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Elgin police report disparities in juvenile cases

Black, Hispanic student arrest, citation numbers in schools disproportionate to that of enrollment

By: Gloria Casas

Elgin police statistics show a steady drop in the number of juvenile arrests made at city high schools and middle schools over the past five years, but they also show a disproportionate number of the cases involving Hispanic and Black students.

Police Chief Ana Lalley shared the numbers with the Elgin City Council on Wednesday as members weigh whether they will renew a \$500,000 contract under which the police department provides police officers to serve as student resource officers at District U-46 schools in Elgin.

The council has traditionally approved the contract with little discussion but this year some members asked for more information about the program before making a decision.

A decision on the contract renewal is expected to be made before the end of the month.

Overall, the number of juvenile arrests at Elgin schools has gone down, Lalley said.

In 2015, police arrested 510 juveniles and referred 72 to the Kane County Juvenile Justice Center, she said. In 2019, the number was 224 arrests and 30 referrals. So far this year, there have been 151 arrests and 21 referrals, she said.

According to the data, 66% of citations written between 2015 and 2020 were given to Hispanic students at Elgin High School and 16% involved Black students. However, Hispanic students make up 75% of the student enrollment and Blacks account for 6.3%.

At Larkin High School in Elgin, 58% of the citations for the same time period involved Hispanic students and 23% involved Black students. Hispanics make up 72.1% of Larkin's student population and Blacks make up 6.3%, the data showed.

The citations were written for a variety of infractions, including truancy, disorderly conduct, battery and tobacco use, Lalley said.

Statistics paint a similar picture at the city's middle schools. Larsen's Black population is 6.5% but they received 22% of citations written over a six-year period, according to the data. Abbott Middle School's population is 8% Black but Black students received 32% of the citations.

The top middle school infractions were disorderly conduct, truancy, battery and cannabis possession, Lalley said.

"I recognize our numbers are going down in terms of arrests. That is excellent and I want to continue to see that happen," Councilman Tish Powell said. But what is not changing is "who's being affected," she said.

"That is what causes me to pause as an African American parent and as an African American member of this community," Powell said. "That is something very concerning to me."

“We share the same concerns,” U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders told Powell. “Are (the numbers) still disproportionate? Yes, but are we in a different place where we were six years ago? Absolutely. Are we done? Absolutely not.”

“I will tell you we see disproportionate data across the board in multiple areas. One of them is the overidentification of (Black) students being emotionally disturbed and that begins in elementary school,” Sanders said.

The district is directing more attention to the issue in an effort to figure out why the numbers are disproportionate, he said.

“We will get better,” he said. “It will take more training. It will take more time. It will take more resources. We all need to work together.”

U-46 officials have been discussing its student resource officer programs and decided to renew the contract with area police departments for the coming year so they can get feedback from teachers, staff and students about their experiences, Sanders said.

“There’s a lot of things to consider when we talk about the school resource officers being in the schools besides just the numbers,” Lalley said.

Elgin has police officers assigned to Larkin, Elgin and Central high schools and Ellis, Kimball, Larsen and Abbott middle schools. The program started 33 years ago with the goal of creating a bridge between schools and the police, protecting students’ welfare and building relationships, Lalley said.

The officers don’t enforce discipline. That’s U-46’s responsibility, she said.

In her opinion, the student resource officers “do an amazing job,” Lalley said. “They are there for the safety of students and the staff. They serve as teachers, they serve as mentors, they serve as counselors.”

The officers are important for student safety, especially should there be an active shooter event, she said. They’re also the ones who investigate threats made to the school, such as bomb threats, she said.