

Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion

Keeping students in school and learning

Despite their wide-spread use, disciplinary exclusions are largely ineffective in reducing challenging behaviors. Office for Civil Rights data shows that the rate of students who have been suspended on multiple occasions ranges between 28 percent for girls and 72 percent for boys.

(<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>)

This suggests that suspensions do not serve as a deterrent for misbehavior. In fact, suspensions may reinforce the use of challenging behaviors for students who wish to escape or avoid school (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Many school administrators use exclusionary disciplinary measures not because they wish to remove students from the opportunities to learn, but because they need to do something, and they often don't know what else to do (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). This document is meant to provide some resources and suggestions for administrators and school staff.

Youth who are suspended or expelled are at a greater risk for academic failure, school drop-out, and incarceration (Sundius & Farneth, 2008).

- The use of suspensions and expulsions may propel some students who already display antisocial behavior to delinquency by placing them in situations where there is little or no parental supervision and in increased likelihood of socializing with other peers with similar behaviors (NASP, 2008).
- Schools with higher rates of suspension tend to demonstrate lower academic quality, pay little attention to school climate, and receive poor ratings on school governance measures (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).
- Exclusionary discipline measures are inequitably used. Students who are male, who are African American, or who have disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than are other students (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Inequity in policy and practices disproportionately affect African American students and leave those students most vulnerable to the school to prison pipeline. (Mallett 2016)

Many schools use alternatives to suspension and expulsion that include administrative detentions and Saturday school. But there are many other options. According to Peterson (2006), administrative teams – especially those that involve a larger school-wide team - can identify creative alternatives for exclusionary discipline procedures. When these alternatives are based on the culture of the school, it is more likely that they will have support of the teachers, staff, students, and parents.

All the alternatives should be within the framework of moving away from punishment and moving toward meeting students' behavioral needs and keeping the student in school and learning. The use of one alternative alone will not be helpful; however, there is value when a variety of alternatives are implemented based on students' needs (Peterson, 2006).

These three approaches used together can work to reduce and eliminate suspensions and expulsions:

- Programs and practices that work to improve the climate and culture within an entire school.
- Programs and practices that give school staff skills in behavior management and student discipline.
- Changing the response of schools to misbehavior by individual students.

Definitions (from [MCL 380.1310d](#))

Short-Term Suspension: A short-term suspension occurs when a student is suspended for one school day up to and including 5 school days.

Long-Term Suspension: A long-term suspension is when a student is suspended for more than 5 school days up to 60 days.

Expulsion: An expulsion occurs when the school district's board of education or designee terminates the student's rights and privileges, including extracurricular activities for 60 days or more.

Ten Examples of Alternative Disciplinary Consequences (Peterson, 2006) (This is not an all-inclusive list.)

Schools may generate a larger list from which to select alternatives. However, all the options should emphasize supporting and meeting students' behaviors and needs and keeping them in school and learning. Implementing a variety of strategies is the most effective way to provide the best outcomes (Peterson, 2006).

- Mini Courses: Schools develop short, stand-alone units or modules on topics related to various types of inappropriate behavior. Module activities may include readings, videos, workbook tasks, tests, and oral reports. The modules are designed to teach awareness, knowledge, or skills about targeted areas in order to promote students' behavioral change.
 - Topics may include inappropriate language, sexual harassment, alcohol/drug use, tobacco use and vaping, conflict resolution, and social skill development. Once created, students are assigned to complete the appropriate modules based on their offense.

- **Parent Involvement/Supervision:** Parents are invited to help school administrators identify ways they can provide closer supervision of their children while in school or be more involved with their children's schooling. One example might be to "suspend" the student's parents into school. Parents willingly sit with their child while their child is in school. While this example may not always be possible for parents, it could be a valuable option. Better communication and frequent contacts between parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as coordinated behavior change approaches, can be very useful and could be formalized into a disciplinary procedure.
- **Counseling:** For certain offenses, students are assigned to counseling sessions with appropriately trained professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors, school psychologists). These professionals can engage in problem-solving activities with the student, identify areas of needed skill development, and provide a chance for students to work through identified problems, including personal issues that interfere with learning.
- **Community Service:** Students are assigned community service tasks, with appropriate supervision outside of school hours, in programs or agencies. Tasks include helping at other schools, clean-up crews, or working in community agencies. These kinds of activities strengthen students' ties with the community and develop positive relationships with other adults.
- **Behavior monitoring:** A variety of strategies are implemented to closely monitor behavior. These techniques include behavior check sheets for teachers, students, and parents; behavior charts; and student feedback sessions about behavior. These strategies result in positive feedback from teachers and parents when appropriate behavior occurs. These strategies also result in opportunities to reinforce appropriate behavior. Eventually students use self-monitoring techniques to maintain the learning.
- **Restitution:** Students are assigned to provide work that would repair or restore environments they have damaged. This includes cleaning up graffiti or repairing acts of vandalism. This also includes an option of having students select (or be assigned) other related projects to clean or make attractive in the school environment.
- **Behavior Contracting/Problem Solving:** Develop a negotiated behavior contract with students, which includes specifics about what students will do, what adults will do, and the planned consequences. Contracts include reinforcing consequences for completion of the contract, and consequences for continuing problem behavior. These are created individually for specific students, and consequences are negotiated and agreed to by both parties (student and adult).

- **Alternative Programming:** For some students, especially at the secondary level, it is possible to identify changes in students' schedule, classes, or programs that avoid problem environments or situations, but still permit continued access to curriculum and school. This includes independent study, work experience, alternative location, alternate times, or other creative programming alternatives. Such changes should be specific to individual students' needs and permit credit accrual and progress toward graduation. Appropriate procedures must be followed regarding change of placement for students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- **Appropriate In-school Suspension (ISS):** When students are required to go to an alternative in-school environment:
 - It is important to continue academic and other instruction in the alternative environment.
 - It is also important to have a focus on solving the problem that resulted in students being sent to this environment.
 - The alternative setting must be carefully managed to avoid permitting students to "escape" or avoid class. Clearly defined procedures for returning to class are contingent on students' progress or behavior.
 - Teachers and students may need to make changes to address the problem that resulted in the change of environment. Teachers will need to address the issues that resulted in the action, as removal of students may be reinforcing to the sending teachers.
 - As an example, one district brings in retired teachers and counselors to work with these students specifically in the ISS setting. They will work with the student the whole day and can build in conversations regarding the behavior being addressed and build a relationship with the student.
- **Coordinated Behavior Plans:** Some students need the creation of a structured, coordinated behavior support plan specific to the student and based on the function of the targeted behavior. The support plan focuses on increasing desirable behavior, replacing inappropriate behaviors, reinforcing the appropriate behavior, and withholding reinforcement of the targeted behavior. Data is used to determine if progress is being made and if further assessment or other intervention strategies need to be included.
- For specific tobacco/e-cigarette/vaping violations, it is very important to keep the students in school, learning and providing support. When students are suspended for tobacco related offenses, they are often relegated to environments that may not support their ability to stop using these products and separates them from their learning time. MDE strongly encourages schools to use [alternatives to suspension for tobacco/e-cigarette/vaping violations](#).

Reducing the Need for Suspension and Expulsion

In addition to alternative consequences that will keep students engaged, there are a variety of other preventative practices and system supports that can reduce or eliminate the need to remove students from school. These supports for behavior may also play a role in preventing inappropriate behavior from occurring before it becomes a discipline issue. Many, if not all, of the following supports should be in place to make a more comprehensive discipline code effective:

- *Gather data on behavior*, which permits analysis and action. Develop a school data system, which permits administrators with their building team to examine and use data about student behavior. Include office referral data; surveys of parents, staff and students; grade and academic achievement assessment data; and other indicators of student involvement in school (e.g., attendance, tardiness, drop-out rate, rate of participation in school activities). Use this data to make and evaluate changes in policies and practices. In Michigan, expulsion data gets collected on all students, but suspension data is only required to be collected on special education students. The MDE strongly encourages schools to collect suspension data on ALL students so that the data being reviewed provides a complete picture of what is happening in the school and supports that are needed.
- *Create a caring and welcoming, positive school environment*. Create a tone of belonging and valuing individuals. Make everyone feel welcome at school. The environment should be clean, engaging, and supportive of educational goals. When the community walks into the school, they should see teachers greeting students in the hall and when they enter the classroom, students are actively participating in the learning process, communication to families is open and frequent, the overall experience is positive for ALL students.
- *Create an explicit set of school values*. Establish a set of school values or character traits that support positive behavior and are understood and used by all staff in their work with students. It is important to provide school staff with language to communicate these values to students and encourage teachers to find and provide support for expressions of these values in their day-to-day work with students.
- *Provide conflict de-escalation training*. Train all staff, 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.
- *Provide training for all staff* in recognizing when a student may be having mental health challenges and steps to take to assist that student. Teachers and other staff are not mental health professionals, but they need to be equipped to recognize when students may be struggling and what to do.
- *Mediation programs or restorative practices*. Teach students and staff about nonviolent 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 teacher-student conflicts. Michigan law ([MCL 380.1310c](#)) requires a school board to consider using restorative practices as an alternative to suspension or in addition to suspension or expulsion.

- *Increase opportunities for positive reinforcement* for appropriate student behavior. Increase the amount of positive reinforcement that 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 recognition/awards for behavior, that are parallel to their academic recognition activities.
- *Build communication and partnerships with all parents.* Expand and improve communication with parents, particularly parents of students who are “at-risk.” Explore multiple options and opportunities to build relationships with parents and engage them with school in multiple ways.
- *Build relationships and partnerships with community organizations and businesses.* When schools and community organizations listen to parents, support them, and make sure they have the tools to be active partners in their children’s school experience the students benefit.
- *Provide opportunities for building adult/student relationships.* Encourage staff to engage in conversations with students, to get to know them as individuals, and to share their own stories. Strong relationships with teachers and school staff can greatly enhance students’ level of motivation and in turn promote learning. Students who have access to strong relationships are more academically engaged, have stronger social skills, and experience more positive behavior.
- *Intervene when signs of behavioral issues first become apparent.* Proactively watch for warning signs that students 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 challenges (e.g., declining grades, poor attendance) and then take action.
- *School-wide discipline and behavior system.* Make sure that a common terminology and a 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.

By implementing prevention efforts and developing alternative consequences for suspension and expulsion, schools can reduce the number of students missing valuable academic instructional time, build positive relationships and school culture, minimize the reach of the negative effects of suspension and expulsion, and meet the behavioral needs of the students they serve.

Preventing Suspension and Expulsion through School-Wide Positive Behavior Support

The need for a consistent, pro-active approach and effective consequences that reduce or eliminate problem behaviors is only part of the struggle facing schools today. Research shows that schools have significant effects on school climate and student learning when they implement systemic changes to the approach to discipline and behavioral interventions. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2018), schools that implement effective strategies report significant reductions in office discipline referrals. Such efforts lead to increased academic engaged time and improved academic performance for all students. One such approach is commonly known as School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

The three main components of SWPBS are prevention, multi-tiered support, and data-based decision making. Effective prevention includes defining and teaching a set of school-wide behavioral expectations. For example, if the expectation for the school is "Respect," then it must be defined and taught so that everyone knows what "Respect" looks like and/or sounds like in the hallways, cafeteria, classroom, etc. In addition, prevention includes a consistent system for frequently acknowledging and rewarding those who meet those school-wide expectations.

Establishing a consistent, multi-tiered continuum of consequences and supports for students who demonstrate challenging behaviors is another critical element of SWPBS. Beyond developing predictable and business-like consequences for behaviors, schools implementing SWPBS develop supports for students such as small group social skills instruction, the Check-In/Check-Out Program, and the Check-And- Connect Program, to name a few. These programs are developed to provide increased levels of support for meeting school expectations for students who do not respond to the prevention efforts.

Finally, data-based decision making is interwoven throughout SWPBS. Schools collect, summarize, and report data on a regular basis in order to design the most effective preventative and reactive supports (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

For more information on School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Systems in Michigan, visit the [MiMTSS Technical Assistance Center](#).

References

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