

At-risk students pushed out

Continued from page 1A

during the 2004-2005 academic year, there were more than 20,000 dropout events recorded statewide for grades 9-12, with the African American average being among the highest. For CMS, the total was 1,108, with blacks accounting for 555.

In an age when teaching jobs are connected to achievement and federal funding for schools based on the numbers, schools are taking drastic measures to comply, but how far is too far?

Current and former staff members at Myers Park say school administrators miscoded students after convincing or coercing them to drop out, so that they did not bring down testing scores. They made it look as if students either transferred or moved from Charlotte altogether, rather than being left without an education. They called it "the school of far, far away."

Anything but a fairy tale

In 2002, Newsweek magazine ranked Myers Park the nation's seventh-best high school and the administration was lauded for taking an active role in closing the achievement divide between haves and have-nots. Innovative programs joined high achiever and struggling students to create a dynamic where they learned from and about each other.

Myers Park sources, who did not want their identities revealed for fear of retaliation from CMS, say that climate changed when Bill Anderson took over as principal. Programs were moved or disbanded, campus sources say. Counselors were moved, making it difficult for some students to stop in and talk with them without being late for classes.

"The kids began to hang their heads...like they were sent to the back of the bus," one source said. "They went from feeling like they were important to feeling disconnected."

Standardized test scores began to drop and pressure from the community to improve results and the school's image led to drastic measures. Anderson and other administrators, according to sources at Myers Park and CMS, launched a plan to get rid of specific students.

"They said they weren't going to tolerate students who misbehave, had a hard time getting to school or had a hard time taking tests," one of the on-campus sources said. "They'd pick out who they wanted and who they didn't want in the school."

'School far, far away'

Sources at Myers Park described situations where teachers or administrators purposefully tried to provoke confrontations with students. "They were coercing kids out so they wouldn't bring down EOC," said another campus

source. "They'd set them up to get them angry, then suspend them when they reacted. Once suspended, they'd get behind in school, and then when they reached 10 absences, they'd kick them out."

Anderson denies the allegations, insisting Myers Park faculty and staff worked with high-absentee students to keep them on track, even if it meant exploring other academic options.

"We unequivocally never coerced or forced students out. If a student missed 20 or 30 days they couldn't possibly pass. Our job is always to help students succeed. I am aware of administrators and counselors talking with parents to inform them of their students' option, if they are in danger of failing. We may recommend that they go to community college, but we never coerced or forced students out."

For those that couldn't be provoked but whose test scores were low, there was a plan of action as well, sources say.

"They'd tell them, it looks like you are not going to make it this year," a source said. "Just drop out, come back next year, and start over clean." And the kids would do it, and their parents would believe it was in their best interest and they'd accept it. When they tried to come back the next year, either they'd be told they couldn't, or there wasn't room left for them."

While coercing or forcing students out is a radical step, there are guidelines that would leave them in the system for tracking. However, at Myers Park, the records were coded in a way that made students "disappear" for the school's benefit.

For example, should a student's parents move, the code would be WIF, for out of state or out of the country. There are codes for in-state transfer, in-system transfer, and even in-county transfer to home-schooling.

Yet at Myers Park, students that were coerced or forced out were coded out of state or country, in state transfer, and/or in county transfer to private school instead of dropouts.

Miscoding dropouts circumvented including them among the required 95 percent of students in each state subgroup that must be tested to make Adequate Yearly Progress. Without the dropouts, test scores are boosted. Sources at Myers Park have said Anderson even made jokes at faculty meetings about sending students to the "school of far, far away."

But campus sources believe most of the teachers had no idea what was going on, or at least didn't question when students just stopped coming to school.

"A new principal came into

Myers Park, with a wonderful reputation," said a Myers Park source. "The new principal does not know that this is going on, but Anderson is still in touch with his old cronies."

Anderson, who is now director of Communities In Schools, a program that keeps at-risk students in school, said he knew nothing about students being miscoded after dropping out.

"I know absolutely nothing about that," he said. "That would be fraud on the part of the registrar. I can't believe the registrar at Myers Park or any other school would ever do that."

"There were never instructions given, by me or members of my administration, to falsify documents, ever. There was this one employee terminated from Myers Park due to changing grades. That person alleged that the registrar was responsible for changing the grades. The matter was investigated and the claim was found to be false."

When Myers Park was named a school of distinction, teachers and administrators received bonuses.

A future lost

Turner admits he was a below average student, but he had an opportunity to improve his grades by making up missed assignments. Turner, who hoped to go to college to become a sports manager or agent, admitted to numerous tardies and a suspension, but felt he had a good relationship with some of his teachers and the administration. Instead, he spent a year aimlessly living in Winston-Salem.

"I would rather have gone through with the hearing," said Turner, and then see what the board would have said...instead of just letting the school take everything in their hands."

Though Myers Park was his neighborhood school, Turner was turned away. Campus sources maintain students never get to see the codes themselves, so they don't know why they won't be accepted at other schools. Turner said he tried to enroll at other schools and Central Piedmont Community College, but insists his Myers Park records kept him out.

Although he was the only dropout willing to do an interview when contacted by The Post, Turner is not alone.

In a sample group of 49 Myers Park student records obtained by The Post, 16 were coded incorrectly and 12 of those were African Americans. Among the 16 correctly-coded dropouts, only three were black and of the 17 left, students couldn't be reached to confirm or deny their status.

Silence broken

In a school of 200 teachers and about 2,700 students, few at Myers Park were willing to discuss the situation on campus.

"What's really tough is that good people do awful things," a campus source said. "That's just historically true. I hate to do this, I know some of these people. I like them. But they are part of a system that has run amok."

Top-tier public high schools aren't the only ones pushing students out.

Crossroads Charter High School came forward as well, because of disgust for the situation there.

"It's all about money," said a source at Crossroads, who requested anonymity because of fear of reprisal. "Kids are counted through to October, but once the head count is taken, and state money is calculated, students are suspended and forced out left and right."

In 2004-2005 Crossroads Charter reported 10 dropouts; in comparison, Kennedy Charter reported none.

"It is a disservice to chil-

dren, parents and the community," the Crossroads source said. "There is no point at which you give up on a student. If a child comes to class, I don't believe you fail a child who comes to school and tries."

Kenneth Simmons, Crossroads' principal, said the school doesn't force students out.

"I just finished my first year as principal at Crossroads; the reason I was brought here was to correct the school, but none of those problems are related to students being coerced or forced out," he said. "I have never experienced anyone sharing this information; I have never heard anything before about these concerns. My staff and I considered who might have made such comments and we decided it must be a former staff member."

'A significant problem'

Though not aware of coercion and force-outs, CMS Chief Operating Officer Maurice Green said no one should give up on education, especially for at-risk students.

"It is a significant issue and a significant problem," he said. "Too many in the community want to say it's the fault of educators, but it's everyone's fault."

"We haven't followed through with the action of educating students. We have allowed large sections to feel that maybe education isn't important. When kids dropout they are hurting themselves and hurting the rest of us," said Green.

What is the solution, when the problem is not just dropouts?

"I don't really know," said one of the Myers Park sources, "but it's up to everyone in schools to be dedicated to do what's best for the students."

Correspondent Angela Lindsay contributed to this report.

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