

Suspension

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One of the most common disciplinary actions that occurs in schools is out-of-school suspension, or simply suspension. As with expulsion, this consequence has been in place since the inception of private or public school education in the United States. Loss of the privilege to attend school was viewed as a harsh punishment because education was valued so highly. Although the roles of schools in society have changed and evolved, and the population of students that public education serves has become more diverse, suspension remains the primary disciplinary consequence employed in schools.



Tier 2 & 3 Intervention

What is Out of School Suspension?

Out-of-school suspension occurs when a student is removed



from school, and not permitted to attend for a relatively short period of time, from a few hours up to several days. A building administrator is usually the person who makes decisions regarding a possible suspension based on the school's code of conduct and the circumstances surrounding the incident.

The length of a suspension is communicated to the parent, and the student is returned to the custody and care of the parents for the duration of the suspension.

How is the Length of Suspension Determined?

Each state or school district sets the limit on how long a student can be suspended for a particular violation of the student code of conduct, so there are variations in the length of suspension (Brown, 2007). There also may be considerable latitude given to school administrators regarding the length of a suspension based on circumstances (e.g., developmental level of student, behavioral history, etc.). Typically, a short-term suspension varies between a portion of one school day (a few hours) up to ten days away from school. While there is local variation, a long-term suspension is often eleven days or more away from school (Blomberg, 2004). If a student has a short-term suspension, he or she will likely be sent home. However, if the student is serving a long-term suspension, he or she may be sent home, or to an alternative school setting depending on state and local policies (Brown, 2007).

Distinguishing Suspension from In-School Suspension or Expulsion

Other related types of disciplinary consequences include in-school suspension and expulsion. In-school suspension is a form of discipline in which students are removed from their regular classroom schedule and placed in a supervised in-school suspension room for a pre-deter-

mined length of time, ranging from a few hours to several days (Blomberg, 2004). Procedures and activities within the in-school suspension location may vary depending on specific school district policies. Expulsion is the long-term removal from school either for the remainder of the semester, the school year, a calendar year, or permanently (Brown, 2007) depending on state and district policies.

What are the Required Due Process Procedures for Suspension?

Because of the importance of education, case law has required that when a student is removed from access to school through a suspension, some basic due process procedures are required. The student must be notified of the charges which lead to the suspension, and the evidence regarding the charge. The student must then be given the chance to explain or defend his or her behavior (Jacob, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2011). The building administrator may then make a decision for a short-term suspension from school. The parents must be notified (orally or in writing) of the reason for the suspension and the length of the suspension. Suspension of more than 10 days, or expulsion, require more formal procedures (Jacob et al., 2011).

How Often Is Suspension Used?

Out-of-school suspension is the most frequently used type of school discipline strategy (Cameron, 2006; Fenning & Rose, 2007), and is reportedly used three times more frequently than in-school suspension (Burke & Nishioka, 2014). Skiba and Rausch (2006) estimated that suspension might be a consequence employed on average in one-third or more of office referrals. Office of Civil Rights data indicated that 3,328,750 different students were suspended at least once in 2006. About three years later, well over three million children, K-12, are estimated to have lost instructional, or “seat time”, in 2009-2010 because they were suspended from school (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).



Can suspension be used for students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities follow the same procedures as students in general education unless the suspension will result in ten cumulative days of suspension or more during a school year. Prior to ten days of cumulative suspension for a student with a disability, the school must also conduct a functional behavioral assessment, and implement an appropriate behavioral intervention plan to ensure that the behavior does not continue to occur prior to any suspension beyond ten days (Jacob et al., 2011). If one or more suspensions accumulate to ten days, the school must provide educational services in accord with that student’s individualized education plan (IEP) during suspensions that are in excess of ten days (Jacob et al., 2011).

What Do We Know About Suspension?

A great deal of analysis and research has been conducted on suspension in recent years. A search of the phrase “school suspension” on PsychINFO, Academic Search Premier, and EBSCOhost databases revealed over 1,500 peer reviewed articles and books, suggesting that suspension has been heavily examined and discussed in the literature. Much of this literature refers to “exclusionary discipline”, which lumps

together both suspension and expulsion. With the increasing criticism of “zero tolerance”, there is recognition that suspension may be over used by school personnel. There has also been a major focus on the over representation of minority students and students with disabilities among those students suspended.

Increasing use of suspension. Suspension rates have been on the rise over the past 15-20 years. Many researchers believe that this increase may be due to Zero Tolerance Policies (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Arcia, 2006), which assign suspensions and expulsions for a number of behaviors without regard for individual circumstances or the exact nature of the problem behavior. These policies were adopted by schools as a response to school violence and were thought of as a way to reduce these types of incidents. However, they have had apparently little impact on reducing school violence, and zero tolerance policies have been heavily criticized as being ineffective and disproportionately affecting ethnic minorities and students with disabilities (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Policy Task Force, 2008; Cornell, 2006; Lamarche, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 1999), as well as contrary to sound policy (American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Committee, 2001).

Of course another possible explanation for this increase in suspension is that simply removing students from schools does not solve the students’ problems or correct students’ behaviors that lead to the suspension. As a result, re-offending and additional suspensions are likely to occur.

Who is suspended? Researchers have consistently found that minority males are suspended at rates disproportional to their population (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014; Connecticut Department of Education, 2010; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Karega Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These differences are also evident in female minority students, and can be detected as early as preschool (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014). There is also

a disproportionately high percentage of students with special needs receiving suspensions (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014), specifically those with emotional and behavior disorders (Brown, 2007), and learning disabilities (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhammin, 2007). Research also indicates high rates of suspension among students who have previously displayed problematic behavior (Morrison & Skiba, 2001), who have transferred schools (Engel, 2006), who come from disadvantaged communities (Barnes, Belsky, Broomfield, & Melhuish, 2006), and are in urban schools (Fenning & Rose, 2007). There is a notable increase in the number of suspensions given in middle school compared to elementary school, with that number continuing to increase into high school (Arcia, 2006; Burke & Nishioka, 2014).

In a study comparing 20 middle schools with high suspension rates to 20 middle schools with low suspension rates, several variables emerged as positively related to suspension, including low socioeconomic status, ethnicity (i.e., the higher the school’s suspension rates, the lower the percentage of Caucasian students), student law violations, and student retention rates (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004). School attendance and academic achievement were negatively related to suspension (Christle et al., 2004). Overall, suspension may be a short-term solution to behavior problems; however, long-term consequences of suspension may involve grade retention, lower levels of engagement, and reduced academic achievement.

Reasons for suspension also differ among groups. When White students are suspended, it is typically for an objective, overt offense, such as bringing a weapon to school or physical violence (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba, Michael,



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Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). When an African American student is suspended, it is more likely to be for more subjective offenses, such as excessive noise or disrespect (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002). This pattern may help to explain the substantial discrepancy in suspension rates among different ethnic groups. A large segment of the literature on suspension or exclusionary discipline generally is focused on highlighting and understanding these disproportionalities.

Ineffectiveness in changing student behavior. Research reports have consistently demonstrated that suspension is ineffective at reducing problematic behaviors (Arcia, 2006; Blomberg, 2004; Brown, 2007). If this is true, it appears that it is not serving the goal of reducing behavior problems in school.

For some students, who are underachieving academically and do not enjoy structured school environments, exclusion from school (e.g., suspension, expulsion) might be reinforcing - they may view time away from school as a reward instead of a punishment - leading to an increase in problem behavior in order to “escape” from school (Brown, 2007).



For teachers and administrators, suspending students might be reinforcing as well, because the time away from the disruptive student behavior while the student is suspended might be rewarding. In an era of high stakes testing of achievement, the ability to remove students who are perceived to be disruptive and to detract from that achievement may also be a powerful incentive to remove them from the school.

However, removing students from school does not teach appropriate behavior and does

not address the reason or cause of the inappropriate behavior. Therefore, it does not necessarily solve the problem that provoked the student behavior. The fact that students who have been suspended are very likely to be suspended again illustrates that this form of discipline is often ineffective (Cameron, 2006).

Behaviors resulting in suspension. Another concern is the variation regarding which behaviors merit suspension (Brown, 2007). Typically, schools think of suspensions as a response to the more extreme behavior problems, such as involvement with “drugs, gangs, and weapons” (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). However, there are inconsistencies among staff, students, and schools, resulting in suspension being given for a wide variety of reasons (Blomberg, 2004). According to Knipe, Reynolds, and Milner (2007), students are suspended for verbally or physically mistreating staff or students, breaking school rules, damaging property, stealing, using drugs or alcohol, and being disruptive. In practice, most students are suspended for minor, nonviolent reasons, such as tardiness, breaking dress code, disrespecting authority, and classroom rebellion (Blomberg, 2004; Cameron, 2006; Connecticut Department of Education, 2010). Burke and Nishioka (2014) reported that physical and verbal aggression is the most prevalent cause of suspension for elementary and middle school students; however, at the high school level, insubordination and disruptions are most common. The fear of chaos in the classroom may sway teachers and administrators to punish severely even if students are not violent (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

Effects of suspension. When students are excluded from school, the most obvious result is the students’ loss of time in the classroom. Availability of class material is withheld and progress is stunted. Often, students are not allowed to make up schoolwork during their absence, leading to lower grades. When students return to school after being suspended, they often feel behind and academically lost (Brown, 2007). Not surprisingly, suspension has been shown to have a significant negative effect on achievement in education, especially read-

ing achievement (Arcia, 2006). If a student was already lagging behind academically, suspending the student may intensify the problem (Brown, 2007). One recent study has indicated that not only are suspended students' academic achievement affected, but that in schools where suspension and expulsion are frequent, the academic achievement of other students in reading and math are diminished (Perry & Morris, 2014).

A number of other factors are affected by suspension. If students have received an out-of-school suspension, there is a higher risk for running away from home (Tyler & Bersani, 2008), using drugs, breaking the law, engaging in sexual activity (Brown, 2007), and eventually dropping out (Arcia, 2006; Boon, 2008; Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). There is also a relationship between suspensions and an increase in absences from school and school failure (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). When students are suspended, they are more likely to distance themselves from teachers and staff (Cameron, 2006), resulting in continued, or worsened, behavior problems (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007; Cameron, 2006). Unfortunately, suspensions, which are used more than any other type of school discipline consequence, exclude students who are already at risk for negative outcomes.

Reducing the Use of Suspensions

Given the over representation of minorities in suspension and the other problems identified by researchers, there have been efforts to reduce the use of suspension. A variety of strategies are being employed in this effort, and many of these represent proven or promising practices.

Establishing environments and programs to prevent inappropriate behavior. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education released a report urging schools to create positive school climates through staff training, parent engagement, and by providing social-emotional resources to address the mental health mechanisms behind misbehavior. Improvements in school climate can also be made by creating partnerships with

mental health and child welfare agencies that can provide expertise and resources to build positive social competencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Another recent report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Morgan et al., 2014) also emphasizes the importance of a positive school climate and the need for schools to reach out to community organizations and programs to meet the needs of their students. The report encourages schools to assess the needs of their students as well as the school's capability to handle the breadth of student needs and make adjustments as necessary.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. Programs such as school-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), which has been demonstrated to be effective in lowering the numbers of students who are suspended in elementary and middle schools, could be employed (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports emphasizes teaching and reinforcing positive, appropriate behaviors, and intervening early to address student behavior problems, before they lead to suspension.

Restorative Justice Practices. Another method of school discipline and conflict resolution is restorative practices such as family group counseling, mediation, restitution, and youth courts. These practices primarily focus on reintegrating students back into the school community while protecting the victim's right to a safe and secure learning environment (Varnham, 2005). These procedures emphasize addressing student needs, and restoring and healing the social and emotional environment. This method has many benefits to the target student. Benefits include improved social skills, conflict management, responsibility, empathy, accountability, and self-discipline (Shaw, 2007; Von der Embse et al., 2009). Although there is little research available currently related to the use of these procedures for school discipline, they hold promise and some small scale studies have shown strong results.



Clarifying criteria. Some strategies have been aimed at more effective use of suspensions. Out-of-school suspensions should be used only for the most severe offenses and as the last option (Arcia, 2006). Secondly, rules should be clearly taught and consistently applied (Kupchik, 2009). Schools need to establish an agreed upon set of behaviors that merit a suspension (Fenning & Rose, 2007), but still take each case individually to determine the appropriate action that will best help the student. The 2014 report of the U.S. Department of Education further advocated for clear and appropriate behavior expectations and consequences, and for the use of suspension “only as a last resort for appropriately serious infractions” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. iii). Some schools have clarified policies so that suspension is only used for the more egregious violations of the code of conduct in an effort to reduce the number of suspensions for more minor violations.

Improving implementation of suspensions.

If we assume that suspensions will remain as one disciplinary alternative, there may be ways to minimize its negative impact on students. If students are suspended, school staff should communicate with parents or guardians to make sure that there is adequate supervision of the student while out of school. Schoolwork should be sent with them to prevent them from falling too far behind academically, (Brown, 2007; Knipe et al., 2007; Riordan, 2006) with other academic supports provided as needed. In addition,

students who have been suspended or are at risk for being suspended should be given the option of counseling services (Knipe et al., 2007) and specific plans for transitioning them back into school after suspension should be made at the time of suspension (Riordan, 2006).

Establishing other disciplinary consequences.

A variety of disciplinary consequences have been suggested as alternatives to suspension (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2003; Peterson, 2005; Stetson & Collins, 2010). This might entail use of other disciplinary options such as in-school suspension or Saturday school. However, it might also include a wide variety of other consequences being added to school codes of conduct which might include these required programs: counseling sessions, instruction in social skills, anger management programs, behavior monitoring, restitution, use of restorative practices and many others. There has been little research to date on whether these consequences are being used, let alone their effectiveness. Nevertheless, reforming school discipline policies to include these alternative consequences is one approach to reducing suspensions.

Establishing arbitrary limits. Some schools have also attempted to establish arbitrary limits on the number of suspensions which can be imposed at any school. The ethical and legal implications for this approach are not clear, and it appears unlikely that this action will do anything

to solve the behavioral issues of students which would otherwise have provoked these consequences.

Other suggestions. A variety of other additional ideas –mostly focusing on methods to prevent behavior problems and intervene early when they do occur- have also been suggested to improve school discipline and thus reduce the need for suspension or expulsion. While it is beyond our scope to examine these suggestions, these include implementation of school-level interdisciplinary student support teams with clear roles for each individual within those teams, utilization of a systems-of-care approach to providing mental health services including external providers and multiple funding sources, etc.



Evaluating Efforts to Reduce Suspensions

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the reforms to school discipline programs should be carried out in accordance with ethical and legal considerations, with data used to evaluate the effectiveness of change. Through data and documentation, schools can move toward discipline practices being applied fairly and equitably. If it appears that discipline practices are being applied unfairly, the school should examine underlying mechanisms and develop a plan to address disproportionality (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Discipline Recovery

In order to attempt to ameliorate some of the negative consequences of long-term suspension or expulsion, some states and districts have begun to find ways to provide education to students after the exclusion (Brown, 2007). This may be in the form of independent study or alternative school programs, which permit students to continue to earn credit towards graduation. A few states offer some educational opportunities to students during suspension (or expulsion).

Conclusion

School suspension has been used for many years as a disciplinary consequence. Research has shown that Zero Tolerance Policies are associated with increasing use of suspension, often for minor violations such as tardiness, dress code infractions, and minor classroom misbehavior. Suspension has been shown to be relatively ineffective, failing to change student behavior, leading to future suspension, lower academic achievement, and eventual dropout. Moreover, suspension has been used disproportionately with minorities and students with disabilities. As a result a variety of efforts are underway to develop strategies to identify alternative disciplinary consequences, and to implement other procedures which have the potential to reduce the negative outcomes associated with the over use of suspension.



See related Strategy Briefs:

- Discipline Recovery
- Dropout Recovery
- Expulsion
- Individual Behavior Plans and Functional Assessment
- In-School Suspension
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Punishment
- Zero Tolerance



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Resources

U.S. Department of Education (May 2014):

This report from the U.S. Department of Education reports the findings from six school districts in Oregon regarding suspension and expulsion for the 2011/2012 school year. The report includes the percentages of students suspended and expelled, the reasons for suspension/expulsion, the number of times suspended/expelled, and the number of days suspended/expelled.

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/rel_2014028.pdf

The Council of State Governments Justice Center (2014) - The School Discipline Consensus Report:

This report highlights the path to student engagement in order to eliminate student misbehavior and keep students out of the juvenile justice system. It begins with information on school climate then progresses to behavioral interventions and recommendations for students with behavioral issues. It concludes with information regarding the policies surrounding disciplinary action in the schools and the function of juvenile justice systems in students' educational trajectories.

<http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/school-discipline-consensus-report/>

U.S. Department of Justice (January, 2014):

The main focus of this report was to call attention to the disparity among students commonly receiving exclusionary discipline. This report pointed out differences in race, color, national origin, gender, and special education status. This article brings to light the legal framework, departmental considerations in examining discriminatory discipline, the importance of record keeping, and ways to remediate schools that have engaged in discriminatory discipline.

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html>

U.S. Department of Education (May 2014):

This report from the U.S. Department of Education reports (suspension and expulsion in early childhood education programs.)

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ec-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>

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