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Not yet ready to make it final

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DURHAM -- With a new state law requiring school districts to make big changes to their discipline policies before the start of the 2011-12 school year, Durham school board members found themselves in a race against the clock this week.

The school year begins Monday for year-round students, meaning that Durham Public Schools administrators have less than a week to get codes of conduct into those students' and faculty members' hands.

After about 90 minutes of discussion Tuesday, many board members expressed that they weren't yet ready to give their final stamps of approval on the rewritten discipline policies. So, after making some revisions, the board decided to approve the policies on a provisional basis for year-round schools, revisit the policies at their Aug. 9 Support Services Committee meeting and stay open to revisions as they're put into action during the school year.

A period of public comment before the board took up the issue Tuesday likely contributed to members' concerns. Erwin Byrd and Mark **Trustin** -- both lawyers by trade who said they were speaking only as members of the community -- said they'd found numerous points of concern in the few hours that they'd had to look over the policies.

"I believe that these policies, beyond almost any other policy that you all work on, affect every student, every day in the school system," Byrd said, stressing that there's a need for "as much community input as you can get" to make sure that the policies are fair and easy to understand.

Among the specific concerns she pointed out was a proposed policy that forces suspended students who do not request a hearing within three days to waive that right. After Byrd spoke, school board attorney Ken Soo agreed that the requirement violates a state statute and said that the policy would be revised.

Trustin expressed concern over a proposed policy that allows administrators to continue a long-term suspension into the following school year if the offense occurs in the final quarter of the school year.

"I would think that any child psychologist would say -- so much longer after the incident with an entire summer in between, do you really intend to punish the child further by taking away more education?" **Trustin** said.

Board member Leigh Bordley later responded to that concern, saying that's a situation that "cries out with a loud voice for a more creative type of punishment." At a previous discussion on the discipline policies, Bordley spoke of her desire to look at alternative forms of restitution or punishment, such as picking up trash on campus.

Trustin also pointed out that one proposed policy allows administrators to punish truant or tardy students with up to a two-day suspension, suggesting that it was illogical to punish students who don't come to class by giving them yet more time out of class.

Bordley, board Chairwoman Minnie Forte-Brown and board member Omega Curtis Parker agreed.

However, board member Natalie Beyer said she saw a need for administrators to have the option of prescribing a punishment "with some teeth." She cited a conversation she'd had with one administrator who said many students only skip one or a few classes a day, suggesting that preventing them from coming to school at all would, indeed, be a punishment.

The board voted to continue allowing administrators to suspend chronically truant and tardy students with suspension with the caveat that it "should only occur after documented intervention."

While no decisions were made Tuesday, the board indicated it plans to tweak the wording of its policy on the use of cellphones and other electronic devices -- which "strongly discourages" students from bringing the devices to school and mandates that those on campus be turned off.

The Support Services Committee meeting during which board members will next discuss the discipline policies is set for 4:30 p.m. Aug. 9 at the Fuller Administration Building, 511 Cleveland St.

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