Alternative Consequences and Strategies to Reduce School Exclusion

There is no evidence that zero tolerance [out-of-school suspension and expulsion] makes a contribution to school safety or improved student behavior. Rather, higher levels of out-of-school suspension and expulsion are related to less adequate school climate, lower levels of achievement at the school level, a higher probability of future student misbehavior, and eventually lower levels of school completion.


In a well-intended effort to ensure safety, many schools have adopted a zero tolerance disciplinary system that relies heavily on school exclusion as the cornerstone (i.e., out-of-school suspension and expulsion). Over the years since the introduction of zero tolerance, the scope of student misbehaviors for which school exclusion is applied has extended far beyond the original focus of the legislation (i.e., drugs and weapons). Currently, the majority of suspensions are for relatively minor misbehaviors, including truancy, disruptive behavior, insubordination, and school fights (Skiba, R. J., & Knesting, K., 2001).

That raises the question: For those infractions that fall into the category of “relatively minor misbehaviors,” what are some alternative consequences and strategies schools can use? Each of the following alternatives/strategies has a promising research base. The list has been compiled from a variety of sources, with major contributions coming from the research and help of Reece L. Peterson (University of Nebraska-Lincoln).

There are strengths and limits to each of these alternatives/strategies; they each have a purpose and often multiple options may be utilized as the discipline process unfolds. The key is to understand the functions of each and to develop a continuum of interventions to ensure an organized plan for when and how different strategies might be utilized:

1. **Guided Reflection for Problem Solving / Contracting:** The process of a guided reflection can help students take responsibility for their actions, develop empathy and self-awareness, and identify alternative behavioral choices to deal with similar problems or goals in the future. Signing a contract about how they will behave in the future can help strengthen their resolve. It is important to acknowledge and reinforce effort and positive behavior.

2. **Restorative Conferencing:** Conferencing brings the victim and offender together, along with their supporters, in a face-to-face meeting. The goal of a conference is to provide a forum for participants to discuss and share their feelings about the offender’s behavior and its impact. A trained facilitator guides the process that empowers participants to have input into a plan for what the offender can do to help repair the harm.

3. **Restitution:** Giving students an opportunity to repair damage or harm they have caused can be a learning and healing experience. Restitution for misbehavior involving vandalism or property damage, students can do things to repair damage or to improve the school environment. In cases of acts of aggression toward a peer or school adult, it is not quite so straightforward to make amends. In cases of apologies, care must be taken to ensure the apology is sincere to avoid further harm to the target of aggression and also to avoid having the aggressor learn the unfortunate lesson that saying “I’m sorry” is a quick fix.

4. **Targeted Instruction:** If a student’s misbehavior is related to an underlying social/emotional problem, an important component of the disciplinary process is to provide access to skill-building opportunities related to students’ misbehavior (i.e., use of individualized lessons or curricular modules to teach skills related to their behavioral problem, as anger management, impulse control, problem-solving/conflict resolution, communication/social engagement, etc.)

5. **Counseling:** Some students may benefit from school-based counseling to help them solve problems or resolve personal issues interfering with their learning or behavior. In more severe cases, it may be necessary to refer students to community-based professionals.

6. **Individualized Behavior Plans:** Some circumstances might require an Individualized Behavior Plan to provide students with a structured support plan to help them make desired behavioral changes. It may be an informal plan developed in partnership with educators, parents, and students where appropriate, or it may be based upon a formal Functional Behavior Assessment conducted by a professional to identify the function of the targeted behavior and to develop a behavioral plan.

7. **Saturday School and After School Detention:** These are variations of ISS. Refer to recommendations for ISS above.

8. **Classes Only:** Classes Only is a form of extra-curricular/co-curricular activity suspension that deprives students of non-curricular activities and informal social interaction during passing time and lunch. Students are detained from leaving
class until the starting bell rings for the next class period. Consequently, they arrive at their next class a few minutes late. Students may or may not be escorted between classes, depending upon the age and maturity level, etc. Classes Only usually includes Silent Lunch, where students are not able to socialize with other students. An advantage of Classes Only is that because students continue to attend academic classes, they are able to keep up with their academic studies while serving the consequence.

9. **Parent Phone Call/Parent Conference:** Having students call their parent/guardian to describe their misbehavior and the consequence they earned can be an important part of taking responsibility for mistakes. It can be helpful for the administrator to get on the phone afterward to acknowledge any positive behaviors the student might have exhibited during the disciplinary process (e.g., honesty, courage, empathy, remorse) and to see if parents have any questions. This reinforces the student’s pro-social behavior and promotes a positive relationship with the parent. Parent conferences can provide an opportunity to build positive relationships and effective partnerships with parents and obtain their input into their child’s disciplinary needs.

10. **In-School Suspension (ISS):** “Successful in-school suspension programs require thoughtful planning in order to accomplish the goals of reconnecting students to the learning community and remediation of behavioral and/or academic concerns” ([Guidelines for In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions](http://njsponderings.hubpages.com/hub/School-Suspensions-Pros-Cons-and-Ways-to-Improve), Connecticut State Department of Education, 2010). ISS is not likely to resolve truancy or homework completion problems, which should be addressed through other means.

   Recommendations for effective in-school suspension include the following:

   - Placement of students by age or grade in a positive learning environment
   - Prompt access to current class assignments from students’ teachers
   - Oversight of ISS by a qualified coordinator to serve in the following capacities:
     - Develop and promote positive relationships with students, including those who may have an ongoing discipline issue,
     - Provide supervision and academic support/instruction to students,
     - Assess need for additional support services (e.g., learning difficulties, emotional, behavioral)
     - Maintain effective communication among administrators, staff, and parents, and
     - Collect data and maintain records
   - Implementation of strategies to address students’ social/emotional needs necessary to make behavioral changes such as the following:
     - Life skills curriculum or lessons (e.g., Michigan Model, Why Try, Second Step)
     - Circle discussions or rap groups about related topics (e.g., anger management, accountability)
     - Student journals about feelings and behaviors

The most effective in-school suspension programs address educational and social needs because frequently, suspended students have both academic and behavioral problems. Indeed, in-school suspension programs ‘should be one part of a school-wide strategy for creating and sustaining a positive, nurturing school climate....’

—Rogers, Anita (2012)

### Making the Best of Out-of-School Suspension (OSS)

First of all, we need to keep them in school unless it is serious. For weapons and drugs, the students need to be removed from the school grounds and proper actions need to be taken. We must keep our students safe.

—School Suspensions: Pros, Cons, and Ways to Improve

http://njsponderings.hubpages.com/hub/School-Suspensions-Pros-Cons-and-Ways-to-Improve

In those cases where school exclusion is appropriate (i.e., when genuine issues of safety are at stake), there are a number of things schools can do to reduce the negative impact of school exclusion and increase the potential for a positive outcome. Below are some examples of services that schools can provide to students either directly or indirectly by connecting students and their families to community partners:

- **Academic Support:** Provide homework and academic support to help students keep up with their studies.
- **Community Service:** Develop community partnerships with organizations and businesses to provide students with opportunities to make meaningful contributions. Include a reflection process to promote social/emotional learning from the community service experience.
- **Mentoring:** Utilize community partnerships to provide adult mentors to develop supportive connections with students. Including a mentoring component in community service can greatly enhance the benefits.
• **Ongoing Communication:** Periodic phone calls from school personnel can communicate care and concern to students and their families to promote a sense of belonging to the school community.

• **Back to School Transitional Support:** Students’ reentry to school following OSS can be made easier by providing them with transitional support designed to help students “reconnect” to the school community, clarify behavioral expectations, identify students’ needs for academic or behavioral support, and opportunities to make amends where appropriate. Restorative conferences can be very effective in accomplishing these goals. Mediation may also be an effective strategy; however, it should only be used if both/all parties involved are willing. It should not be required. In cases of bullying or harassment where there is an imbalance of power, it should only be undertaken with the guidance of a trained, adult facilitator following their assessment of the circumstances to determine if it is an appropriate option to offer involved parties.

The goals of the OSS strategies above are to prevent students from falling behind in their academic work, minimize the amount of unsupervised and unstructured time, to provide students with experiences that can enhance their self-esteem.

Primary Sources:
1. *Impact Newsletter: Ten Alternatives to Suspension*, Reece L. Peterson, Retrieved from the Web site of the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota

**Beyond Alternative Consequences:**

**How a Positive School Climate Promotes Social/Emotional Learning in the Disciplinary Process**

Students learn important life lessons about themselves and how they feel about their school when they are disciplined, and much of what they learn is influenced by the school’s climate. The climate of a school creates the context within which students experience the disciplinary process. It creates an emotional tone that underlies the entire discipline system and plays a major role in determining the life lessons students ultimately learn from their experience. Based upon the quality of the school climate (which includes the quality of relationships students have with school adults before, during, and after disciplinary action is taken), students will formulate answers to questions such as these:

- Do my mistakes define who I am? Do they make me a “failure,” a “bad person” or “just someone who made a mistake and can learn to make better choices in the future”?
- Am I cared about even when I make a mistake?
- Do I “belong” in this school community?
- Can I trust the adults in this school?
- Do I have a “way back”? Is there a way to redeem myself and reconnect?

The discipline experience can either be a destructive and alienating learning experience that actually perpetuates antisocial behavior—or it can be a constructive experience that promotes learning, pro-social behavior, and resiliency. When administered within a positive school climate using restorative guiding principles, discipline can be an opportunity for students to internalize the following important life lessons:

- I am more than my mistakes. Mistakes do not define who I am—they don’t make me a “failure” or a “bad person.”
- My actions affect other people and relationships.
- There are consequences for my choices. When I choose a behavior I choose the consequence that goes with that choice.
- If I learn from my mistakes I can change my behavior in the future.
- Taking responsibility for my mistakes is an “act of courage” that will help me learn.
- Understanding what problem I was trying to solve or the goal I was trying to achieve will help me make better choices in the future.
- If I make a mistake, school adults will help me find a way to repair the harm I have caused.
- School adults care about me and will not give up on me when I make mistakes.

—The concept of “life lessons” learned from disciplinary practices was developed by Chuck Saufler.
More About Positive School Climate...

Note: The following article is an excerpt from *Impact: Ten Alternatives to Suspension* by Reece L. Peterson and is reprinted with permission:

To make...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.** Programs that attend 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 that involve a variety of parents and community members in functions and activities within the school, and maintain communication about their children.
- **Character education/consistent school values.** School curriculum and organization features that promote the development of fundamental values in children. Typically these list 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.** Programs that “catch students being good” and 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 that indicates positive, promising effects 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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References


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