

Lending a hand up: School tutors suspended students

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Tony and is the youngest of the three. He received a 10-day suspension for carrying a boot knife on the school bus.

The boys in Madison's class represent some of the 819 students who have been suspended since the sixth month of the 1996-97 calendar year. Though LIFT's regular student population is currently on break, the three are allowed to take classes during their short-term suspensions.

In Forsyth county last semester, minority students represented 82 percent of out-of-school suspensions, down from last year when almost 90 percent of those suspensions went predominantly African-American students.

Alternative learning assignments to schools like Independence and Petree were cut in half this year: 182 as compared to last year's 323 students were assigned out. Out-of-school suspensions overall, though, have risen by almost 50 percent.

Middle schools reported the highest number of suspensions, but all schools share a common denominator: repeat offenders. "There are far more students who are doing the right thing," said John Beaty, principal of Ashley Middle School. Parkland High School principal James Brandon agreed with Beaty. "Ninety percent of these kids do what they're supposed to," said Brandon. "That's why I don't get upset with kids."

Ashley and Parkland have the highest percentages of suspension for their levels: 26.22 out of an average 16.67 percent and 27.12 out of 19.35, respectively. Brandon said that these



Students on short-term suspension work in LIFT Academy's computer lab.

numbers reflect a perception that there are "good" schools and "bad" schools.

"We are the ugly stepsisters," said Brandon of his school and others located within the city limits. He feels that the media coverage tends to cast Parkland in a bad light, while focusing positively on schools like West Forsyth.

Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools Superintendent Don Martin thinks that economic background, rather than race, defines those students who are repeatedly suspended.

"In this county, there are more African Americans on [the] free and reduced lunch [program]," said Martin. "It's more a function of that than anything else." He pointed out that suspensions for white males have risen 81 percent in the past two years, compared to 65 percent with black males, and added that there is no room for biased teachers or administrators in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools.

"I guarantee you, there's nobody who gets up to come to school to try to suspend kids,"

said Martin.

The stricter policy adopted this year accounts for the 47 percent rise in all out-of-school suspensions. Martin calls the policy an "equalizer" in terms of discipline, in that there are guidelines set for every school to follow.

While the majority of elementary students are suspended for aggressive behavior such as fighting, middle and high school students usually get in trouble for disruptive behavior and rule violation.

Excessive tardiness may fall under the category of disruptive behavior. The cycle of misbehavior that may lead to suspension, Parkland's Brandon explained, begins with a minor infraction, such as tardiness. Students are then assigned to a lunchtime detention. If a student fails to appear for that detention, he or she is then ordered to stay after school. If the student skips after-school detention, he or she must attend school on Saturday.

When the student misses Saturday detention, a more

serious punishment may be called for, such as suspension.

Parkland is trying to change this approach. "On paper we look good, but in reality we haven't done much to help kids," said Brandon, adding that Parkland's suspensions are down since the last reporting.

Brandon feels that ultimately, it is the parents' responsibility to discipline the students. "We do kids an injustice when we let kids go through the world and let them find ways of getting out of things," he said.

Most educators agree that students of parents who are involved in the school usually don't become repeat offenders, and students get lost in the communication gulf between the school and the home. "There is a breakdown someplace," said Ashley's Beaty.

LIFT Academy's founder and executive director, Earline Parmon, doesn't allow that gulf to begin. "When students attend school here at LIFT, it is voluntarily," said Parmon. LIFT students cannot be suspended — if they are violently disruptive in class, they are sent home and told to return with a parent. Parmon said that students always return, sometimes even within the same day.

"Students are aware this is their reprieve," she said. Students are also charged with finding their own way to school, as LIFT doesn't provide transportation.

The three students on short-term suspension each say that this is his first suspension. Tony thinks that the schools need to ease up on out-of-school suspensions. "They

should give you a chance," he said.

All three agreed that once they were suspended, many teachers treat those students as more prone to trouble-making than others. "That's just the way it is," said Chris, and Vashon added that teachers should leave the judgment up to parents.

Tony compares that attitude to what faced the late rapper Tupac Shakur. Shakur garnered a reputation for being a "gangsta," serving time in jail after becoming famous, and perpetuating the East Coast-

they needed attention, so she began making deals with them. If they stayed with her after school during the week and worked on their homework, she would take them out for a fun activity on the weekend.

Chondella Taylor was one of these students. "I loved it," she said of Parmon's early LIFT. At the age of 9, Taylor already knew what she wanted to do when she grew up.

"I told her (Parmon) that I would be her secretary," said Taylor, laughing. She came to work at LIFT last year and now manages the office.

A probation officer who knew Parmon noted that attendance was up among the students she worked with, and told her about the Community-Based Alternatives Grant, set up by the Department of Human Resources to reduce court involvement among youth. With that grant, Parmon began receiving students full-time.

Presently on North 17th Street, LIFT serves 55 students. With the charter funding recently approved by the state board of education, Parmon will have 160 spaces available by July.

Though the school will now be open to all students, Parmon will continue the tradition of serving those children and youth who have been kicked out of traditional public schools.

Chris doesn't regret his suspension. He said, "It sort of teaches me a lesson not to do it again." Tony and Vashon said that they regretted their actions that got them suspended. "My dad was upset with me," said Tony. "I don't like to make my dad mad."

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West Coast hip-hop rift. A young man believed to have gang affiliations was recently charged with the October 1996 murder of Shakur.

Shakur has also been portrayed as a gentle person with an amazing talent. "He was grounded for life," said Tony of the hype surrounding Shakur's life. "He was smart but he didn't make the right decisions."

Parmon hopes she can help her students made the right decisions. Before LIFT's inception in 1982, Parmon worked part-time for the East Winston Community Development Corporation. She noticed that many of the children she worked around got in trouble because



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