High school blacks ‘not measuring up’

By ROBB JOHNSON
Capital Times Staff Writer

You can see the pain in Betty Franklin's face as she looks over the numbers. The executive director of the Madison Urban League doesn't like what she sees.

Black students in the Madison Metropolitan School District's high schools are not achieving grades equal to those of other students in the district.

That was the conclusion of a report prepared by Janet Baeur, a University of Wisconsin-Madison social work student who interned at the Madison Urban League last year.

Bauer collected the grade-point averages and studied records of all black students in regular education programs in the four Madison high schools for the fall semester of 1988-89.

"It definitely demonstrates that black students as a group are not achieving on a par with any of the other students, whether they are Hispanic, Asian, or white," Franklin said. "Our children are not measuring up."

The report also concluded that:
- Black students are disproportionately represented in Exceptional Education classes.
- Black students are disproportionately represented in the number of student suspensions.
- Black student enrollment in high-level math and science courses is low.
- There is a disproportionately low number of black teachers.

Franklin, who also heads the Committee on the Academic Achievement of Black Students, said the group's main goal is to improve the academic achievement of black students in Madison's public schools.

"Out of the 22,000 students in the district, there are only about 1,800 blacks," Franklin said. "They can really get lost."

Black students comprise about 10 percent of Madison's elementary school students, 11 percent of the middle school students and six percent of the high school students.

According to the report, black students were low achievers in all grades at East and La Follette high schools; in the 9th and 10th grades at Memorial; and in the 9th, 10th and 11th grades at West.

"The grades of black students are a real concern," said Madison Superintendent of Schools James Travis. "But we have to be careful because it would be a real disservice to leave the impression that this report characterizes all black students. Obviously there are some very successful black students."

Franklin said she was also concerned that many black students are funneled into exceptional education classes. Often those students never get off that track during their entire public school experience.

"I think some schools are more notorious than others," she said. "A minority kid who is significantly behind in terms of academics also demonstrates different behaviors going to be categorized."

The whole process starts in kindergarten, according to Franklin. "The parents I've talked to don't really understand," she said. "The parents are very threatened. They sign any paper the district says is in their best interest."