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BUSED AND BROKEN

A TAMPA BAY TIMES SPECIAL REPORT

Years of district policy threw a middle school into turmoil. Is the problem solved, or should the district rethink busing?

STORY BY MARLENE SOKOL | PHOTOS BY EVE EDELHEIT

BRANDON

First she noticed the gates around the building, then the boys playing football shirtless at the bus stop. Kenyatta McClairen had a bad feeling about her 11-year-old son's new school.

Her instincts were right.

Before her son could make it to class on his first day, one boy grabbed his neck while the other tried to snatch his cubic zirconia earring. Afraid of

his attackers, he just gave it to them, the police report said.

The robbery didn't happen in the high-crime East Tampa neighborhood where McClairen and her children lived. It happened inside a school 12 miles away in Brandon, a bedroom community with 3,000-square-foot homes and backyard pools.

McLane Middle School, by some measures the most troubled school in Hillsborough County, has battled waves of violence and crime for the better part of a decade.

Rampant suspensions have cut down on class time, especially for McLane's black students, who test well below black children at other middle schools. Teacher ratings are unusually low, suggesting children who need the most help are being bused to the place least able to provide it. And while behavior has improved under an energetic new principal, large-scale busing from Tampa's poorest neighborhoods — a root cause of the disorder — remains in effect.

What happened at McLane is partly a function of the way society's problems spill into big, urban school systems. But a closer look reveals Hillsborough school leaders helped create McLane's problems years ago, then let them fester.

As part of a well-intended move to foster racial integration, officials allowed magnet schools to claim most of the middle school seats in East Tampa and import their students from other areas. The policy pushed large concentrations of poor East Tampa students into a faraway school

that had no connection to their neighborhood and a staff weakened by too many under-performing teachers.

That led to what experts say was an entirely foreseeable reign of chaos that the district let stand in the face of alarming headlines and statistics. Over the past decade — culminating with an especially troubling 2013-14 academic year — thousands of 11-, 12- and 13-year-old kids found themselves in a middle school that failed them.

» See **BUSED AND BROKEN, 8A**

Last year, records show:

- An average of one student per week left McLane in handcuffs.
- Nearly 14 percent of teachers were rated "unsatisfactory," nearly nine times the district average and more in number, nine, than any other public school in Florida.
- McLane's state test scores lagged well behind the district average for middle schools. And its black students, who comprise slightly more than half the school, performed 10 to 20 percentage points worse than their black peers across the county.
- McLane students were three times more likely than those at other Hillsborough middle schools to receive out-of-school suspensions and six times more likely to be referred for expulsion or change in placement, with many problems occurring on long bus rides.
- McLane led the county with 35 expulsion cases, eclipsing schools twice its size. The school record: 51 in 2007. Black students were most affected, with far more cases in the past three years than at any other middle school.

Acting superintendent Jeff Eakins, who lives in Brandon, said he doubts McLane was as constantly chaotic as

some describe. But he acknowledged “pockets of occurrences, sometimes on a daily basis” that created stress for students and teachers.

Others who experienced it describe the school differently.

“It was kind of a shock to the senses,” said Hillsborough County sheriff’s Deputy Chad Keen, who became McLane’s resource officer in early 2014. “I came in thinking, ‘How bad can this be? I was in middle school once.’ I wasn’t here on campus but 30 minutes and there was already a huge fight breaking out in the main office.”

Reading teacher Margery Singleton said she left abruptly in late 2013 after bullies threatened a seventh-grader in her class. She tried to lock them out, but another student let them in. She recalls seeing her student tremble and knowing his tormenters would be waiting for him later.

“I think about McLane a lot. It’s something that is burned into my psyche,” Singleton said.

“I couldn’t take it any more. I needed to separate myself. I’ve never seen anything like it.”



Built on a quiet street a short walk from Brandon High, McLane opened a century ago as “Brandon School.” It was later named for Eldridge Franklin McLane, a principal there for more than 30 years.

A promotional YouTube video, posted on the district website in recent weeks, highlights McLane’s history and its robotics and technology program — a point of pride for more than 100 high-achieving students who are separated from the others for their core classes.

All county schools were affected by court-ordered busing for integration that began in the 1970s.

What followed was a collision of events and agendas.

After U.S. District Judge Elizabeth Kovachevich lifted the busing order in 2001, Hillsborough could no longer assign students to schools based on race.

But the district still wanted diversity. So it turned to a popular tool of voluntary integration — magnet pro-

grams that would draw middle-class students to the inner city. MaryEllen Elia, as head of the district’s magnet office — years before she was named superintendent in 2005 — enthusiastically embraced the concept.

To encourage inner-city kids to enroll in largely white schools after 2001, the district designed a voluntary choice system.

Two problems: Not enough inner-city families opted to send their kids to the suburbs. And magnets often displace children who live closest to the schools.

With magnet programs in every middle school in mostly black East Tampa, administrators scrambled to find seats for thousands of children.

McLane was not the only middle school tapped to receive displaced students. Mann Middle in Brandon also became a destination, as did Madison and Monroe in South Tampa.

The effects varied as busing patterns shifted, but, judging by discipline statistics, McLane saw the worst of it.

Parents and police reports describe gang-influenced students pressuring others into acting as drug mules. Former teachers say students swore at them to establish “street cred” and treated an arrest or suspension as a badge of honor. Substitutes avoided the school.

“You’re more of a juvenile officer than a teacher,” said Devin Irvin, 28, a onetime McLane student who taught physical education there last spring.

Some years were better than others. Discipline improved after Frank Oliver, a former Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive back, became principal in 2009.

Speaking at a teacher dismissal hearing in 2011, Oliver said, “McLane is a tough school, has been a tough school, and we’ve put things together where the culture has changed.” A student survey showed the school felt safer.

But those numbers soon headed south. McLane made headlines in 2013 after someone filled a hall with pepper spray, sending dozens to hospitals. Today, viewers who click on the district’s new promotional video on YouTube see clips about the pepper spray incident as well.

When Keen, the school resource officer, came on the job in January 2014, “flash mob fights” involving hundreds of kids were happening at arrival and dismissal. They would kick and shove any adult who got in their way. “It’s almost like the worst kind of riot you can imagine on TV,” he said.

A 2014 survey asked teachers at McLane if “students at this school follow rules of conduct.” Three percent agreed, by far the lowest number among more than 200 Hillsborough schools.

The *Tampa Bay Times* asked to interview Elia about McLane and the magnet school policies in force during her tenure before she left her job as school superintendent, and again last week. She did not respond to any of the requests.

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Nothing provides a more powerful window into McLane at its worst than Sheriff’s Office reports for the 2013-14 school year:

Kids contending with homelessness and learning disabilities. Some students arming themselves out of fear. Others threatening to punch an assistant principal, shoot a student or start a riot. A teacher accused of trying to steal school furniture.

A 12-year-old girl tussled with a civics teacher over a cellphone, trashed the classroom and left school in handcuffs, according to one report, declaring, “I don’t give a f--- what you say, I want my phone.”

Weeks later, two students were arrested on charges they attacked a boy in the bathroom for his cellphone. Both of their mothers told the *Tampa Bay Times* their children had learning difficulties.

A special education student — 12 years old, weighing 80 pounds — was caught with an open knife in his black-and-yellow Batman backpack. He “admitted to bringing the knife to school to scare someone if they tried to jump him.” After his arrest, he got a 10 day out-of-school suspension.

Another student was charged with trespassing, accused of returning to school after being suspended the day before. It turned out he was a run-

away who slept under the bleachers at Brandon High. Another report said he kicked in the office air conditioner and bit a chunk out of the squad car seat when Keen arrested him a month later.

Students were accused of assaulting teachers. Two were arrested after another 12-year-old was caught with a blade, or “shank.” He was giving his belongings to a friend when it fell to the ground. The friend, searched to see if he was armed, was carrying marijuana.

The defining moment of 2013-14 came on Feb. 25, when an afternoon crowd at the bus ramp became so violent that Keen used a Taser on two 14-year-old girls who were fighting.

A probe struck the girl who was on top, and that stopped the fight. The girl on the bottom pushed past Keen, ran home and was later arrested.

Keen took the first girl to the office, where he removed the Taser probe and a nurse treated the puncture wound.

She was arrested too.

Sheriff’s officials issued a news release lauding Keen’s actions, and the event became a catalyst for change.

Security cameras went up. Sheriff’s cars descended on McLane at dismissal time. The school issued nearly 100 out-of-school suspensions in March, followed by more than 120 each in April and May.

The message: Gangs and bullies would not rule McLane.

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Opponents of busing say the practice creates a physical and psychological distance between a school and the community it serves. In East Tampa, where poverty contributes to often stressful home lives, the relationship is that much more important — and precarious.

It doesn’t help when the school is 12 miles away from home.

“It does create a two-community school,” Eakins said. “And if you are going to create a two-community school, you have got to figure out a way to make one community out of it, and that is the challenge that McLane has had over the years. That absolutely can be done. But you have

to take some extra measures — and sometimes extraordinary measures — to bring those communities together.”

Parents of students involved in the expulsion cases said they felt alienated from the school and had trouble getting clear information. Some said their children, once deemed disruptive, were targets for arbitrary discipline.

Timeka Bowles, whose son was moved to an alternative school after he and a friend were accused of shoving a teacher, said McLane called her over minor infractions. “Like, he had a rubber band on his wrist. I said, ‘For real?’ Some of the things were so petty.”

Kasanthian Smith, who had two sons transferred out of McLane, said the older one was suspended for chewing gum.

Principal Dina Langston, who took over in November 2013, said school officials communicated their concerns clearly with parents. She can’t imagine a child suspended for chewing gum, she said; even the idea of suspending for dress code is a stretch.

More likely, she said, the children had been warned and refused to wear the uniforms staff keep at the office. “Then they get disrespectful, so something that started over something simple turns into disrespectful and willful disobedience — ‘You can’t tell me what I will or won’t do.’”

Some East Tampa parents said they didn’t know how their kids even wound up at McLane. “Why do they commute the kids way out there? It’s crazy,” said Jesstina Burden, whose son was transferred from McLane after the same incident as Bowles’ son. “All these schools they pass. I don’t understand.”

Some said their kids had learning or behavioral issues that, in their opinion, were not addressed properly.

And they often got in trouble on the bus. Smith said she got a call at 9 a.m. saying her son was being suspended for “horseplay.” Through 2013-14, McLane reported 350 bus referrals, a pace comparable to this year, though overall discipline numbers are down.

Parents said they didn’t trust the school, even as they admitted their kids violated school policy and sometimes the law.

Smith, whose younger son was

arrested on a drug possession charge, acknowledged he was on probation at the time and later developed a drug problem. But the day of his arrest, she said, he was wearing a borrowed jacket. She believed him when he said he was not high.

Ultimately, she said, it’s impossible to know how many of his problems were related to school.

What she does know: “They were drilling them with so much negativity and making them feel like they’re worth nothing. And they feel like they’re nothing. And us as parents, we’re left with, we don’t know what to do.”

While no one wants to give up on a child, teachers said they sometimes encountered students who simply could not function, and the majority who wanted an education suffered as a result.

“One of the hardest parts is, these are kids,” Keen said. “And I think a lot of times when these things are happening, it’s hard to remember that. Because kids shouldn’t be acting that way.”

The fact that their neighborhoods were home to rival gangs makes the job harder. “We have kids with tattoos already with ‘Rest In Peace, So-and-So,’” Keen said. “That’s what a lot of fights start from. Someone says (something) negative about their friend who was killed. Fight’s on.”

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At community meetings in Hillsborough and nationwide, civil rights activists increasingly invoke the phrase “school-to-prison pipeline.” The theory holds that schools discipline black students more frequently and harshly through zero-tolerance policies and racial bias, setting them on a path toward the criminal justice system.

A complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights alleges Hillsborough not only over-disciplines black students, but also gives them an inferior education.

At D-rated McLane, a number of grim statistics support those allegations. Nearly 90 percent of last year’s expulsion cases involved black students, who make up 52 percent of the school.

Sixteen percent of McLane's black eighth-graders were reading at grade level, compared with 62 percent of its white eighth-graders. Districtwide, 35 percent of black eighth-graders and 68 percent of white eighth-graders read at grade level.

Officials who created the McLane situation, and experts outside the district, say what happened there did not arise from discrimination. Rather, they say, students were collateral damage in a war of competing interests as the district embraced magnet schools decades ago.

Starting in the 1990s, East Tampa's middle schools — Young, Franklin, Ferrell, Orange Grove and Williams — became specialty schools offering curricula in science and technology, criminal justice and the performing arts. Later, Ferrell and Franklin became single-gender schools.

The middle magnet schools choose their students through a lottery system that is weighted based on ZIP code, income and other factors designed to create a diverse student body. But, as with the choice program, families must apply. If they do not, or if they apply and do not get in, the children are put on a bus to McLane or another school.

The choice program, rolled out in 2004, was intended to maintain the diversity court-ordered busing had created. The idea was that urban families would send their children to suburban schools in hopes of giving them the best education.

But officials were way off in predicting how many would take part. "Many parents, because of where they live and where they work, even if it's a failing school, their kids are going to go there," said Bill Person, then-director of pupil administrative services.

Person, now retired, said he tried to warn his bosses that thousands of middle school students needed seats. But they were slow to respond. And when they tried to convert some magnets to neighborhood schools, they met with resistance from parents who didn't want to move their kids.

"We were not willing to make the hard decisions to reclaim seats in the inner city," he said.

The district made room for some

East Tampa middle school students by converting James and B.T. Washington to K-8 schools. But both were overrun by students. Books, computers and bathrooms were scarce. Expulsion cases were in the double digits. That plan was short-lived.

There was talk of building a new middle school near Ybor City. But that has yet to happen.

When told what became of McLane, Person said: "We always thought this was temporary. We never thought it would still be going on after 10 years."

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Scholars say it's not unusual for districts to create troubled schools as they pursue other, often noble objectives.

"Educational policy is like an architectural dig. You have layers of reforms on top of each other," said Chester Finn, former U.S. assistant secretary of education and now a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.

He's not against magnets. They're "something to be applauded," he said. "It means some children are getting a good education and achieving their goals." But "when you ordain that some schools will be successful, the poor and broken ones tend to do worse."

The contrast can be found everywhere, including Pinellas County, where the expansion of fundamental and magnet schools has attracted children of the most ambitious parents.

"Everyone knows that school that nobody wants to send their kids to," said Kara Kerwin, president of the Center for Education Reform, which advocates for charters and vouchers. "For me it's why the education reform movement was born."

But the result can be a downward spiral. As families find alternatives — nearly 300 kids zoned for McLane attend charters — schools get bad reputations that compound the exodus.

Experts say a key factor is the concentration of poor students.

At their worst, said author and University of Missouri professor Bruce Biddle, high-poverty schools "are rife with crime, rife with alienation and rife with youngsters left behind by society. They have been brutalized by the educational system and they know it. They

wind up taking it out on the school and taking it out on each other.”

As for teachers, Biddle said, “you have young, inexperienced people who spend a year there and they flee.”

Irvin, the P.E. teacher, said as a young black man with family members who had been in prison, he tried to reach out to his students at McLane.

“They’re just so deep into the whole culture, the society, they can’t see five or 10 years down the line,” he said.

“When you’re at that middle school age, it’s all about impressing. You want to fit in, you want to be cool. And if being cool means cussing out your teacher and making sure everybody sees and hears about it, then that’s what you do.”

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Soon after she took over as principal for the retiring Oliver, Langston, 43, vowed to remake McLane from top to bottom. She got support from someone in the district who knew East Tampa well — area director Owen Young, a former principal of Middleton High.

School officials say the results are dramatic and encouraging.

Langston dismissed six poorly performing teachers at year’s end. Others left voluntarily.

She asked the whole faculty to read Eric Jensen’s *Teaching With Poverty in Mind*. The book makes a case that, while students’ brains are susceptible to harm from poverty, they can also soak up the good from a great school with caring teachers.

Langston relaxed the dress code. She made discipline and class routines more consistent.

Each class has a “reflection” desk labeled in fluorescent green, a place to cool down after a blow up.

Dismissals are staggered so not everyone is at the bus ramp at once. Enrollment is down from about 900 last year to 803, including 344 from the city.

Discipline referrals dropped from 1,647 in the first half of 2013-14 to 640 this year. Some of the change reflects a new, less punitive approach when kids are tardy. Nearly 40 percent were

for eighth-graders, who seem “a little bit more hard-headed in trying to get underneath what we’re trying accomplish, that this is a place of learning,” Langston said.

Attendance is up. And arrests have stopped almost entirely, said Keen, who, despite his harsh initiation, considers McLane a good school. Kids turn in drugs and stolen phones. They shake his hand. When he first arrived they would call him “F-12,” a profane slang term for police.

To reach out to East Tampa parents, McLane held a conference night at Middleton. Langston has driven sick children home. She’s on the phone with parents late at night when they can’t find their kids.

She drove into the city to meet a morning bus parked because four students were “acting the fool.” She loaded them in her SUV and carted them to school.

“I’ll do whatever I can, probably more than what I should have to,” she said. “But the parents are learning and gaining respect for me. It sends a message to them in the community that we care about your child. Kids won’t learn if they don’t think you care.”

It’s exactly the right response, said Eakins. He suggested the district can do more, maybe send McLane teachers to East Tampa after school or on Saturdays for programs at Middleton.

Langston can’t undo the past, Eakins said. “All she can do is right the ship and have the right type of attitude in doing that. This can’t be a police-state school. This has got to be one where kids are advocated for.”

The transition is far from complete.

On Feb. 27, deputies made three arrests after a fight began on a bus leaving McLane. Two girls were brawling on the moving bus, officials said. They continued after the bus pulled over and a deputy tried to break them up. A 12-year-old boy egged the crowd on, yelling “fight” and “f--- the police.”

In March, officials say a former student, who had been arrested on charges he issued a bomb threat, came back to McLane and tried to give Keen a fake name. He was charged with trespassing.

But even some parents whose

kids have had trouble appreciate the improvements this year.

That group includes Laquanda Watson, whose daughter was jumped on an October day when Keen was busy breaking up other fights. “There’s not as many conflicts as last year,” Watson said. And her daughter is benefiting from tutoring.

Results are mixed with the new teachers as well.

Rachel-Star Goldstein — hired fresh out of college to teach disabled students, although her certificate was in social studies — saw so many behavior problems she wrote a detailed letter to Elia.

The events, most in September, included fights in class and a student urinating in the hall. Administrators were slow to respond, she wrote. Once, hearing a student discussing a drug deal, she called the office. The student noticed and told her he knew what kind of car she drove.

Langston said she cannot have a child arrested for just discussing a crime. She denied administrators were slow to assist Goldstein. When something happens, she said, “We run.”



Like Oliver before her, Langston is pleased with her progress and looks forward to favorable numbers in this year’s surveys.

But it’s impossible to predict how long the improvements will last — or the long-term effects on kids who were pushed out or under-served in years past.

Keen no longer sees gang graffiti, a positive sign. But when he returns from a week off he finds “F-12” etched in the bathroom mirrors. In his view, Langston and her team are working to exhaustion. If they ease up or leave, the school could backslide.

He sees busing as an ongoing challenge, as kids are less likely to take pride in the school.

Young, the area director, disagreed, predicting they will behave as they grow to appreciate McLane. “We have kids around the country who are not magnet kids who get on a bus to go to a culture that they really own,” he said.

“If you love them and if that’s at the core of how they feel and what they

expect from the leader, then they will have no problem getting on a bus and going to McLane. I believe strongly that the school is moving in that direction.”

Eakins, new in his job as the district’s leader, said he is keeping an open mind about McLane.

“It’s going in a good direction,” he said. “But we always ask ourselves: What’s in best interest of the students? If we feel like the path we’re moving down isn’t sustainable, then we owe it to the students and the families to always look for other solutions.”

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Contact Marlene Sokol at (813) 226-3356 or msokol@tampabay.com. Follow @marlenesokol.

About this story

Information for this report came from yearly expulsion and change-of-placement reports the Hillsborough County School District gives the School Board; student and teacher surveys; discipline data submitted as part of an ongoing federal civil rights investigation; student test and teacher evaluation scores maintained by the Florida Department of Education; and more than 130 Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office reports. The *Tampa Bay Times* also interviewed more than 30 former McLane teachers, students and parents, along with current and former school district administrators.

High number of expulsions

Most expulsion or change of placement cases, 2013-2014

McLane Middle	35
Giunta Middle	17
Greco Middle	17
Monroe Middle	17
Van Buren Middle	16
Wharton High	15
Madison Middle	13
Shields Middle	14
Dowdell Middle	13
Chamberlain High	12

Most cases, 2005-2014

McLane Middle	252
Eisenhower Middle	211
Chamberlain High	211
Jennings Middle	201
Shields Middle	200
Madison Middle	193
Greco Middle	184
Blake High	178
Dowdell Middle	157

Source: Hillsborough County School Board agenda reports

Not biding the rules

Of more than 200 schools in the Hillsborough district, here are the 10 lowest rates of agreement when teachers were asked if they agreed that “Students at this school follow rules of conduct.” The source is Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL), an annual survey the district considers a valid and reliable instrument.

All Hillsborough schools	71%
All middle schools	57
Mendez Exceptional Center	17
Sligh Middle School	17
Oak Park Elementary School	14
Memorial Middle School	13
Turkey Creek Middle School	11
Chamberlain High School	9
Brandon Alternative School	7
Van Buren Middle School	7
Carver Exceptional Center	6
McLane Middle School	3

Participation rate was 80 percent districtwide; 71 percent at McLane.

Source: Hillsborough County School District annual survey

Unsatisfactory teachers

Schools with the most teachers in Hillsborough rated unsatisfactory, 2013-2014

McLane Middle	9 (13.8%)
Hillsborough High	8 (7.1%)
King High	7 (6.1%)

Wharton High	7 (5.1)
Mort Elementary	6 (8%)
East Bay High	6 (4.6%)
Shore Elementary	5 (14.3%)
Young Middle	5 (11.1%)
Jefferson High	5 (4.5%)
Leto High	5 (4.3%)
Districtwide	225 (1.6%)

Source: Florida Department of Education

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• Read police reports from some of the incidents at McLane referenced in this story.

At tbtim.es/g8z

“It means some children are getting a good education and achieving their goals. (But) when you ordain that some schools will be successful, the poor and broken ones tend to do worse.”

Chester Finn,
former U.S. assistant secretary of education, talking about magnet schools



Dismissal time at McLane Middle School used to be chaotic and sometimes violent. A new routine is among steps this year to calm things down.

“Why do they commute the kids way out there? It’s crazy. All these schools they pass. I don’t understand.”

Jesstina Burden, parent of a former McLane student



Photos by EVE EDELHEIT | Times

“I’ll do whatever I can, probably more than what I should have to. ... Kids won’t learn if they don’t think you care,” says McLane Middle School principal Dina Langston, here talking with a student on the McLane campus in January.



“One of the hardest parts is, these are kids. And I think a lot of times when these things are happening, it’s hard to remember that. Because kids shouldn’t be acting that way.”

Hillsborough County sheriff’s Deputy Chad Keen, above, who became McLane’s resource officer in early 2014



“If you are going to create a two-community school, you have got to figure out a way to make one community out of it But you have to take some extra measures — and sometimes extraordinary measures — to bring those communities together.”

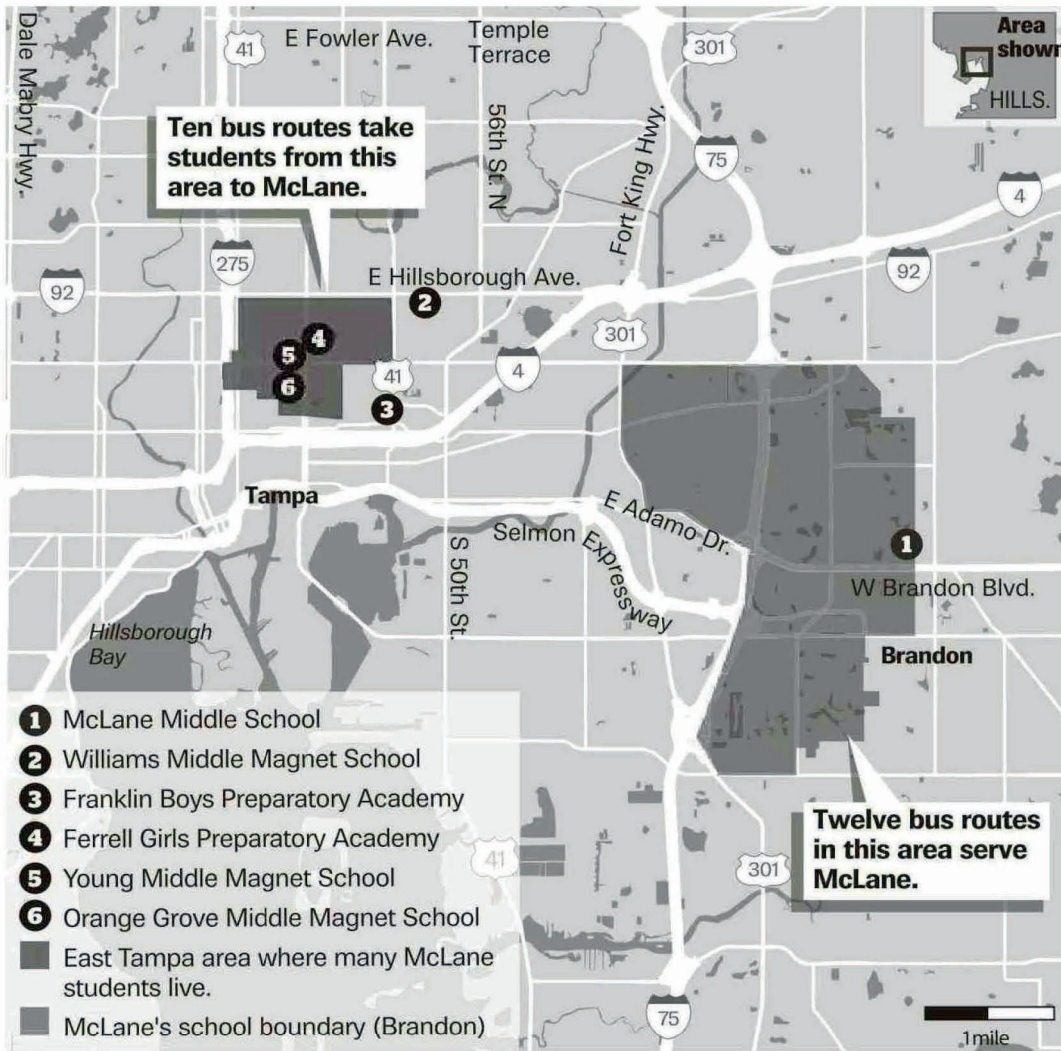
Acting Hillsborough schools superintendent Jeff Eakins



Dina Langston, who has been principal at McLane Middle School since November 2013, has relaxed the school's dress code and made discipline less punitive and more consistent, and there has been a sharp decline in discipline referrals.

The long commute

Every school day, hundreds of students are bused from East Tampa to McLane Middle in Brandon, about 12 miles away. The commute is made necessary by the Hillsborough County School District's decision to turn East Tampa middle schools into magnets, keeping scores of children out of their neighborhood schools. The long bus rides to and from the school contribute to McLane's discipline problems.



Source: Times research

Times