

# Detention

## Strategy Brief, February, 2014.

Scott Fluke, Amber Olson & Reece L. Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Administrators are commonly asked to decide on and deliver consequences for disciplinary infractions. In fact, an elementary school with a student body of 1,000 students can expect an average of four office referrals a day, while a high school of the same size can expect an average of 13 office referrals each day (Spaulding et al., 2010). The vast majority of these infractions typically are not severe enough to warrant out of school suspension or expulsion. Detention has been a traditional and widely used disciplinary consequence for relatively minor disciplinary referrals

### What is Detention?

Detention is a consequence in which students are required to remain in a presumably undesirable place for a specified amount of time outside of school hours. Typically, detentions are served after school. Instead of going home at the end of the day, the student reports to a designated classroom where he or she must sit in a desk for an amount of time generally ranging from 10 minutes to two hours, with an hour or less being most typical.

Detentions can also be served before school, during recess (e.g., the student stays in the classroom while his classmates go to recess), or during lunch (e.g., the student is required to eat lunch at a particular table or room away from peers). Some secondary schools have also experimented with holding detentions on Friday evenings when many school activities, social events and athletics events are occurring. This is in an effort to make the detention something students would avoid, and thus be a disincentive to inappropriate behavior. Similarly Saturday school can be considered another form of detention, although Saturday school is typically longer in duration. (See the Strategy Brief on Saturday School).

In some detention situations, the student in detention is expected to bring materials and complete homework or assignments during the detention time. Other forms of detention do not necessarily expect completion of school work, but instead simply prevent students from talking or socializing, and from leaving the assigned area.

The purpose of assigning detention is to punish misbehavior. Therefore, the goal of detention is to reduce future occurrences of the behavior being punished. Comparable to a time-out, the mechanism at work in detention is the removal of the student from desirable activities (e.g., going home to spend time with friends, recess) and replacing those activities with aversive boredom (Spaulding et al., 2010).

Detention, which occurs outside the school day and does not entail loss of instructional time or participation, is distinguished from in-school suspension which occurs during the school instructional time and as a result removes students from instruction. (See the Strategy Brief on In-school Suspension).

### **What do we know about detention?**

Detentions are one of the most common disciplinary actions utilized by schools with varying ages of students. A nationwide study of office referrals in over 1,500 schools found that, in elementary schools, office referrals lead to detention approximately 13% of the time, second only to conferencing with the student (Spaulding et al., 2010). The same study found that detention was the single most common response to office referrals in middle and high schools, with detentions being the response in approximately 26% of middle school referrals and 28% of high school referrals (Spaulding et al., 2010). Additionally, because this study examined only detentions following office referrals, it likely under reports the amount of detentions given since they can be administered without a referral. In many schools, detentions can be given directly by teachers as well as by administrators after an office referral.



Despite its common use by teachers and administrators, detention has not been well researched in the academic literature (Hintsanen, Hintsanen, Merjonen, Leino, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2011). A search for the terms “detention” and “school” in academic databases returns primarily results for juvenile detention centers. Excluding these, less than ten articles could be identified. Of these articles, only a handful attempt to study the effects of detention on later occurrences of problem behavior. Teachers and administrators should be cautioned that more research is required before substantial conclusions can be drawn about detention.

### **Is detention effective?**

Some evidence exists that detention does decrease future problem behavior for certain students. At the very least, many students perceive detention as aversive and as an effective discipline practice (Infantino & Little, 2005). One research group compared students that received detention or suspension in the fall semester of the school year with those who received detention or suspension in the fall and spring semesters (Atkins, McKay, Frazier, Jakobsons, Arvanitis, Cunningham, Brown, & Lambrecht, 2002). They theorized that students who received these consequences in both the fall and spring semesters are possibly those for whom detention and suspension are likely ineffective. The researchers found that, despite having more consequences than the other group, this group of students showed an increasing rate of problem behavior as the year went on, specifically more disruptive and aggressive behavior. Detention and suspension with these students may have been rewarding, rather than punishing their behavior.

However, research suggests that detention can be an effective consequence for some students, particularly those that are not prone to repeated problem behavior. If a student regularly receives detention but does not show a decrease in problem behavior, then an alternative consequence should be given in place of detention (Atkins et al., 2002). Detention may

not be appropriate for students who commit a serious act like serious aggression or bringing drugs to school.

### **How should detention be structured?**

Detention is most commonly thought of as holding students after school under the supervision of a staff member. While this strategy is somewhat convenient for the school, it does have some drawbacks. Students, particularly in low-income districts, often have to take a bus home from school. If they receive a detention, they are likely to miss the bus and must secure alternative transportation. Some schools have scheduled detentions in time for student to catch a late “activity bus” home. However if that is not available, and if the students’ parents are unable to drive to the school to pick up the student after the detention is served, this may pose a practical problem for its use. This situation may cause some students to decide to skip detention if they cannot find another way home, leading to additional consequences from the school up to and including suspension (Andrews, Taylor, Martin, & Slate, 1998).

A suggested alternative to after-school detention is having students serve detention during the lunch period (Andrews, et al., 1998; Clements, McKernan, & Call, 1985). Students in lunch detention can be required to eat in the cafeteria in isolation or to bring their lunch to a classroom away from the cafeteria. Lunch detention can serve as an effective consequence because students typically enjoy spending their lunch period with their peers. One study found that, despite not wanting to lose this time, students preferred lunch detention to after-school detention because of concerns about transportation (Andrews, et al., 1998). The study also showed that a school implementing lunch detention had fewer students who skip detention, leading to less risk of escalating consequences.

Whether a school implements detention after-school, during lunch, or at another time of the day, several aspects of the detention environment are important:

- Detention should always be supervised by a teacher or staff member with training in behavior management. Given staff duties, and teacher contract times, this can be problematic for some schools.
- Detention should never replace instructional time.
- Students in detention are often supervised in a group of other students who have received detention that day. Even though talking and socializing is usually not permitted, students may still “trading ideas” and teaching one another ways of getting into trouble (Spaulding et al., 2010).
- Detention can be viewed as an opportunity to provide educational supports (such as homework completion time, tutoring, etc.). Students who receive detention have been shown to have lower academic achievement (Infantino & Little, 2005). However to make this effective, qualified instructional staff are needed to supervise the detention.
- The detention environment should not be one which students view as reinforcing.

### **Conclusion**

Detention is one of the primary discipline strategies used by teachers and administrators across the country in elementary, middle, and high schools. Despite its popularity, very little research has been conducted on its effectiveness. What little research there is suggests that detention, particularly lunch detention, can be effective for some students; especially those who are not likely to repeatedly break school rules. However, detention is unlikely to be effective for students who repeatedly receive office referrals. It is recommended that before issuing a detention, teachers and administrators review records for the student in question. If the student has received detentions in the past but has not shown a change in behavior, then schools should strongly consider alternative consequences.



## Recommended Reference

Fluke, S. M., Olson, A. & Peterson, R. L. (2014, February). Detention, Strategy Brief. Lincoln, NE: Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Nebraska Department of Education. <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/detention>

## Detention References

- Andrews, S. P., Taylor, P. B., Martin, E. P., & Slate, J. R. (1998). Evaluation of an alternative discipline program. *The High School Journal*, 81, 209-217.
- Atkins, M. S., McKay, M. M., Frazier, S. L., Jakobsons, L. J., Arvanitis, P., Cunningham, T., Brown, C., & Lambrecht, L. (2002). Suspensions and detentions in an urban, low-income school: Punishment or reward? *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 30, 361-371. Doi: 10.1023/A:1015765924135
- Clements, J. E., McKernan, M. L., & Call, D. M. (1985). The structured lunch period: An alternative in disciplining high school students. *The High School Journal*, 69, 156-159.
- Hintsanen, M., Hintsala, T., Merjonen, P., Leino, M., & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, L. (2011). Family- and school-related factors in 9- to 15-year-olds predicting educational attainment in adulthood: A prospective 27-year follow-up study. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, 9, 523-540.
- Infantino, J. & Little, E. (2005). Students' perceptions of classroom behavior problems and the effectiveness of different disciplinary methods. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 25, 491-508.
- Spaulding, S. A., Irvin, L. K., Horner, R. H., May, S. L., Emeldi, M., Tobin, T. J., & Sugai, G. (2010). School-wide social-behavioral climate, student problem behavior, and related administrative decisions: Empirical patterns from 1,510 schools nationwide. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 12, 69-85. Doi: 10.1177/1098300708329011