

Hyatt: Article on GMCS expulsions is ‘bad journalism’

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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District superintendent argues media outlet didn’t do their research, created their own narrative

When a non-profit online publication published a series of articles claiming that Gallup-McKinley County Schools is responsible for the majority of the state’s expulsions of Native American students from schools, GMCS Superintendent Mike Hyatt spoke out against the accusations.

The Dec. 21 article from the publication alleged the district has a quarter of New Mexico’s Native American students, but it also had “at least three-quarters of Native student expulsions in the state during the four school years ending in 2020.”

The article went on to explain that the reporter interviewed 80 people, and he studied data he received from the New Mexico Public Education Department, as every New Mexico school district must submit every disciplinary action to the NMPED.

The article focused on one Native American seventh-grade boy who was reportedly expelled from GMCS. In the article, the boy said that he was getting written up for “everything” before he was expelled – for being “off-task” to “playing on the school elevator” and a list of other items.

Hyatt took time during the Jan. 9 GMCS school board meeting to address the article.

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He began by stating the article was "bad journalism" and false. Then, he called the piece "an attack" on GMCS.

"... [The] unfortunate part about this is they're falsely attacking our staff, our teachers, our administration and stating that our people who live in this community, who are of a diverse nature in the first place, who live here and support our students and do their best to support our students and do our best to educate students, they're saying that they are making racial decisions when they implement discipline," Hyatt said.

During the meeting, Hyatt told the board members that the district had only had 15 expulsions in the last seven years.

According to the article, GMCS reported at least 211 expulsions in the four years between the 2016-2017 school year and the 2019-2020 school year.

But in an interview with the *Sun* on Jan. 20, Hyatt said that the number was incorrect. Besides the 15 students previously mentioned, the 196 other students were eventually allowed back to school.

He explained how the district reports its disciplinary actions to the NMPED. All New Mexico schools must submit their disciplinary actions in the Student Teacher Accountability Supporting System. STARS is where school districts record everything from their students' attendance to their disciplinary records.

The disciplinary section has categories and asks questions such as 'How many expulsions did you have? How many suspensions or long-term suspensions?'

But Hyatt said STARS falls a bit short when it comes to discipline. According to Hyatt, the form doesn't ask every question about discipline, and the discipline categories aren't clearly defined.

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“There’s nothing in the STARS manual that says ‘this is what an expulsion is,’ but in general an expulsion should have been – and as a district this is what we refer to now – an indefinite removal from school,” Hyatt said. “There’s no date for a student to return.”

Hyatt said the STARS manual’s lack of a definition could lead to different districts having different definitions for disciplinary categories. He said that is what happened at GMCS.

Each principal is responsible for reporting the disciplinary records for their school, and then a secretary at the district’s central office puts them into one big document for the district. Hyatt said that multiple definitions of expulsion and suspension were used, and many suspensions and long-term suspensions were marked down as expulsions, hence the larger number.

After hearing Hyatt speak on the subject during the latest school board meeting, GMCS board member Michael Schaaf voiced his opinion to the *Sun* about the mistake.

“We need to report the incidents correctly to the state,” Schaaf said. “But I think Mike Hyatt’s doing a great job. We’re going to support Mike.”

Hyatt said part of the problem was recently found in the district’s student handbook. In the handbook, a long-term suspension shared a similar definition to an expulsion. Hyatt said that’s where a lot of the confusion could’ve happened.

The 2022-2023 GMCS Student Behavior Handbook defines a long-term suspension as “a suspension from school for more than 10 consecutive school days.” A long-term suspension requires a due process hearing at the district level. Sometimes a student who has been long-term suspended can be placed in an “alternative program.”

Whereas an expulsion is an indefinite removal from school. According to the handbook, an expulsion requires a formal long-term suspension/expulsion due process hearing at the district level. A student who is expelled may be placed in an “alternative program.” An expelled student

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must return back to school if the due process hearing is delayed more than 10 days until a decision is made.

Hyatt said the mistake led to lots of misinformation, and made the data inapplicable when it comes to what each district in the state might define an expulsion. The article is actually what led the district to look into their data and discover the mistake.

"So when we looked at the data you're not comparing apples to apples across the state. You're comparing whatever that district's definition of that category is," Hyatt said.

The alleged incorrect data is what led Hyatt to the suspicion that the reporter wasn't going to be handling his story about GMCS correctly.

"When [he] received [the data from the NMPED, the reporter] started putting that together and he started asking me questions about the data," Hyatt said. "But he didn't ask it in a way like 'what is this data?,' it was almost like 'are you racist?' It wasn't a fair, unbiased question."

As previously stated, the article alleged 25% of the state's Native American students attend GMCS but at least 75% of the expulsions of Native American students came from the district.

But Hyatt argued that the amount of Native American students GMCS has skewed the data.

According to district records, the district had over 9,000 Native American students attending its schools in the 2020-2021 school year. Hyatt noted that in schools such as Crownpoint High School and Tohatchi High School, the Native American population greatly outnumbers other races.

Crownpoint High had 295 enrolled Native American students in the 2020-2021 school year, while only having two enrolled Caucasian students and seven Asian students. Tohatchi High had 265 enrolled Native American students, one African American student, and one Caucasian

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student in the 2020-2021 school year.

Hyatt argued that when the statistics are looked at properly, the angle that the article was trying to take doesn't hold up.

"You can quickly see how statistically, the narrative that they're trying to create falls flat. If they'd just done their homework [they would've seen that], but unfortunately they were just working out of ignorance," Hyatt said.

Hyatt said he felt that the reporter had already come to a conclusion about the data and what it said about GMCS. He refused to do an interview with the publication.

"It was obvious that he'd already come to the conclusion that he wanted because he felt he understood the data. When anybody approaches me with those types of questions, I don't respond to them," Hyatt said. "... I could already tell this is a story being created rather than being found."

As for the kid featured in the article, Hyatt said what was written made it sound as if the student was expelled from GMCS, when he was not. The student was allowed back to school, and even when he left the school district to attend a different one, he eventually came back to GMCS.

Hyatt said the student also had some trouble at the other district, but that GMCS welcomed him back, and allowed him to take summer classes.

SCHOOL BOARD SUPPORT

During the school board meeting the school board members backed up Hyatt's statements against the publication and showed their support for the superintendent.

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In an interview with the *Sun*, GMCS board President Christopher Mortensen restated his support for Hyatt and his comments against the publication.

“We want to make sure people understand that this isn’t impartial news. [Two New Mexico publications] have an ax to grind, they’re out for us, and it’s unfortunate,” Mortensen said. “...We don’t have time to deal with these guys, these bush-league media outlets that put stuff out there without really looking hard into it, doing real journalism work.”

The Sun did file a request for the public records from NMPED detailing GMCS’s disciplinary records on Jan. 20, but did not receive any materials from NMPED by press time.

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