

Ten Alternatives to Suspension

by Reece L. Peterson

The suspension or expulsion of students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) has been problematic and controversial. Requirements of IDEA, and case law before that, have indicated that long-term suspension or expulsion violate the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) guarantee for students with disabilities. Schools have struggled to meet these requirements, but the problems with suspension and expulsion are larger than issues of EBD or disability.

Today, many schools are rightfully concerned about the numbers of all types of students who are being suspended or expelled for their behavior. This concern is driven by the overrepresentation of some minority groups among those who are suspended or expelled from school (Wu, Pink, Crain & Moles, 1982; Townsend, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2001). Equally important is the emerging research that indicates that these consequences are not likely to change the inappropriate behavior of the students involved, nor do they serve to deter other students from engaging in the same behaviors (Skiba, Peterson & Williams, 1999, 1997). Instead, these consequences make the suspended student's academic progress more difficult, and they may increase the likelihood of the student dropping out of school or having other negative outcomes.

As a result, many schools are beginning to examine their school discipline policies with an eye to making them both more effective and less reliant on traditional exclusionary consequences. These changes may also help schools to better serve students with EBD. Schools that try to improve their discipline system ask the questions "What do we use in place of exclusionary consequences in our discipline policies?" and "What are some disciplinary consequences which might be more effective?" The examples that follow illustrate the kinds of actions that could be built into a school's formal

disciplinary code of conduct as part of an array of consequences for inappropriate behavior. Each of these examples has at least some research demonstrating positive behavioral-change outcomes for students, and is an opportunity to maintain or re-engage students in school rather than pushing them out of school. While additional information beyond that provided here will be needed for appropriate implementation, the examples below describe multiple promising alternatives to suspension:

- **Problem Solving/Contracting.** Negotiation and problem-solving approaches can be used to assist students in identifying alternative behavior choices. The next step should involve developing a contract that reminds the student to engage in a problem-solving process, and which includes reinforcers for success and consequences for continuing problem behaviors.
 - **Restitution.** In-kind restitution (rather than financial restitution, which often falls on the parents) permits the student to help to restore or improve the school environment either by directly addressing the problems caused by the student's behavior (e.g., in cases of vandalism students can work to repair things they damaged), or by having the student improve the school environment more broadly (e.g., picking up trash, washing lockers).
 - **Mini-courses or Skill Modules.** Short courses or self-study modules can be assigned as a disciplinary consequence. These should be on topics related to the student's inappropriate behavior, and should be designed to teach the student to have increased awareness or knowledge about the topic, thus facilitating behavior change. These modules might include readings, videos, workbooks, tests, and oral reports on a range of
- topics such as alcohol/drug use or abuse, strategies for conflict resolution, anger control strategies, social skills (e.g., getting along with peers, making behavior appropriate for the setting), and appropriate communication skills (e.g., appropriate and inappropriate language, how to express disagreement).
- **Parent Involvement/Supervision.** Parents should be invited to brainstorm ways they can provide closer supervision or be more involved in their child's schooling. Better communication and more frequent contacts between teachers and parents, as well as coordinated behavior change approaches, are very useful and could be formalized into a disciplinary consequence.
 - **Counseling.** Students may be required to receive additional supports or individual counseling from trained helping professionals (e.g., counselor, school psychologist) focused on problem solving or personal issues interfering with learning.
 - **Community Service.** Programs that permit the student to perform a required amount of time in supervised community service outside of school hours (e.g., volunteer at another school or an organization where supervision is available).
 - **Behavior Monitoring.** Closely monitor behavior and academic progress (e.g., self-charting of behaviors, feedback sessions for the student). Rewards could be provided for successful performance.
 - **Coordinated Behavior Plans.** Creation of a structured, coordinated behavior support plan specific to the student and based on a hypothesis about the function of the target behavior to be reduced. It should focus on increasing desirable behavior, and replacing inappropriate behaviors.

- **Alternative Programming.** Provide short- or long-term changes in the student schedule, classes or course content, or offer the option of participating in an independent study or work experience program. Programming should be tailored to student needs, and permit appropriate credit accrual and progress toward graduation. Change of placement or programming must be made by the IEP (Individualized Education Program) team for students with EBD or other disabilities.
- **Appropriate In-school Suspension.** In-school suspension that includes academic tutoring, instruction on skill-building related to the student behavior problem such as social skills, and a clearly defined procedure for returning to class contingent on student progress or behavior. The environment should be carefully managed to guard against using in-school suspension as a way to avoid attending classes.

Many of these will be familiar to teachers who have worked with students who have EBD and there is a promising research base for these alternatives. Other alternatives might also be generated. Some schools are already using some of these, but few are using very many of these, and fewer yet use these systematically as a coordinated behavior improvement strategy built into their disciplinary codes of conduct.

To make these alternative options work as a disciplinary consequence, some “prerequisites” may also be needed. A school climate supportive of positive behavior, efforts to build positive interactions, appropriate instruction, and ongoing close supervision may prevent behavior problems from growing to crisis proportions and requiring disciplinary consequences. Here are several examples of programs that support the previous alternatives to suspension:

- **Creating a Caring School Community and Climate.** Attention to patterns of good communication and problem solving, having clear patterns of authority and decision making, procedures for developing and implementing rules, helping students feel they belong and are welcome, good curriculum and instructional practices, and having a clean and positive physical environment.
- **Efforts to Build Adult-Student Relationships.** Programs offering opportunities for students to develop individual relationships with staff.
- **Increased Parent Involvement.** Programs which involve a variety of parents and community members in functions and activities within the school, communication about their children.
- **Character Education/ Consistent School Values.** Curriculum and organization features of schools that promote the development of fundamental values in children. Typically these list of desirable goals for student behavior.
- **Early Identification and Intervention.** Programs that permit systematic screening of students for potential behavior problems, and which provide interventions for the students identified as at “risk.”
- **Mediation Programs.** Programs that teach students about non-violent conflict resolution and permit students to use and experience these in school. Peer-mediation is one example.
- **Bullying Prevention and Intervention.** Programs that teach students about bullying behaviors and how they can be reported to teachers. Specific interventions are created for both bullies and victims.
- **Conflict De-escalation Training.** Programs that teach staff and students to recognize and to disengage from escalating conflict.
- **School-wide Discipline Program.** Programs that develop a common terminology and consistent approach to discipline across school staff. Responsibilities of students and staff are identified, consistency in rule

enforcement is increased, and consequences are identified for positive and negative behaviors occurring anywhere in school.

- **Positive Office Referrals/Recognition.** These “catch students being good” programs identify, reward, and celebrate individual students for appropriate behavior (e.g., attendance, being on-time, improving grades, meeting behavior goals).

Each of these “prerequisites” is also supported by a body of research which indicates positive promising affects on student behavior in school. If they are to be effective, these “foundations” must be implemented in such a way as to become a normal part of that school’s culture. They enable the “disciplinary alternatives” listed earlier to be effective by providing the context and skills for appropriate behavior. They may permit a substantial reduction in the use of suspension and expulsion as disciplinary options, and have the side effect of decreasing staff stress related to behavior, and increasing academic achievement for all students. They may also provide a way to reduce the involvement of students with emotional or behavioral disorders in the problems associated with suspension and expulsion.

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