Alternatives to Suspension

Joel Rosch and Anne-Marie Iselin

This document was prepared in conjunction with the 2010 NC Family Impact Seminar, *School Suspension: Research and Policy Options*, held April 27, 2010, at the North Carolina General Assembly.*

As demonstrated in the accompanying brief, *Research on School Suspension*, education research consistently shows that high rates of suspension are related to a number of negative outcomes for suspended students including elevated rates of school dropout, poor school climate, and low academic achievement.

Others have argued that out-of-school suspension contributes to what has been called the school-to-prison pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Ironically, some even argue that high suspension rates are not related to increased school safety (Skiba, Cohn, & Canter, 2004), especially if they contribute to increased crime in surrounding communities (Casella, 2001).

The purpose of this brief is to inform policymakers of the range of evidence-based practices that can be adopted to reduce suspension rates without burdensome costs to schools. Overall, research suggests that there are various ways to limit the use of suspension and to mitigate its negative effects. These include programs that (1) prevent disruptive behaviors that lead to suspension, (2) offer alternatives to out-of-school suspension, and (3) mitigate the impact of suspension.

(1)   Programs that prevent disruptive behaviors:

Research indicates there are a number of evidence-based programs that appear to be effective at reducing school discipline problems. It would benefit students, schools, and communities broadly for North Carolina policymakers to encourage schools and districts to adopt effective programs and provide the resources to ensure that they are well implemented. Effective programs that have been shown to reduce school discipline by creating positive and supportive school environments include:

Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS)

- Teach, model, and reinforce appropriate behaviors—by using practices such as, Personal Responsibility In Daily Effort (PRIDE) cards for not

missing assignments, not missing school more than twice, and not having any discipline tickets for a 9-week period. In turn, PRIDE cards can be used for free admissions, field trips, dances, and additional privileges.

- Establish and foster collaborative relationships with parents and school stakeholders.

- Intervene early to de-escalate inappropriate behaviors.

- Support student needs and use knowledge about these needs to address the root causes of a student's misconduct.

- Define consequences so that they are fair, age-appropriate, and matched to the behaviors that should be changed.

North Carolina already has resources to support the adoption of PBIS. When implemented properly, PBIS leads to improved school discipline and fewer suspensions.

On-Campus Intervention Program (OCIP):

- Identify issues underlying each student's disruptive behaviors.

- Identify alternative behaviors.

- Develop life skills (e.g., communication, goal setting, choices, sexuality, dating, gender identity).

Consistency management and Cooperative Discipline (CMCD):

- Create classrooms in which rules and expectations are developed and regulated collaboratively between teachers and students.

- Focus on acknowledging and rewarding positive behaviors.

Other elements of prevention practices might also include:

- Conflict resolution training for students, teachers, and administrators which:

  - Acknowledges that conflict is inevitable and is either helpful or harmful depending on how it is handled.

- Identifies non-violent practices that change characteristics of the individual as well as characteristics of his/her environment that contribute to the conflict.

- Practices that focus on building cooperative tasks and reward structures.

- Practices that teach effective problem-solving skills.

- Practices that implement non-violent methods at multiple levels (e.g., student peer mediation programs, curriculum, teaching, administration).

(2) Programs that offer alternatives to out-of-school suspensions:

- In-school alternatives, such as:

    - Establishing an "intervention" room for students to use to "cool off."

    - Providing individual counseling.

    - Offering space for the student to work privately.

    - Requiring before- or after-school detentions or Saturday school.

- In-school community service programs (e.g., assisting teachers with preparatory work).

- Disciplinary systems that:

    - Have graduated levels of disciplinary actions that are matched to the seriousness of the infraction (with suspension being the last alternative reserved for serious misconduct).

    - Limit the duration of out-of-school suspensions.

    - Substitute in-school suspensions for out of school ones

- Programs that use data management systems that record student misconduct and disciplinary practices to develop alternative options that are tailored to disciplinary issues that exist in each school.

(3) Programs that mitigate the impact of suspension:

- Programs that are an active part of local systems of care and connect suspended students to appropriate community-based services. These programs acknowledge that:

    o Suspended students are more likely to have contact with other social service systems.

    o Suspended students are best served through collaborative relationships among health, mental health, justice, social services, and other schools or educational agencies because these relationships:

        ▪ Facilitate referrals and communication among agencies.

        ▪ Increase the range of possible disciplinary alternatives for a given student.

- Programs that engage with families and family support organizations.

- Programs that provide academic work so students have an opportunity to progress academically during suspensions.

Other ways to offset the effects of suspension include:

- Providing clear definitions of all minor and major behavioral misconduct to all staff and students.

- Developing a sense of community and holding students accountable by having them repair any harm they do and having them restore any damage done to their relationships with peers or school personnel (e.g., restorative justice).

- Having teachers and personnel who have regular contact with students provide the first point of contact for communicating with parent(s) about disciplinary actions.

- Providing school police officers, teachers, administrators, and all other school personnel with training in child and adolescent development to prevent alienation from positive adults.

- Reconnecting alienated students by:

- o Increasing their bonds with school and school personnel.

- o Encouraging caring relationships between students and teachers (e.g., mentoring students through an Advisor/advisee program).

- o Matching policies to meet the developmental challenges of students' age:

  - ▪ Adolescent challenges include the reliance on peer relationships, asserting autonomy, seeking support from non-parental adults, negotiating their development of a unique identity, and building self-efficacy.

- Improving parental involvement (e.g., school-sponsored family picnics, "Good News" postcards) by regularly reporting positive behaviors as well as minor misconduct.

- Evaluating implementation, fidelity, scale-up studies of practices, effects and effectiveness of approaches, effects of practices and policies on outcomes related to school climate, families, and long-term functioning of students (e.g., School-wide Evaluation Tool, SET for PBIS).

- Creating working groups of stakeholders within the community— including parents, students, teachers, principals, and other community members—to craft school discipline policies and alternatives that meet the community needs.

Strategies for potentially reducing racial disparities in the use of suspension:

- Engaging students, teachers, administrators, stakeholders, families, and community members in cultural competency skill building.

- Increasing training for teachers in culturally sensitive and responsive classroom behavior management and instruction (cultural competency should include understanding race and poverty).

  - o National Education Association's CARE Program Curriculum— Culture, Abilities, Resilience, and Effort.

- Engaging guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists who can address student's academic and behavioral issues.

- Establishing school discipline oversight committees.

Overall, successful evidence-based policies that target school suspension will:

- Rely on programs that promote positive behaviors and build prosocial skills.

- Use well-defined and consistently applied disciplinary codes.

- Implement programs at multiple levels (e.g., administrative, school personnel, individual student).

- Actively engage schools, parents, students, and community partners.

- Collaboratively develop and regulate practices among students and school personnel.

- Provide a variety of graduated disciplinary options that can be tailored to meet individual and school needs.

Implementing a range of such strategies is likely to benefit not only the specific students in question but the broader school community.

References

Casella, R. (2001). *Being down: Challenging violence in urban schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Costenbader, V., & Markson, S. (1998). School suspension: A study with secondary school students. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36, 59–82.

Fenning, P., & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline: The role of school policy. *Urban Education*, 42, 536–559.

Skiba, R. (2004). Zero Tolerance: The assumptions and the facts. *Education Policy Briefs*, 2(1), 1–8.