary in 2014. Here, he answers a question during language class at Bethel Community Christian School.

hour's walk from Gibbs. Her parents, who both work, couldn't leave their jobs at 2 p.m. to drive her to the school.

Unable to report for the punishment, Gaines said she pleaded with administrators to work out some other arrangement. She said they told her she couldn't return to regular class until she served all of her suspension days in full.

Gibbs principal Reuben Hepburn told the Times that the school typically works with students who have transportation issues and can arrange for bus passes. But Gaines said she asked for one and was refused.

Two weeks passed before she could arrange to be at school and serve her punishment. She wasn't allowed to go to class the entire time.

During the alternate bell schedule hours, she said, the teacher who ran the suspension didn't teach the students or require them to keep up with class work. Instead, Gaines said, the teacher told them "to find something to do."

By the time she was finished, Gaines said, she was frantic at the thought of not graduating because of so much missed class.

In the end, she managed to graduate in June. She now plans to study

nursing at St. Petersburg College.

But she knows it could have gone the other way if she hadn't stayed up night after night to make up the missed assignments.

"I was crying all the time. I broke down. I did not know what to do," she said. "I was failing, and I was failing so bad to the point where I was really about to give up."

No secret

It was obvious even to white students at Gibbs that blacks were punished more often and more harshly, said Claire Ison, who is white and who graduated from the school in June 2015.

Ison said she often walked past administrators while cutting out of classes early her senior year, and they never said a word to her. Black students were routinely stopped, Ison said.

"As a white student I honestly did feel like I got away with more than a black student would," she said.

Teachers, too, were aware of the disparities.

Polled by the district in 2014, a third of the staff at the school said students of different ethnic backgrounds were not treated equally.

District leaders told the Times they



Jaquan Henderson, who has asthma, recalls not being able to catch his breath when teachers at Lakewood Elementary pinned him to the floor when he was 7.

are making progress in reducing suspensions thanks to the new training program. At Gibbs, there were 41 percent fewer suspensions for black students in the first two months of this school year compared to last year, they said.

Interviewed separately, the principal at Gibbs, Hepburn, acknowledged that black students at his school are punished disproportionately. Hepburn, who is black, said it's because black students break the rules more. He said he believes in a tough approach to bringing students in line.

"My philosophy — and I know it's not always a favorable philosophy — is we're going to hit you hard on the front end, and then coach you on what the right thing is," he said. "We believe in a hands-on approach, and I mean by that, we'll go upside your head.

But we're the first to high-five you when you're doing right."

During the interview, Hepburn played a Fox News clip that he described as "powerful."

It lambasted the idea that students who commit violent acts should get counseling rather than face immediate expulsion.

"If you have bullies and thugs allowed to remain in the classroom," the commentator said, "the good

teachers, they're not going to put up with it."

Resisting change

Across Florida, other school districts are using a tool to make punishments more fair.

Known as a discipline matrix, the system defines punishable behavior and calibrates punishments to fit the crimes. It explicitly spells out which behaviors merit which consequences rather than leave the decision up to teachers.

A matrix takes the guesswork out of student discipline and helps ensure all students are treated equitably, experts say. It also bars suspensions and other harsh punishments for minor infractions.

Eighteen of the 20 largest school districts in Florida use some form of discipline matrix.

Miami-Dade's system prevents principals from giving students more than in-school suspension for minor class disruptions. Pinellas suspended students out of school more than 12,000 times for that offense in the past five years.

Orange County's matrix blocks suspensions for profanity. Pinellas has suspended children more than 9,500 times for swearing since 2010.

Hillsborough's matrix prohibits administrators from suspending

children the first three times they're caught with a cellphone or other electronic device. Pinellas suspended children more than 1,000 times for that offense.

Black parents and community leaders in Pinellas have pressured the school district for years to adopt a discipline matrix. But the School Board has so far refused.

Board members haven't been convinced by success stories in other school districts, including Broward County. Leaders there revamped a matrix in 2013 and saw out-of-school suspensions given to black children fall by more than half.

"Broward is a different makeup than we are. They are a different culture than us," said Rene Flowers, the board's sole black member, while rebuffing the NAACP's calls for the program in fall 2014. "When you try to fit what someone else is doing, it doesn't work because it's not your community."

In May, Grego told School Board members that it's important for schools to be "the final decision maker" in discipline cases. "That's where I think some of the weaknesses are with these so-called matrices because it ties the hands of the administrators," he said.

At a community gathering weeks earlier, a multifaith religious group invited all seven School Board members to address calls for a discipline matrix. Only one — then-chairwoman Linda Lerner — showed up.

Standing near the empty seats of her colleagues, Lerner told the crowd the district didn't need the discipline tool.

"I do not support that if it's a particular offense it has to be a particular intervention," she said. "I certainly will have an open mind in the future."

Black leaders responded with frustration, but not surprise. They said they've been calling on the board for years to take basic steps to make discipline more fair.

"More stonewalling. More arrogance," said the Rev. Manuel Sykes, pastor of Bethel Community Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, after the meeting. "It's pretty clear that they're not going to listen to the concerns of parents and other community people when it comes to what's best for our children."

Constantly on edge

When children are suspended in Pinellas, they have fewer chances to make up the work they miss than they would in other Florida districts.

Eight of the state's 20 largest school districts require in-school suspension sessions be led by a certified teacher to help kids complete schoolwork while suspended.

Six districts, including Hillsborough, have centers where suspended students make up work with teachers and counselors instead of sitting at home.

Thirteen always give students full credit for work done on suspension.

In Pinellas — where black children are failing at some of the highest rates in Florida — district leaders have cut funding for programs designed to keep students from missing lessons.

They opened alternative behavior centers that drastically cut down on the number of black children suspended from middle schools in the mid 1980s, only to discontinue them within a few years.

They created on-campus suspension centers in the late 1990s that were praised by Harvard researchers as "a program with clear benefits" and a national model for keeping order in schools while ensuring black children still got a good education. But the School Board would not fund even one of them in full — they cost about \$100,000 apiece — and discontinued the program when outside money ran out in 2008.

Board members and district leaders pledged in 2010 to train teachers how to use "positive behavior supports," a classroom management system that puts a premium on getting troubled kids help for their problems while keeping them in school. But the board allowed five years to pass before ensuring that teachers were trained. The training only began again in earnest in the past two years.

Superintendent Grego told the *Times* that the district could do more to ensure students don't fall behind during punishments. "We need to continue to look and stretch ourselves on that. Alternatives to out-of-school suspension are important. They're expensive," he said. "But I'm looking and we as a staff are looking at ways we can mitigate that cost and still have that instructional time."

In a district where even minor misbehavior can lead to harsh punishments and lost class time, many black children are constantly on edge.

Avontrell Hazzard said he had to think twice before laughing after what happened at Mount Vernon Elementary.

The 13-year-old said he was eating lunch with his friends in spring 2014 when a teacher singled him out for being too loud. He spent the rest of the day in the office, filling out worksheets he had already completed in class.

Fifteen-year-old Jaquan Henderson, who has asthma, recalls not being able to catch his breath after his first-grade teachers at Lakewood Elementary pinned him to the floor over a temper tantrum. He was 7.

Jaden Lee said he paid a high price for a simple misunderstanding.

One day in October, the seventh-grader chose a brownie from the lunch counter at Joseph L. Carwise Middle School and asked the lunch lady to charge it to his school account. He thought he had the money to cover it. He said the lunch lady told him he did.

Two hours later, Jaden — one of about 70 black kids at the 1,100-student school — was called to the front office. There was no money in his account after all, an assistant principal told him. She accused him of stealing the 50-cent baked good and gave him an in-school suspension, a punishment that took him out of class for a full day.

The 12-year-old reported for the punishment the next day, spending the 6 1/2-hour suspension in a spare room with another student.

After settling in, he pulled out a worksheet from his civics class but discovered he couldn't complete it. His teacher hadn't given him the book he needed for the assignment, his mother told the *Times*.

As his school day ticked away, he stared down blankly at the worksheet, not knowing what it covered.

It was a review of the 14th Amendment. The part of the Constitution used to strike a blow for black children in *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

Times staffwriter Cara Fitzpatrick and computer-assisted reporting specialist Connie Humburg contributed to this report. Designed by Martin Frobisher. Graphics by Nathaniel Lash, with additional development by Frobisher and Alexis N. Sanchez.

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