

Examining the Research on Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions

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ALTERNATIVES TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

This paper is the second in a series of papers examining the issue of school suspensions and their correlation to student and school failure. Our first paper examined the research about the effectiveness of school suspensions. This paper expands on this by examining some of the research on alternatives to traditional out-of-school suspension. This work is relevant to both urban and suburban school districts who realize that school suspensions provide little benefit and who hope to find effective solutions that support students and the school community. The Center for Public Safety Initiatives is assisting several groups in Rochester in examining school disciplinary processes, and this research overview should inform the conversation.

Studies have shown that out-of-school suspension is not an effective answer for punishing students that misbehave. Many peer reviewed studies have concluded that out-of-school suspension harms students in many ways (reference Keaser, 1979; Pareses, 1999, and Arcia, 2007), by taking away their access to public education, by negatively labeling students throughout their school journey, and even by leading to future school failures. Also, because they do not provide any training to teach students more positive behaviors, suspensions do not generally help decrease the frequency of problem behaviors.

Out-of-school suspensions are not helping students; therefore, many schools are trying to find alternatives to school suspensions that will be beneficial to students. Some alternatives to out-of-school suspension include phone calls to parents or parent conferences, after-school detention, lunch detention, co-curricular activity suspension (sports or clubs), restitution (i.e. written apology), community service, and Saturday school. Schools are also realizing that school suspensions are not reducing the behavioral problems seen in students as it was aimed to do. Other approaches must be implemented to help reduce behavioral problems in students who violate school codes.

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School suspensions were implemented to reduce aggressive behavior in schools for the protection and safety of all the students in the school and to avoid disruption of well-behaved students' educational opportunities, however school suspensions are damaging to suspended students' education. Therefore, it is important to implement interventions in schools to prevent and reduce aggressions in school before they occur (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Some prevention programs that schools can implement include surveillance, deterrence, and psychosocial programs. The programs are meant to reduce interpersonal behaviors, such as fighting, hitting, bullying, verbal conflict, disruptiveness, and acting out. If schools are able to implement programs and interventions that teach students behaviors as alternatives to acting out, it could help reduce many behavioral issues that are seen in schools.

Schools are finding that aggression, bullying, and misbehavior are increasing in their schools, and in order to reduce those rates, another approach needs to be implemented. The Clayton County school district in Georgia found that in 2003, referrals to court and recidivism rates in their schools were increasing, and graduation rates were decreasing, with school suspensions not helping the students or school in any way (Teske, 2011). Clayton County started the School Referral Reeducation Protocol, which included three main rules. The first was that before suspensions, students and parents would receive a warning when the student first misbehaves. The second step is if a student offends again, the student would be referred to a conflict resolution workshop, and the third step would be if the student offends again, the student would be referred to the court. Each student is individually addressed for his or her behavior problems. Students can be referred to evidence-based treatment programs such as functional family therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy. This would give the student a chance to realize that she or he has gone against the school code, and it is his or her decision to make a change or face more consequences. After implementing these rules, evaluation results concluded that

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referrals to court were reduced by 6%, and the graduation rate increased by 20% by 2009 (Teske, 2011). The school realized that with those changes, it could cause a great positive change to their schools and help students in beneficial ways that traditional school suspension does not.

However, many researchers are finding that some prevention programs that are used as an alternative to suspensions are not showing better results compared to traditional school suspension. As Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, and Elias (2003) stated, prevention programs' main goal is for the students to boost their personal and social assets, but many of the programs do not seem to work, especially if those programs are short-termed and not focused. For example, they found that Social and Emotional Learning is only effective if it is implemented correctly. It was stated that this approach is most effective if implemented consistently from preschool to high school. It was found that it benefited students who were 2 to 7 years of age the most, so researchers recommend that schools use social and emotional learning beginning in preschool or elementary school.

Schools that change their policy even a little bit or implement a new discipline could make a positive difference. Osher, Bear, and Doyle (2010) examined three school disciplinary strategies. One of the school discipline strategies examined was called ecological approaches to classroom management, which is designed to increase the strength and quality of classroom activities. Another school discipline policy examined was school-wide positive behavior supports, which provides function-based interventions. In this model, students who show positive behavior are rewarded, and all students are taught rules and communication skills. Social and Emotional Learning is another school discipline that was examined, and the main focus of this strategy is to promote self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. It was concluded that proper implementation of the ecological approach was linked to academic achievement and with school-

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wide positive behavior. It was concluded that ecological approaches could reduce discipline referrals, aggression, and antisocial behaviors. Implementing Social Emotional Learning was also found to reduce aggression, disruptive behavior, antisocial behavior, and bullying and to increase prosocial behavior. This research demonstrates that if schools do not go straight to suspending students who do not follow the school code, the schools and students are able to benefit. There is a growing list of effective alternatives. Importantly, many of these involve school-wide teaching and modeling of prosocial behaviors combined with effective disciplinary procedures that maintain the students' education and teach them alternatives to their problem behavior.

Some alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, especially in-school suspensions, are shown to be very positive and beneficial to students and schools. Schools that have implemented new school disciplines and programs are showing positive results, and other studies have shown that interventions and taking steps before considering suspending students are valuable and helpful strategies. Another alternative to out-of-school suspension is Saturday School, and, depending on the school, the requirements vary. Patall (2010) stated that, "adding time to the school year or school day is at the top of the list of measures that have been hypothesized to improve achievement among U.S. students" (401). Some schools have extended school years or school days, such as Massachusetts, which introduced a pilot project to ten schools that extended school days. It was only a three-year program, as there were funding problems threatening to discontinue it. During those years, though, studies showed that the students with longer school days achieved higher tests scores. A group of charter schools in the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) extended school days for students in fifth to eighth grades. It also included half-day classes on Saturdays and during summer sessions for two to four weeks. Out of those charter

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schools, one school in particular which used this program showed that during the 2002-2003 school year, they were the sixth highest-performing school in the state (Patall, 2010).

Hillcrest High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, decided that students would benefit from Saturday school as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. The program has only existed for five years, but during those five years, it gained an excellent reputation. Before the program, the school had high suspension rates, and students were not allowed to make up work during suspension. With increasing problems because of out-of school suspensions, the school changed the way misbehaved students were dealt with. The principles that they agreed upon were that students must understand why they got in trouble, suspension must have an educational benefit, and, lastly, parents must be involved. With Saturday school, the school benefited in that daily attendance rates increased, and there were even decreases in tardiness (Mickler & Martin, 1989).

It should be noted that some limitations exist in applying these models to schools with various characteristics and needs. For instance, if a school or district struggles with attendance rates, Saturday school may not be well-attended, at least without intensive resources devoted to ensuring attendance. However, the overall principles of preventing misbehavior with general school education about proper behavior, ensuring even misbehaved students continue to receive instruction time, and teaching students who misbehave alternatives to their misbehavior are generally proven by research to be effective in any school. Implementation, of course, will vary by school. Several alternatives to out-of-school suspensions have been shown to be beneficial and show how it truly helps misbehaved students by allowing those students to not miss out on their right to education. There are many ways around out-of-school suspensions, and implementing a program to fit the school's needs can be very valuable if done properly.

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