What Every Administrator Needs to Know About

Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion

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Overview

This brief report will identify why school discipline systems should be overhauled, and will suggest that is possible to provide lots of alternative consequences which have a chance of changing student behavior more than the traditional consequence of "suspension". We will go on to suggest ways that a school can establish underlying supports which will enable an improved school discipline system to be effective. If this happens, we have a chance to improve student behavior, and eliminate many of the problems in our current discipline systems.

Problems with School Discipline

Much attention has been directed at school discipline procedures over the past several years. Most of this attention has been focused on "exclusionary" consequences, where students are suspended or expelled from being able to participate in school and related activities.

This attention has been the result of a variety of factors including:

- Media reports about incidents of extreme school violence which has occurred over the past ten years

- Implementation in many schools of "zero tolerance" discipline policies originally intended to reduce behavior problems through consistent harsh punishment for any inappropriate behavior.

- Over reliance on suspension as the primary school discipline consequence in many schools

- Over-representation of racial and ethnic minorities among those who are suspended or expelled, and even for those referred to the office.

- Concern about legal requirements regarding the discipline of students with disabilities which have been incorporated in IDEA

- Emergence of data which seems to indicate that suspension and expulsion are not effective procedures to change student behavior

- Emergence of data that suggest long term negative side effects of suspension and expulsion including school drop out, increased crime, etc.

- Focus on academic outcomes for all students which has focused attention on the negative academic consequences for students who are suspended or expelled.

- Development and growth in the implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports

As a result of these factors, many schools have tried to reduce their use of suspension or expulsion. Although we are concerned about both suspension and expulsion, we will focus mostly on reducing the use of suspension, since that would likely also be likely to reduce the rate of expulsions as well. Usually this effort focuses on revising school discipline policies and "codes of conduct".

It may be time for a major overhaul of school codes of conduct- to make them more sophisticated and permit more options for responses to behavioral situations. Many school's codes of conduct are antique documents which may have never been clearly conceptualized. As new "problem behaviors" have emerged in students (hooded jackets, cell phones, etc.) these have simply been added to a laundry list of banned behaviors. Moreover as new banned behaviors have been added, few new consequences have been added, and often the consequences are not matched in any way to the nature of the offense. There is no longer any semblance of "logical consequences" in this system. For example a student involved in a fight might be suspended, but

one caught violating the school rule for chewing gum might be suspended, as well as a student who has been tardy too many times.

In order to make school codes of conduct effective we need to make them more sophisticated, and more responsive to the variety of situations and needs related to student behavior.   We also need to move away from the traditional idea that these consequences are "punishment" and instead focus on our job to be effective in changing student behavior. We need to develop a "teaching" orientation to the consequences we employ. We also need to greatly expand the number and variety of consequences which are included. But equally importantly, we may need to organize and relate the consequences to the offenses. For example it is possible to imagine a tiered "Code of conduct" which identifies levels or categories of offenses, and which also has levels or categories of consequences which might be assigned based on the best judgment of the administrator or behavior team.

Alternative Discipline Consequences

However before a school can substantially reduce reliance on exclusionary consequences, most administrators are concerned about identifying "alternative" consequences- what would replace the "suspension" if its use was diminished. Many school systems may already employ some other options for disciplinary consequences. Historically these have included "detention" (having students stay after school for specified amounts of time), or Saturday school (having student come to school on a Saturday such as depicted in the movie "The Breakfast Club") for some schools. And certainly the "trip to the principal's office" is itself a consequence. While these may be useful options, they are probably not in themselves adequate. What are some alternatives to suspension?   How can they be identified?

It is possible for most administrative teams, particularly if they can involve a larger school-wide team, to identify lots of creative ideas for additional alternatives for discipline, and it is best if these emerge from the culture of a particular school. This will also build the support for these alternatives among teachers, staff, students and parents. The examples which follow are

some promising examples of the kinds of alternatives a school might choose to incorporate. Many more might be generated, but all should be within the framework of moving away from punishment, and providing alternatives which match up to student behavior and needs. It is only when a variety of these are implemented that they become valuable- any one is probably not all that helpful by itself. The following ten examples of disciplinary consequences are not presented in any particular order of priority:

- **Mini Courses.** Schools could develop short self standing units or modules on topics related to various types of inappropriate behavior. These could include readings, videos, workbooks, tests and oral reports. These could focus on topics from inappropriate language, sexual harassment, to alcohol/drug use, conflict resolution, social skill development, and many more. Once created, students could be assigned to complete the appropriate modules based on their offense.

- **Parent Involvement/Supervision.** Parents can be invited to help school administrators to identify ways that they can provide closer supervision to their children while in school or be more involved with their child's schooling. One good example might be to suspend the student's parents if willing to sit with the student while the student remains in school. While this example may not always be possible for some parents, it could be a valuable option. But there may also be many other ways of increasing the contacts and communication between parents and school around student behavior.

- **Counseling.** For certain "offenses" students might be assigned to required counseling sessions with appropriately trained professionals (social workers, counselors, school psychologists, etc.) who can do problem solving with the student, identify areas of needed skill development (such as Anger management), and provide a chance for students to work through problems.

- **Community Service.** Students might be assigned community service tasks with appropriate supervision outside of school hours in helping programs or agencies. These might include other schools, clean up crews, or community agencies. This might strengthen ties with the community, and develop positive community relationships for students with other adults.

- **Behavior monitoring.** A variety of strategies could be implemented to closely monitor behavior or a particular student.   These could include teacher and parent behavior check sheets, charts of behavior, and feedback sessions for the student about behavior. As a result they might also foster appropriate positive feedback from teachers and parents when appropriate behavior occurs.

- **Restitution.** Students could be assigned to provide work which would repair or restore environments they may have damaged. This could include cleaning up graffiti, or repairing acts of vandalism. These could also include other related projects to clean or make attractive the school environment.

- **Problem Solving or Behavioral Contracting.** A defined procedure for behavioral problem solving and then creating a behavioral contract, including positive consequences for completion of the contract, could be created for specific students where this might be useful.

- **Alternative Programming.** For some students, especially at the secondary level, it may be possible to identify changes in the student's schedule, classes or program which would avoid problem environments or situations, but yet permit continued access to curriculum and school. This could include independent study, work-experience, or other creative programming alternatives.

- **Appropriate In-school Suspension.** When students are sent to an alternative in-school environment, it is important to have that environment continue academic or other

instruction, but to also have a focus on solving the problem that resulted in the student being sent to this environment. All too often these environments permit students to "escape" without addressing the needed changes by both the sending teachers, and the student to actually address the problem.

- **Coordinated Behavior Plans.** Some students may need the coordination of having all of the adults in their environment "on the same page" regarding that student's behavior. Thus a behavior intervention plan, might provide a map of how a school will address this behavior. While these types of plans are required for some special education students, there is no reason that they could not also be employed for other students as well.

School-wide Supports for Discipline Alternatives

In addition to these alternative consequences there are likely some other "prerequisites" which might make it more likely that these alternatives are effective. These are school-wide "supports" for behavior which may also play a role in preventing inappropriate behavior from occurring before it becomes a discipline issue. Many if not all of the following ten supports should be in place in order 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. This could include office referral data, surveys of parents, staff and students, grade and academic achievement assessment data, and other indicators of student involvement in school (attendance, tardiness, drop out rate, rate of participation in school activities, etc.). Use this data to make and evaluate changes in policies and practices.

- **Create a caring and welcoming school environment.** Create a tone of belong, and valuing of individuals. Make everyone feel welcomed and valued at school. Make the environment clean, engaging and supportive of educational goals.

- **Create an explicit set of school values.** Establish a set of school values or character traits which are supportive of positive behavior and which are understood and used by all staff in their work with students. It is important to provide school staff with a language to be able to communicate these to students, and to encourage teachers in particular to find and provide support for expressions of these values in their day to day work with students. Some character education programs might be one way to do this.

- **Provide conflict de-escalation training.** Train all staff, but 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 non-violent 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 some teacher-student conflicts.

- **Increase opportunities for positive reinforcement for appropriate student behavior.** The general level of positive reinforcement should be maximized. Increase the amount of positive reinforcement which 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 recognitions/awards for behavior, which are parallel to their academic recognition activities.

- **Build communication and involvement with all parents.** Expand and improve communication with parents, particularly parents of "at-risk" students. 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 individually as people and to share their own stories and beliefs.

- **Intervene earlier when signs of behavioral issues first become apparent.** Proactively watch for warning signs that kids 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 (declining grades, poor attendance, etc.) 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.

There may be additional formulations of supports for appropriate behavior in schools beyond these, but these ten would be an excellent start. While it is clearly not possible to implement all of these at one time, it is possible to develop a long range plan, and to begin implementation of these supports.

Suggestions for Administrators

Many problems exist with our current school discipline codes, and the limited options and punitive rather than educational nature of these systems. Administrators can begin to change these systems to better reflects our goals, and thus to also better meet the needs of our students, and the learning environments we supervise. Administrators can begin the process of making student "codes of conduct" more sophisticated, and to have a broader and more useful set of consequences. Administrators can also establish supports in their building, which will enable discipline codes to be effective. In so doing we may diminish the problems associated with the exclusionary discipline consequences of suspension and expulsion.

Resources and Links

Peterson, R. (Spring, 2005). Ten Alternatives to Suspension. *Impact, 18*(2), 10-11. (Impact is a
publication of the College of Education & Human Development, University of
Minnesota.). http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/182/default.html

Peterson, R.L., Miller, C, & Skiba, R. (Spring, 2004). A Framework for Planning Safe and
Responsive Schools. *Beyond Behavior, 13*(3), 12-16.

Skiba, R., Peterson, R., Miller, C., Ritter, S. & Simmons, A. (2004). The Safe and responsive
schools project: A school reform model for implementing best practices in violence
prevention. Chapter 40. Submitted to the *Handbook of School Violence and School
Safety: From Research to Practice.*

Skiba R. J., Peterson, R. L. & Williams, T. (January, 1999). The dark side of zero tolerance:
Can punishment lead to safe schools? *Phi Delta Kappan, 80*(5), 372-381. Condensed and
republished in Education Digest.

Skiba R. J., Peterson, R. L. & Williams, T.   (August, 1997). Office referrals and suspension:
Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children,
20*(3), 1-21.

Web Resources

The American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Committee Report on "Zero Tolerance Policy".
http://discussions.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/zerotolreport.html

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. A variety of brief articles are
available on this website. http://ici.umn.edu/products/newsletters.html

Institute on Violent and Destructive Behavior, University of Oregon.
http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln/Indiana University.
For more information about how to employ a building-wide planning strategy to address

improved discipline, as well as a variety of fact sheets addressing many related topics see the materials at each of the Safe and Responsive Schools Websites: http://www.unl.edu/srs and http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl.