

# Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion

- Youth who are suspended or expelled are at a greater risk for academic failure, school drop-out, and incarceration (Sundius & Farneth, 2008).
- The use of suspensions and expulsions may propel some students who already display antisocial behavior to delinquency by placing them in situations where there is little or no parental supervision and in increased likelihood of socializing with other peers with similar behaviors (NASP, 2008).
- Schools with higher rates of suspension tend to demonstrate lower academic quality, pay little attention to school climate, and receive poor ratings on school governance measures (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).
- Exclusionary discipline measures are inequitably used. Students who are male, who are African-American, or who have disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than are other students (Sundius & Farneth, 2008).

Despite their wide-spread use, disciplinary exclusions are largely ineffective in reducing problem behaviors. Research shows that the rate of students who have been suspended on multiple occasions ranges between 35 and 42 percent of all students. This suggests that suspensions do not serve as a deterrent for misbehavior. In fact, suspensions may reinforce the use of problem behaviors for students who wish to escape or avoid school (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Many school administrators use exclusionary disciplinary measures not because they wish to remove students from the opportunities to learn, but because they need to do something and they don't know what else to do (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

## Implementing Alternative Consequence Strategies

Many schools use alternatives to suspension and expulsion that include administrative detentions and Saturday school. According to Peterson (2006), administrative teams – especially those that involve a larger school-wide team – can identify creative alternatives for exclusionary discipline procedures. When these alternatives are based on the culture of the school, it is more likely that they will have support of the teachers, staff, students, and parents. All the alternatives should be within the framework of moving away from punishment and meeting students' behavioral needs. The use of one alternative alone will not be helpful; however, there is value when a variety of alternatives are implemented based on students' needs (Peterson, 2006).

The following examples, based on the work of Reece Peterson, offer alternatives a school might choose to incorporate. This is not an all-inclusive list. Schools may generate a larger list from which to select alternatives. However, all of the options should emphasize supporting and meeting students' behaviors and needs. Implementing a variety of strategies is the most effective way to provide the best outcomes (Peterson, 2006).

## Defining Zero Tolerance, Suspension, and Expulsion

**Zero tolerance** was originally defined as consistently enforced suspension and expulsion policies in response to weapons, drugs, and violence in the school setting. Over time, however, the concept of zero tolerance has grown to refer to policies that require typically harsh predetermined consequences, such as suspension or expulsion, for a wide variety of rule violations including tardiness and truancy, disruptive behavior, noncompliance, and insubordination (NASP, 2008; Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

**Suspension** “refers to the relatively short-term removal of students from school for a disciplinary infraction” (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

**Expulsion** “refers to the procedural removal of a student, for a longer period of time, typically involving a decision by the superintendent and the school board” (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

## Ten Examples of Alternative Disciplinary Consequences (Peterson, 2006)

- **Mini Courses.** Schools develop short, stand-alone units or modules on topics related to various types of inappropriate behavior. Module activities may include readings, videos, workbook tasks, tests, and oral reports. The modules are designed to teach awareness, knowledge, or skills about targeted areas in order to promote students' behavioral change. Topics may include: inappropriate language, sexual harassment, alcohol/drug use, conflict resolution, and social skill development. Once created, students are assigned to complete the appropriate modules based on their offense.
- **Parent Involvement/Supervision.** Parents are invited to help school administrators identify ways they can provide closer supervision of their children while in school or be more involved with their children's schooling. One example might be to *suspend* the student's parents *into* school. Parents would willingly sit with their child while their child is in school. While this example may not always be possible for parents, it could be a valuable option. Better communication and frequent contacts between parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as coordinated behavior change approaches, can be very useful and could be formalized into a disciplinary procedure.
- **Counseling.** For certain offenses, students are assigned to counseling sessions with appropriately trained professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors, school psychologists). These professionals can engage in problem-solving activities with the student, identify areas of needed skill development, and provide a chance for students to work through identified problems, including personal issues that interfere with learning.
- **Community Service.** Students are assigned community service tasks, with appropriate supervision outside of school hours, in programs or agencies. Tasks include helping at other schools, clean-up crews, or working in community agencies. These kinds of activities strengthen students' ties with the community and develop positive relationships with other adults.
- **Behavior monitoring.** A variety of strategies are implemented to closely monitor behavior. These techniques include behavior check sheets for teachers, students, and parents; behavior charts; and student feedback sessions about behavior. These strategies result in positive feedback from teachers and parents when appropriate behavior occurs. These strategies also result in opportunities to reinforce appropriate behavior. Eventually students use self-monitoring techniques to maintain the learning.
- **Restitution.** Students are assigned to provide work that would repair or restore environments they have damaged. This includes cleaning up graffiti or repairing acts of vandalism. This also includes an option of having students select (or be assigned) other related projects to clean or make attractive in the school environment.
- **Behavior Contracting/Problem Solving.** Develop a negotiated behavior contract with students, which includes specifics about what students will do, what adults will do, and the planned consequences. Contracts include reinforcing consequences for completion of the contract, and consequences for continuing problem behavior. These are created individually for specific students, and consequences are negotiated and agreed to by both parties (student and adult).
- **Alternative Programming.** For some students, especially at the secondary level, it is possible to identify changes in students' schedule, classes, or programs that avoid problem environments or situations, but still permit continued access to curriculum and school. This includes independent study, work experience, alternative location, alternate times, or other creative programming alternatives. Such changes should be specific to individual students' needs and permit credit accrual and progress toward graduation. Appropriate procedures must be followed regarding change of placement for students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- **Appropriate In-school Suspension.** When students are required to go to an alternative in-school environment, it is important to continue academic and other instruction in the alternative environment. It is also important to have a focus on solving the problem that resulted in students being sent to this environment. The alternative setting must be carefully managed to avoid permitting students to "escape" or avoid class. Clearly-defined procedures for returning to class are contingent on students' progress or behavior. Teachers and students may need to make

changes to address the problem that resulted in the change of environment. Teachers need to address the issues that resulted in the action, as removal of students may be reinforcing to the sending teachers.

- **Coordinated Behavior Plans.** Some students need the creation of a structured, coordinated behavior support plan specific to the student and based on the function of the targeted behavior. The support plan focuses on increasing desirable behavior, replacing inappropriate behaviors, reinforcing the appropriate behavior, and withholding reinforcement of the targeted behavior. Data is used to determine if progress is being made and if further assessment or other intervention strategies need to be included.

## Reducing the Need for Suspension and Expulsion

In addition to alternative consequences, there are a variety of other preventative practices. These supports for behavior may also play a role in preventing inappropriate behavior from occurring before it becomes a discipline issue. Many, if not all, of the following supports should be in place to make a more sophisticated discipline code effective:

- **Gather data on behavior, which permits analysis and action.** Develop a school data system, which permits administrators or a building team to examine and use data about student behavior. Include office referral data; surveys of parents, staff and students; grade and academic achievement assessment data; and, other indicators of student involvement in school (e.g., attendance, tardiness, drop-out rate, rate of participation in school activities). Use this data to make and evaluate changes in policies and practices.
- **Create a caring and welcoming school environment.** Create a tone of belonging and valuing individuals. Make everyone feel welcome at school. The environment should be clean, engaging, and supportive of educational goals.
- **Create an explicit set of school values.** Establish a set of school values or character traits that support positive behavior and are understood and used by all staff in their work with students. It is important to provide school staff with language to communicate

these values to students and encourage teachers to find and provide support for expressions of these values in their day-to-day work with students.

- **Provide conflict de-escalation training.** Train all staff, especially teachers, in how to de-escalate conflict and avoid power struggles. This will help by keeping minor conflicts from getting to the point of being discipline problems.
- **Mediation programs.** Teach students and staff about nonviolent conflict resolution strategies, and permit students and staff to use and experience these in school related to significant school issues. Peer mediation may be one example, but could be expanded to include mediation of teacher-student conflicts.
- **Increase opportunities for positive reinforcement for appropriate student behavior.** Increase the amount of positive reinforcement that occurs in the building for any type of appropriate behavior by students. Make sure that all teachers work hard to identify, acknowledge, and strongly reinforce good behavior. Some schools have implemented positive office referral systems for good behavior, as well as special recognition/awards for behavior, that are parallel to their academic recognition activities.
- **Build communication and involvement with all parents.** Expand and improve communication with parents, particularly parents of students who are “at-risk.” Explore multiple options and opportunities to build relationships with parents and involve them with school in multiple ways.
- **Provide opportunities for building adult/student relationships.** Encourage staff to engage in conversations with students, to get to know them as individuals, and to share their own stories and beliefs.
- **Intervene when signs of behavioral issues first become apparent.** Proactively watch for warning signs that students are in trouble, and then take action to explore and address the problems before they get to the point of being discipline problems. Devise ways to screen students for problems (e.g., declining grades, poor attendance) and then take action.

- **School-wide discipline and behavior system.**  
Make sure that a common terminology and consistent approach to behavior is in place across all staff.  
Responsibilities related to behavior for all staff

should be identified, school-wide rules in place, and both positive and negative consequences understood and communicated.

By implementing prevention efforts and developing alternative consequences for suspension and expulsion, schools can reduce the number of students missing valuable academic instructional time, minimize the reach of the negative effects of suspension and expulsion, and meet the behavioral needs of the students they serve.

### Preventing Suspension and Expulsion through School-Wide Positive Behavior Support

The need for effective consequences that reduce or eliminate problem behaviors is only part of the struggle facing schools today. Research shows that schools have significant effects on school climate and student learning when they implement systemic changes to the approach to discipline and behavioral interventions. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2008), schools that implement effective strategies report reductions in office discipline referrals by 20 to 60 percent. Such efforts lead to increased academic engaged time and improved academic performance for all students. One such approach is commonly known as School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS). The philosophy of SWPBS is that when members of the school staff actively teach, expect, and acknowledge appropriate behavior, the proportion of students who display serious problem behaviors decreases and the school's overall climate improves (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

The three main components of SWPBS are prevention, multi-tiered support, and data based decision making. Effective prevention includes defining and teaching a set of school-wide behavioral expectations. For example, if the expectation for the school is "Respect," then it must be defined and taught so that everyone knows

what "Respect" looks like and/or sounds like in the hallways, cafeteria, classroom, etc. In addition, prevention includes a consistent system for frequently acknowledging and rewarding those who meet those school-wide expectations.

Establishing a consistent, multi-tiered continuum of consequences and supports for students who demonstrate problem behaviors is another critical element of SWPBS. Beyond developing predictable and business-like consequences for problem behaviors, schools implementing SWPBS develop supports for students such as small group social skills instruction, the Check-In/Check-Out Program, and the Check-And-Connect Program, to name a few. These programs are developed to provide increased levels of support for meeting school expectations for students who do not respond to the prevention efforts.

Finally, data based decision making is interwoven throughout SWPBS. Schools collect, summarize, and report data on a regular basis in order to design the most effective preventative and reactive supports (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

For more information on School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Systems in Pennsylvania, visit either the Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support Network at [www.PAPBS.org](http://www.PAPBS.org) or the PaTTAN website at [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net).

## References

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