

Time-Out and In-School Suspension in the School Setting:

A User's Guide for School Administrators

Deborah L. Sisco

St. Joseph Public Schools

The scene plays out daily in schools across the nation. Teachers shadow the doorways of administrative offices, disheveled ... a bit wild-eyed ... small child with tear-stained face in tow. "He can't stay in my room any longer. His behavior is out of control and I can't get a thing done."

Across town discipline referral notes are passed off to the office at lightening speed. It seems middle and high school principals and discipline officers get little else done than conference with disruptive teens or listen to the laments of teachers who are "fed up" with the constant problem behaviors in their classrooms. Students are referred for a myriad of infractions ranging in scope from being tardy to class to incidences of fighting, weapon or drug possession, bullying and other aggressive/ disruptive actions. What's a principal to do?

It would be difficult to find a school employee in this day and age who would state that school discipline is not an issue for concern. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1993) reports that in 2001, 8 percent of school-age students claimed to have been a victim of bullying. Between 1993 and 2001 between 7 to 9 percent of students claimed to have been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. No administrator would argue that teachers need assistance and support from district administration in appropriately managing their classroom environments.

Despite a database indicating negative effects and misuse, the use of time-out and other seclusionary practices are daily occurrences in many schools. Zero tolerance policies that

followed highly publicized school shootings hold suspension and expulsion measures mandatory for many dangerous school behaviors. In the year 2000, data gathered by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights indicated there were 3,053,449 suspensions from U.S. schools (2003).

This paper seeks to give the school administrator some guiding principles in the use of time out and in-school suspension. Appropriate use of these techniques can enhance the opportunity for disruptive students to exhibit pro-social behaviors and gain a successful school experience. In addition, school policies and procedures that keep with the idea of least restrictive environment and proactive measures of intervention reduce incidences of disruptive school behaviors and provide less opportunity for student harm or litigation from misuse of exclusionary strategies.

The Use of Time-Out / Seclusion in the School Setting

Goldstein, Glick, and Gibbs (1998) give a three-prong definition of time-out.

- *Isolation time-out*, which requires a student be removed from the classroom or other area and placed in a “time-out” room.
- *Exclusionary time-out*, which requires physically removing a child from a source of reinforcement. This would include moving a child to a corner or other area of a classroom, or having a child sit in a “quiet chair.”
- *Nonexclusion time-out* (also called contingent observation), which requires a student to sit on the periphery of class activities but still allows the child the opportunity to view the appropriate behaviors of classmates.

Isolation time-out is the most common form of these procedures (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998) It is also a method that carries a probability for misuse, student harm, and political / legal scrutiny from child advocacy centers.

The use of a time out procedure should be offered in a school environment structured on the belief that students should be educated in the least restrictive environment. Such school climates must place an emphasis on teachers possessing and using skills that foster a supportive and nurturing classroom and engage in measures that prevent / lessen the occurrence of disruptive classroom behaviors in order to be successful.

If student behaviors escalate to a point in which the safety of the student or others is at stake, isolation time-out may be the option chosen by school staff. The following guidelines are offered in the literature. (Alberta Learning, Special Programs Branch 2002)

- *Parental Consent:* Any use of isolation time-out as part of a pre-arranged strategy should be a part of the student's individual behavior plan and involve full consent of the parents. Have the consent in writing and be sure to have fully defined and explained to the parent the specific behaviors that would lead to the use of time-out. In addition, walk the parent through exactly how and where the isolation time-out will occur.
- *Document attempts to understand the antecedent to the problem behavior:* The use of a functional behavior assessment and / or communication assessment will assist in this process. Understanding the driving force behind a student's behavior is key to developing strategies that can be implemented outside of time-out to lessen the chance of the behavior reoccurring.
- *Distinguish and document attempts at positive behavioral reinforcement:* Be sure the amount of time positive reinforcement is being used for appropriate behaviors outweigh the use of aversive measures. Students must perceive their classrooms as much more rewarding than the time out experience in order for it to prove effective.
- *Use a graded system of alternatives:* Isolation time-out should not be used prior to the use of less exclusionary measures unless there is an immediate situation of probable harm to self or others.

- *The physical environment must be safe:* Rooms should not be locked from either inside or out. Students must be supervised and in view of staff at all times. The room should be well ventilated and free from objects or fixtures that could cause the student harm.
- *Administrators must play a key role:* All aspects of the development and implementation of time-out procedures should involve the input and supervision of the school principal.
- *Length of time:* The amount of time a student spends in a time-out area should be reasonable and take into consideration a student's age and ability level.

In-School Suspension

In-school suspension is an option to students being excluded from the school campus for disruptive behaviors. At the least, ISS allows students the opportunity to remain on campus and off the streets during the school day. In addition, many ISS programs allow students the opportunity to continue work on school assignments.

Many ISS models place students in a separate room of the building, often in study carrels with assignments sent from the classroom teacher. There is usually one teacher or paraprofessional to monitor the students. Often the goal is for the student to remain quiet and keep their attention buried in their assignments. The ISS supervisor offers tutorial assistance with assignments as needed.

The question lies in the effectiveness of the program in changing the behaviors that got the student into ISS in the first place. In addition, the assignments and instruction being delivered in these settings may prove to be more a matter of "busy work" rather than meaningful curricula.

In-school suspension programs that assist in decreasing disruptive behaviors require constructive planning and implementation. A growing body of research offers school administrators some guiding principles in the development of effective ISS programs. These include:

- *Set criteria for entry:* Teachers should know that admission to ISS is not an opportunity to allow them to refer students to the office at the first sign of an infraction. A proactive administrative approach allows teachers the opportunity to receive in-service training regarding appropriate behavioral management, de-escalation skills, and social skill building in the primary classroom environment. All school faculty should readily understand that time away from the classroom is time away from the richest educational opportunities for all students.
- *Student understanding of the reason for the referral:* Staff should fully explain the behavior that has caused the student to be removed from the regular classroom environment. This conversation should be short and to the point. Too much time engaging the student in conversation on the way to the office or ISS room may result in actually being a “reward” for student behavior if they enjoy the individualized attention.
- *Reflective Writing Prompts:* Writing prompts allow students to examine their behavior by responding to specific questions or essaying a reflection regarding the behavior that got them into trouble. This also allows for thinking and writing about alternative solutions that may have brought about a more proactive result. Writing prompts are only a first step in student reflection. ISS supervisors should discuss these writings with the students, ensuring that students have taken the assignment seriously and have produced pro-social examples of alternate routes of behavior.
- *Formal Social Skills Training:* A research-based curriculum aimed at teaching students appropriate behavioral and social skills is a necessary component to student success. School staff cannot assume students possess the expected skills. In today’s society many students do not have the opportunity of having pro-social behaviors modeled and discussed outside the school environment. Programs such as the “Skillstreaming” series

and “Second Step” have a broad research base and proven effectiveness in reducing unwanted problematic behavior.

- *Appropriate Academic Assignments:* Students need to come to the ISS room with academic work to complete. As much as possible, work assigned should mirror that of the work and instruction students would receive in the regular classroom setting and not be last minute “busy work” a teacher sends just to give the student something to do. Many students assigned to both in and out of school suspensions struggle with academic tasks. More than 30% of sophomores who drop out of school have been suspended (The Advancement Project, 2000). ISS rooms offer the opportunity for additional individualized instruction.
- *Counseling:* Either referrals to school counselors or inter-agency models which allow for referral to community counseling services may assist students with the underlying issues surrounding their misbehavior.
- *Parent Communication:* Parents should be notified of a student’s referral to ISS and asked to follow up at home with their child regarding the issues surrounding the student’s placement.
- *Data collection and functional behavioral assessment:* Administrators should hold educational teams accountable for assessing student behaviors in an attempt to discover their underlying cause. Systematic observation and data collection regarding student behavior are important steps to ensuring that individualized behavior plans meet with the highest probability of success.

Conclusion

School administrators should keep in mind that the use of exclusionary measures such as time-out and in-school suspension should be used only after less restrictive strategies have proven unsuccessful or when student behaviors could result in injury to self or others. Appropriate use of

these strategies requires planning, documentation, parental participation, and ongoing evaluation.

When used inappropriately, time-out and ISS become reactive measures that offer little to no opportunity to teach and maintain student pro-social behaviors.

Resources

- Alberta Learning. *Guidelines for using time-out in schools*. Retrieved 9/06 from www.education.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/timeout-ocy-2002-pdf
- Cotton, K., "Schoolwide and classroom discipline." *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis – 1995 Update*. Retrieved 9/06 from www.nwre.org/sepd/esp/esp95-2.html#2.2.4
- Education World. "Evaluating in-school suspension programs." Retrieved 9/06 from www.educationworld.com/a-issues/chat/chat082.shtml
- Education World. "In-school suspension: a learning tool." Retrieved 9/06 from www.educationworld.com/a-admin/admin/admin329.shtml
- Goldstein, A., Glick, B., & Gibbs, J. (1998). *Aggression replacement training: A comprehensive intervention for aggressive youth*. Champaign: Research Press
- Haley, A.N. & Watson, D.C. (2000). "In-school literacy extension: beyond in-school suspension." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 654 – 661.
- students with emotional or behavioral disorders? Research issues and needs.
- Mathur, S.R., & Rutherford, R.B. (1995). "Is social skills training effective for students with emotional or behavioral disorders? Research issues and needs. *Behavioral Disorders*, 22, 21-28.
- Morris, R.C., & Howard, A.C. (2003). Designing an effective in-school suspension program. *The Clearing House*, 76, 156-159.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2003). *Digest of educational statistics and tables*.
Downloaded 9/06 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d03/tables/dt147.asp/pubsearch/info.asp?pubid-2004004>

National Center for Educational Statistics (2003). *Indicators of school crime and safety, 2003*.

Retrieved 9/06 from <http://nces.ed.g>

Saunders, D. (2001) "A caring alternative to suspension." *Education Digest*, 66(7), 51-54

Sheets, J. (1996), Designing an effective in-school suspension program to change student behavior. *NASSP Bulletin*, April 1996, 86-90.

Taylor, J. & Miller, M. (1997). "When time-out works some of the time: the importance of treatment integrity and functional assessment." *School Psychology Quarterly*, 12(1), 4-22

The Advancement Project, The Civil Rights Project (2000). *Opportunities suspended: The devastating consequences of zero tolerance and school discipline policies. Executive summary*. Retrieved 9/06 from

<http://civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/discipline/opport...>

Turner, H.S. & Watson, T.S. (1999). "Consultant's guide for the use of time-out in the preschool and elementary classroom." *Psychology in Schools*, 36(2), 135-148

Yell, M.L. (1994). Time-out and students with behavior disorders: a legal analysis. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 17(3), 293-301.