

# Racial disparities found in nation's schools

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nearly one of eight black schoolchildren were suspended from school while only one of 30 white students received the same punishment, the Education Department said Wednesday. Officials called the figures troubling but hard to blame solely on prejudice.

"There is a disparity," William Modzeleski, the department's safe schools chief, acknowledged in an interview Wednesday. "But we have to be careful how we interpret these numbers. There's a whole host of reasons as to why you may have these numbers — one of them

being discrimination, but one of many and not the only reason why the number may be this way."

Nearly 3.2 million U.S. schoolchildren — or 7 percent of total enrollment — were reported suspended from schools in the 1997-98 school year, according to a department survey of public school districts conducted roughly every two years. That figure, up slightly from the latest figures from 1996-97, is double the number of children sent home a day or more for breaking school rules nearly three decades ago — with little change in the overall numbers of children go-

ing to school.

Just 4 percent of schoolchildren were punished that way in the 1973-74 school year.

But the numbers that have most concerned parents, child advocates and civil rights groups are those broken down by a child's race. In 1997-98, 1 million black children were suspended — 31 percent of all punished. But black children made up 17 percent of the total student population of 46 million. Meanwhile, white non-Hispanic students made up two-thirds of the population, but just less than half of total suspensions — or 1.5 million.

On Thursday, civil rights advocates — including the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition — plan to challenge the differences in a report contending that schools can effectively discipline children without solely relying on zero-tolerance policies that may target lesser infractions.

"No matter how one may choose to attribute the causes, the number of students of color suspended and expelled is alarming," researchers say in an executive summary of their report.

The department, collecting expulsion data for the first time, also said 87 children were expelled in 1997-98; a

third of them black.

Yet Scott Palmer, who examines anti-discrimination policies for the department, said the suspension rates, based on a sampling of one-third of the nation's 86,000 schools, simply can't be used to draw such conclusions.

Schools report the number of children they suspend, but not the number of children caught breaking a rule, Palmer said. There's no clear way to tell how many children a school considered suspending but didn't in a given year. There's also no way of telling which groups of children were referred more often for suspension or were

more likely to break a rule in the first place.

The survey's margin of error ranges from plus or minus less than one percentage point to plus or minus 5 percentage points.

Modzeleski said the rising suspensions give the department a good start on where to look for potential problems in school discipline policies — which have risen and in some cases toughened in light of recent high-profile school shootings.

"We need schools to be safe for students, their parents and for teachers," Modzeleski said. "We are not (See Disparities, Page 13)

## White man begins trial in bombing of black college

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — When the first pipe bomb exploded, students at Florida A&M University were startled, but not in fear. No one was hurt and the damage was slight.

The next day, Sept. 1, the usual grind of a just-started year resumed.

On Sept. 22, another pipe bomb exploded on campus, this time accompanied by a racist phone call to a local television station warning: "This is just the beginning."

Although there were no injuries, news of the threat spread fear across the predominantly black college campus. The school's once idyllic city-on-a-hill atmosphere was transformed into a compound of ID checks,

police checkpoints and bomb sweeps of the buildings each morning.

At the time, FAMU President Frederick Humphries said the 12,000-student campus was trying hard not to adopt a siege mentality. But as he surveyed a phalanx of police walking across the quad just before a potentially frightening fall football game Saturday, he admitted: "It's playing with the very life of our university."

The bomb scares ended in late October after the arrest of an out-of-work former embalmer. On Monday, Lawrence Lombardi, 42, faced a jury that will decide whether he is guilty of planting two bombs in campus buildings and carrying out a

hate crime. If convicted, he could face life in prison.

The federal trial was moved about 200 miles west of the university to Pensacola because U.S. District Judge Robert L. Hinkle feared local jurors could be swayed by concerns about race relations in Tallahassee.

But as prosecutors seek to convict Lombardi, a former Marine who once had a snack delivery route that took him

to the FAMU campus, the fear among students has faded.

"I haven't heard a conversation about the bombing in so long," said Derric Heck, a senior architecture major from Brunswick, Ga., and president of the student body.

Last year, as vice president, Heck spent days meeting with college administrators about security concerns after the explosions. But as

his last year of college draws to a close, Heck said he and his peers have moved on.

For Humphries and others who have lived through racial violence before say they will be watching as the justice system wrestles once again with race-based hate.

"A lot of people will be paying attention to this court case," Humphries said. "People are paying attention with an eye toward: When is

this kind of stuff going to end? And when are we going to respect each other?"

The prosecution's case has been kept secret and most of the court file in the case is sealed. The federal judge in Tallahassee who made that decision said some of the material is unlikely to be admissible.

Prosecutors will not comment on the case, and (See Trial, Page 13)

## University removes Lee portrait from building

COLLEGE STATION, Texas (AP) — A portrait of a former Texas A&M University president has been removed from a campus building named after him because the picture's background included Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The painting of Gilbert "Gibb" Gilchrist was removed from the lobby of the research building of the Texas Transportation Institute.

Institute director Herbert Richardson said he ordered the removal in late May after receiving a complaint that Lee's image carried racist overtones.

"I felt that the lobby of that building is not the place for a confrontation between admirers of Robert E. Lee and those who view him as a symbol of slavery," Richardson said.

Gilchrist was president of Texas A&M from 1944 to 1948 and chancellor of the university system from 1948 to 1953.

Gilchrist's son Henry said his father was the son of a Confederate soldier and admirer of Lee.

"You've got to remember that at the time of his death in 1972, we didn't have people telling us what we should think, so he did not have the opportunity to have his thoughts rehabilitated by people who think you cannot like Robert E. Lee," Gilchrist said.

Late last week, two plaques bearing Confederacy symbols were removed from the lobby of the state Supreme Court building in Austin. They were replaced with new ones that note the building was constructed with money taken from a Confederate pension fund.

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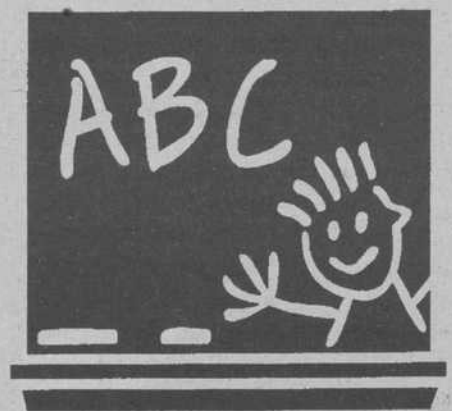
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