The Bottom Line about Suspension and Expulsion

Is school exclusion an effective means to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment?

Research in the fields of education, neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral science all relate a consistent message: A safe learning environment and positive school climate is critical for students' academic success and healthy youth development. 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.[8, 14] Out-of-school (OSS) is one of the most widely used disciplinary practices in American schools, [4, 14] *in spite of* decades of research and evidence that OSS is not only *ineffective* as a means to increase school safety, it also promotes a number of additional negative outcomes for students who are suspended, the student body, and the school as a whole.

Reality Check √

Extensive research gathered over three decades reveals the following negative outcomes associated with out-of-school suspension and expulsion:

√ Increased future misbehavior [1, 5, 6]

√ Increased risk for future suspensions [1, 5, 10, 11]

√ Decreased academic achievement [5, 6, 11]

√ Higher drop-out rates [4, 5, 1]

√ Negative impact on school climate (as perceived by suspended students and the entire student body) [4, 5, 11]

√ Harm to relationships with school adults and bonds to school [8, 6]

√ Increased risk of delinquency and involvement in the juvenile justice system as a result of increased unsupervised time [5, 6 8]

√ Loss of average daily attendance (ADA) funding for schools [6]

√ Lower school scores on state accountability tests [8, 1]

√ Decreased school safety. [2, 13]

Suspension and School Climate

High rates of OSS promote the perception of a school climate that is harsh, punitive, and rejecting, resulting in increased feelings of student alienation and disengagement from school. [1, 4, 5] The disproportionate application of OSS with minority students and students with disabilities add to student perceptions of a negative school climate that is characterized by an unfair disciplinary system. [7] Anecdotal data indicate similar perceptions of inequity and resentment result from disproportionate or arbitrary application of OSS with students who have a "bad reputation" compared to students who have "special status" in schools.

The Civil Rights Project published a detailed analysis of data from 7,000 districts from every state, including Michigan (2009-2010). For the purposes of Civil Rights Project study, schools were considered to be "low suspending schools" if they had a suspension rate of 3%, of which there were "many." In sharp contrast to 3%, other schools had suspension rates of 20% or more. As evidence mounts revealing the ineffectiveness and negative consequences of school exclusion, some states are taking action: Connecticut and Maryland have both recently passed legislation that encourages the use of out-of-school suspensions only as "a measure of last resort." [3, 12]

Michigan Data

Michigan data from 2009-2010 indicate that White students were suspended at a rate of 9.6% compared to Black students' rate of 22.1%—with one Michigan district suspending Black students at a rate of 67.5%. [3] Michigan is among the top ten states in the country for high rates of suspending students with disabilities (15.4%)—with Black students having disabilities being suspended at a rate of 26.8%. [3] A 2003 case study reported males being suspended at a rate of 74%. Over the past 10 years Michigan has developed one of the harshest school discipline codes in the country. [12] A Michigan Public Policy Initiative study states that many Michigan students were "expelled for behaviors that once would have been considered nothing more than adolescent antics or poor judgment."[7]

The Bottom Line

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. [1]

If Not Suspension...What?

Successful alternatives do exist to school exclusion and harsh, unforgiving policies. In some cases, school officials can give students another chance and despite their mistakes, allow them to stay in school, learn from the incident and ultimately become productive members of the school community. [11]

What Are Alternatives to School Exclusion that Will Promote Safety, a Positive Climate, and Academic Success?

Studies comparing schools with high suspension rates to those with low suspension rates found that schools with low suspension rates were more likely to 1) have a school-wide discipline plan, and to 2) use prevention and intervention strategies designed to

- "determine reasons behind students' misbehavior"and
- increase social/emotional skills.

Low suspension schools placed "more emphasis on addressing student needs and treating students with respect." The use of these strategies in schools resulted in a reduction of office referrals and suspensions in grades K-12.[4] Lower use of out-of-school suspensions correlates with higher test scores. [3]

Children and teenagers mature cognitively and emotionally through their life experiences, education, and guidance from adults. They, however, do not acquire knowledge, reason, and wisdom without trial and tribulation (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001). It is incumbent on adults to aid children in their growth and through this often difficult process by articulating expectations, by instructing children when they err, by establishing reasonable responses to undesirable behavior, and by helping students develop better problem-solving and social skills. [2]

Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged in research as strategies that will help reduce suspensions and expulsions while promoting a safe and supportive learning environment when implemented as part of a school-wide approach such as *Bully-Free Schools: Circle of Support*.

1. Reserve suspension and expulsion for the most serious and severe of infractions, and define those behaviors explicitly (i.e., "possession of firearms on school property"). [1,5,11]

2. Use a graduated system of discipline with consequences that are commensurate to the seriousness of the infraction." [1,5,6]

3. Implement research-supported prevention strategies designed to enhance school climate and increase connectedness, such as bullying prevention and social/emotional skill building. [1,3,5,7,11]

4. Implement intervention strategies that are designed to *teach* offending students prosocial strategies to solve problems and achieve goals. [1,3,7,11]

5. Provide clear definitions of all behaviors (both major and minor) to be reported to ensure consistency and fairness. [1,5]

6. Include effective alternatives to suspension in the disciplinary system (e.g., in-school suspension, after-school detention, Saturday school, classes only, restorative conferences, alternative school, parent conferences) that do not deprive students of core content classes. [1,5,11]

7. Provide opportunities for students to be actively engaged in strategies to create a safer and more supportive school. [7,9]

8. Improve communication and collaboration among schools, parents, mental health providers, and juvenile justice system professionals. [1,5]

9. Utilize data to assess effectiveness of all strategies, programs, and curricula designed to promote school safety. [1,3] Disaggregate discipline data by race and gender to ensure there is no disproportionate application of suspension or expulsion. [5,11]

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