Official newspaper of the city of Winona

WAPS' racial disparity in discipline persists

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Black students at Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) were suspended seven times more often than their white peers last school year. As the district nears the end of a three-year agreement with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) to

reduce the disparity in discipline between students of color and white students, that disparity remains largely unchanged.

Later this year, WAPS will submit a final report to the MDHR regarding suspension rates. The district is one of many that entered agreements with the department. "We all agree that kids can't learn if they're not in the classroom," former MDHR Commissioner Kevin Lindsey told the Winona

In the 2019-2020 school year, Black students were suspended at 7.14 times the rate their white peers were. The rate of suspension for Black students was about 34 suspensions per 100 students, while the rate for white students was about five suspensions per 100 students.

That rate marked an increase from the previous academic year. In the 2018-2019 school year, Black students were suspended at 6.9 times the rate their white peers

see **DISPARITY** page 7a

Farmers market starts summer season



by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Holli Wieser and her sisters just started their candle making business in January. Wieser brought their goods to the Winona Farmers Market (WFM) last weekend as it opened for its summer season. However, she already "can't wait to come back." Wieser is one of the vendors joining the WFM as more of its pre-pandemic community-building elements return.

Though WFM organizers and vendors persevered last year and held the event and

enthusiastic customers continued to attend, the feeling of community that comes from gathering to learn about and bring home local products was not quite the same as it had been in pre-pandemic years, several organizers and vendors agreed. "And while we had very loyal customers last year, people didn't feel like they could hang around and have those long, interesting conversations that farmers market customers have," Mar-

see **FARMERS MARKET** page 5a

Photo by Alexandra Retter

Liv Charlton (foreground) right) and Connor Dunn (background) speak with a Winona Farmers Market attendee on Saturday, May 1. The market began its summer season last weekend and will remain open through October.

Vaccine progress hits a wall; cases tick up

by CHRIS ROGERS

COVID infections are up and vaccinations are down in Winona County. The number of new coronavirus cases in the county nearly doubled over the weekend, with a total of 49 new cases in the past week, compared to 26 cases last week. That is the highest weekly total in nearly three months.

"In my mind, it was inevitable that we would see an increase of cases here in Winona County," Winona County Public Health Supervisor Melanie Tatge said, noting how prevalent the more-contagious B117 variant is in Minnesota.

At the same time cases rose, new vaccinations - the number of people receiving their first dose - fell by almost half for the second straight week, with just 377 first shots administered between April 24 and May 1, down from 1,284 shots just two weeks prior. That is the lowest number of first doses administered since the Winona Post began tracking vaccination data in January.

The vaccination slowdown was remarkably abrupt. Over the month of March, Winona County went from having 18 percent of the population with at least one dose to 38 percent. Now, that rapid progress has hit a wall. As of May 1, 44 percent of residents had at least one dose, a gain of only six points since the beginning of April.

see **TICK UP** page 7a

Winona council defers to county on juvenile detention

By ZACH KAYSER

An advisory group's resolution that would voice opposition to the idea of a juvenile detention facility was flatly rejected by the Winona City Council on Monday.

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) submitted a resolution for the council that would

see **HRC** page 5a

WMS 8th grade returns, other ages remain in-person

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Eighth-grade students at Winona Middle School are learning in-person again. Four COVID-19 cases and 154 possible exposures at the eighth-grade level led Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) officials to move that grade to distance learning from April 21 to May 3. Meanwhile, however, WAPS reported that district-wide there were seven new cases and 123 students and staff in quarantine between April

see **WMS** page 6a

After 19 years, holistic doctor passes the baton



Zach Kayser

Photo by

Dr. Karen Vrchota poses in an exam room at her practice, Integrative Health Care in Winona. Vrchota, 65, will retire this summer.

by ZACH KAYSER

At 65, Dr. Karen Vrchota is about to hand over the reins of her holistic medicine practice to the next generation.

Vrchota has a background in conventional medicine, having graduated in 1985 from the University of Minnesota and completed her residency at Hennepin County Medical Center. But her 19 years in the field of alternative medicine began at a conference in 2002, where Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum was speaking on his forte, chronic fatigue syndrome. She was so inspired that years later, Vrchota still gives her patients copies of Teitelbaum's seminal "From Fatigued to Fantastic."

She then dipped her toe into the water of alternative medicine, treating chronic conditions with a limited scope of "fat chart patients," that is, patients with a long medical history that stumps many

doctors. For a while she did this even as she continued working in an E.R., but after seeing results from the alternative

treatments, she decided to do it full time. "It was scary, but I would say, medicine isn't working for most people," she said. "Most doctors, most nurses, most patients are not happy, with the things the way they are. I am a prayerful person

see VRCHOTA page 5a

the winonapost ... proud to be your community newspaper for over 50 years

BROSNAHAN LAW FIRM P.A.

PAUL BROSNAHAN

507-457-3000 | 24-Hour Emergency: 507-450-2422

Located in Winona | Helping families throughout Minnesota & Wisconsin

Helping Injured People get their bills paid.

www.brosnahanlawfirm.com

FAMILY Milestones

obituaries

Schmidt, Gary Rost

Gary Rost Schmidt, 84, of Winona, passed away on Friday, April 30, 2021, at Mayo Franciscan Healthcare Hospital in La Crosse, Wis., sur-

rounded by his family. Gary was born in Win-

ona to Elizabeth "Bette" Mae and Carroll William Schmidt on December 5, 1936. Growing up in Winona, he loved everything about his hometown and was proud of its history. Gary was a proud charter member of the Drag-Ons Motor Vehicle Club, which began in 1954, and he served as president of the club in 1958. Following high school, Gary worked

at the local A&P and attended Winona Business College in 1957. When asked to go on a double date with his buddy, Gary met his friend's date, M. Judith "Judy" Bambenek. After a few double dates, Gary decided to call Judy and their courtship

In 1959, Gary enlisted in the Army and started basic training at Fort Carson in Colorado, eventually serving at Fort Knox in Kentucky. On April 4, 1964, Gary married Judy Bambenek at Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Winona. When Judy completed her degree at WSU, they moved their young family to Caledonia, Minn., for her first teaching position at Loretto High School, and a year later they moved to Houston, Minn., where they made their home for more than 35 years, while Judy taught for Houston Public Schools. Gary attended Winona State University under the G.I. Bill and graduated in 1971 with a Bachelor of Science degree in speech and a minor in library science. His first teaching position was as a substitute teacher for his wife, Judy, while she was on maternity leave with their youngest child. In 1974, Gary started his own business called Food & Popcorn Supply, based in Winona, supplying and delivering snack items for restaurants, bars and businesses in southeastern Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. As a young father, Gary served

as scout master for the local Boy Scouts and supported local community and high school play productions under Judy's di-

rection. He is most known for his knowledgeable guidance and face in the hardware department at Mill's Fleet Farm, where he worked full-time for 25 years, retiring in 2013, at 76 years

Gary is survived by three children, James (Kim) Schmidt, of Eau Claire, Wis., Philip (Elaine) Schmidt, of Lake City, Minn., Catherine Schmidt, of Winona; six grandchildren,

Hunter Koenigs, Andrew Schmidt, Benjamin Schmidt, Abigail Schmidt, Elizabeth Schmidt, Eva J. Elson; brothers-in-law, James Bambenek, Charles (Joyce) Bambenek, and Gary (Claire) Bambenek; sister-in-law, Laurie (Fred) Krause; many nieces and nephews; cousins, Nino Cezar, Virel Schmidt, and Jim (Jeanie) Schmidt.

He is preceded in death by his wife, M. Judith Schmidt; his parents, Carroll Schmidt and Bette M. Schmidt; sister, Nancy (Schmidt) Hilton, of Winona; brothers, Owen J. Schmidt, of North Mankato, Minn., Ronald A. Schmidt, of Minneapolis, Minn.; father-in-law, Jim V. Bambenek; mother-in-law, Phoebe (Abrahamsen) Bambenek; sister-in-law, Marilyn Bambenek; uncles, John Schmidt, Elmer Schmidt; aunt, Kate Schmidt; and grandchild, Faith Marie Schmidt.

A funeral service to remember Gary will be held on Friday, May 7, at 1p.m. at First Congregational Church in Winona with Rev. Danielle K. Bartz, officiating. This service will also be livestreamed through the church Facebook page. Visitation will be held on Thursday, May 6 from 4-6 p.m. at Fawcett-Junker Funeral Home in Winona. Interment with military honors will be at Woodlawn Cemetery, on Saturday, May 8, at 10 a.m. Full obituary at www.fawcett-junkerfuneralhome.com.

Tick up

continued from page 1a

Buffalo and Trempealeau counties also saw a sharp drop-off in vaccinations. Buffalo County went from a high of 986 doses in one week in early April to just 353 doses administered in late April. The trend wasn't as bad in Trempealeau County, where shots dropped from 2,064 in early April to 1,278 in late April.

Across Minnesota, "We feel we've met or reached that COVID-19 vaccine saturation point," Tatge said. "What that means is, all those who were willing have had that opportunity to receive the vaccine, and those who were hesitant for whatever reason and not coming in to fill our appointments. So we're really focusing our efforts on trying to provide information, clarification about the benefits of receiving the vaccine."

"The people who were really interested in being vaccinated basically got it as soon as they were able to," Trempealeau County Health Department Public Information Office Kaila Baer agreed.

How much of that slowdown is a result of people who might be willing to be vaccinated not having convenient options or just not getting around to it, and how much is a result of people simply not wanting to get vaccinated? "It's hard to know. We've seen both," Baer responded. "We've seen people saying, 'I just don't want to get it.' We've also seen people say it's a burden for me to drive all the way to Eau Claire to get this. So it's a combination."

The county health department has been touting weekend and evening vaccination slots at community sites in Eau Claire and La Crosse, Wis., while also offering more local options at the hospital in Whitehall and elsewhere. A listing of all vaccination sites in Wisconsin and Minnesota is available at www.vaccines.gov. See page 3B for information about vaccine clinics in Winona on Thursday, including walk-ins.

"It's a matter of, [for] the people who want to get vaccinated, how can we make it as easy as possible to get the vaccine?" Baer said. She continued, "It's really hard for us to reach people who have already

made up their minds about not getting it."

"Another thing we're seeing is a lot of people aren't scheduling their second-dose appointments," Tatge said. Baer said she'd heard from people who incorrectly believed they didn't need a second dose if they had COVID. "That's just not the case," she stated. Getting one dose of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines is 80 percent effective at protecting recipients from COVID, but that figure is boosted to 95 percent with the second dose, according to

Getting vaccinated isn't just about protecting yourself, Minnesota Department of Health Infectious Disease Division Director Kris Ehresmann said. "They also protect your family, your friends, and your community. They get us closer to the day where we can all do those things we missed over the last year," she stated.

National health experts say the pandemic won't truly end until the U.S. — and ultimately, the world — reaches "herd immunity," a point where so many people are immune that the virus can no longer easily spread to new people. Some estimates of what portion of the population would need immunity to reach that threshold range from 70-85 percent. "The sooner we get people vaccinated, the sooner we can return to some normalcy," Baer said.

Baer encouraged residents to seek out vaccine information from reputable sources, noting, "There's a lot of misinformation out there." She also encouraged residents to check out recent videos from local vaccine question-and-answer sessions at tinyurl.com/5dn7nu8y and contact the health department with specific questions via email at tchealth@co.trempealeau. wi.us or by voicemail at 715-538-2311 ext. 220. "I want people to know that they can always reach out to us if they have questions. We're here to answer questions and help them make an informed decision," she said. Tatge referred citizens to the Winona County Health and Human Services Facebook page, as well as cdc. gov and health.state.mn.us for information on vaccines.

For more information on vaccines and vaccine safety, visit www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines.

Chris@winonapost.com

arrangements

Gerke, Ann Katherine

Ann Katherine Gerke, 80, formerly of La Crosse, Wis., passed away surrounded by her family at the home of her son, under the phenomenal care of Black River Memoria Hospice. In keeping with Ann's wishes, private family services will be held. The family would like

to extend a heartfelt thank you to all of the nurses and staff with Black River Memorial Hospice. Your care and compassion shown to Ann in her final months is truly the work of angels. In lieu of flowers, memorials in Ann's honor may be direct to Black River Memorial Hospice. To express condolences to Ann's family online, please visit www.wozneykillian-

Culp, Jesse E.Jesse E. Culp, of Winona, born July 29, 1992, passed away on October 15, 2020, at

We are welcoming friends of Jesse and his family to celebrate his life on Saturday, May 15, 2021, from 2-5 p.m. at Holzinger Lodge at 925 West Lake Boulevard in Winona. Join us anytime from 2-5 p.m. to remember Jesse together. Refreshments will be provided.

Gifts are not requested; however, if it is on your heart to give, please instead make a donation to Winona County Parks and Recreation Department for Jesse's fondness of frisbee golf. For anyone interested in donating: Checks can be directed to Winona Community Foundation at 51 East 4th St, #317 Winona, MN 55987 with check memo of "Disc Golf Course in memory of Jesse Culp.'

Thank you for all the love and support during this difficult time.

A complete obituary is available at www.watkowski-mulyck.com.

Kirwin, Sue

Sue Kirwin, 57, of Hampton, Fla., and formerly of Cochrane, passed away on March 2, 2020, in Gainesville, Fla.

Due to COVID-19, services were unable to be held last year. A visitation will be held from 11 a.m. until the funeral service at 1 p.m. on Saturday, May 15, 2021, at the Watkowski-Mulyck Funeral Home at 376 East Sarnia St. in Winona.

A complete obituary will follow.

Disparity

continued from page 1a

The disparity last year was roughly equivalent to the difference in suspension rates before the agreement, which aimed to decrease the disparity, went into effect. Prior to the agreement being implemented in 2018, Black students were suspended at 8.5 times the rate white students were, according to data from the 2017-2018 school year. Though the suspension disparity decreased from 8.5 to around 7 over the course of the agreement, it consistently remained at a substantial rate of about 7 for two of the three years of the agreement.

Students not attending school in-person five days a week during the pandemic impacted data at the end of the 2019-2020 school year and throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. With students not physically at school, suspensions for all students declined significantly. In 2020-2021, there were 12 suspensions; over the previous four years, there were 150 to 200 each year.

WAPS Superintendent Annette Freiheit has led the district for the majority of the three-year agreement, having served as superintendent for two of the three years. When asked about her thoughts on why the disparity increased between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 schools years, Freiheit said, "Well, we need to continue working on and implementing the strategies that we are doing." She cited district inclusivity efforts to make its schools more welcoming and supportive for underrepresented students and staff, implement practices to restore and improve connections with students and staff, provide cultural competency and implicit biases training for staff, offer learning opportunities regarding emotions and social interactions for students, reinforce positive student behavior and have discussions with underrepresented families.

It is hard to say what progress the district has made with eliminating the disparity, Freiheit said, as a result of the pandemic influencing the most recent data. When asked whether she is satisfied with WAPS' progress regarding the disparity, Freiheit said, "I would have to say we've got a start, but we have more work to do in that area." The work will not be done until the district eliminates the disparity, she continued.

School Board member Michael Hanratty agreed, saying the district still faces the problem of racial disparities with suspension rates. "We need to make more substantial improvement in the racial disparities," he said.

Like Freiheit, Hanratty said he feels the inclusivity work WAPS is currently completing could help the district reduce the disparity. "We're making a full faith effort at getting this problem eliminated," he said.

When asked about his reaction to the disparity in suspension rates between Black students and their white peers, School Board member Karl Sonneman said, "What is there to say but it's horrid." Like Hanratty and Freiheit, Sonneman cited some action the district has taken in an attempt to increase inclusivity, such as ending WAPS' previous contract with the Winona Police Department for a school resource officer and putting training such as implicit bias training in place for staff who handle school safety currently. However, he also proposed a different way of addressing student discipline. The suspen-

sions included in the report to the DHR do not appear to rise to the level of being egregious and handled through the juvenile justice system, he said. "If we have a disparity of that nature, maybe what we need to do is simply stop suspensions, period, except for those truly egregious cases," he said.

"As a DEC [WAPS Diversity and Equity Committee] member and parent of two children in WAPS, this is not surprising in the least," DEC member and parent of color Maurella Cunningham said in an email about the increase in the disparity between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. "Over the past few years, social justice/anti-racist/equity action has continued to be stifled by the district." She continued, "I don't believe that there were really any actual significant changes in student behavior, district responses and overall mindset shifts with respect to items in the collaborative agreement between the Minnesota Department of Human Rights and WAPS."

On the other hand, when asked whether the disparities would have decreased, if not for the pandemic, Freiheit said, "Well, I think they are [decreasing]." She reiterated that the district is working on inclusivity efforts

Some difficulties with reducing the disparity come from staff having different thoughts on student discipline, which come from the experiences they themselves had as children, Freiheit said.

As the agreement draws to a close, WAPS plans to work toward reducing the disparity by focusing on its inclusivity work, Freiheit said. District staff will continue to track suspension data after the agreement concludes, she said.

"I know our district has difficulties – not difficulties, but we just have issues, as we are all well aware of," Freiheit said. "And we're working to address those."

The MDHR does not require that districts with whom it has an agreement report the races of students who were suspended. However, many districts report their suspension rates with a breakdown by race. Freiheit said WAPS does not report the races of students who were suspended because the MDHR does not require the district

to do so. Freiheit verbally reported the races of students suspended in the 2020-2021 school year per the report to the MDHR at a March School Board meeting. The MDHR declined to comment for

To reduce the disparity, the district could develop ways to be held accountable for its equity work by collaborating with BI-POC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) community members and BIPOC groups that complete equity initiatives, Cunningham said. WAPS should implement anti-racist practices throughout the district, Cunningham said, from classrooms to hallways to lunchrooms, and be held accountable by those outside WAPS. "There is a justified lack of trust of the district for many BIPOC students, families and community members," she said. "Until the district accepts the fact that simply conducting studies on school climate, hosting presenters for professional development and/or putting action steps on paper is not enough, the lack of trust

will continue to exist." Education@winonapost.com



we're here to listen

Southeast Minnesotans experiencing a mental health crisis in may contact us at any time.

> CRISIS RESPONSE For Southeast Minnesota 844-274-7472