

Guidelines to Reduce School Exclusion

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

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 1) “determine reasons behind students’ misbehavior” and 2) 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

Designing a Discipline Systems to Reduce School Exclusion: 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 school-wide approaches that include *Bully-Free Schools: Circle of Support for Learning and Restorative Justice*.

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}

¹ Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness.

In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 1063-1089). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

² Sughrue, J. A. (2003). Zero tolerance for children: Two wrongs do not make a right. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(2), 238-258. doi:10.1177/0013161X03251154

³ Losen, D. J., & Gillespie, J. (2012, August). Opportunities suspended: The disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school [Report]. The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved from <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>

⁴ Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). High suspension schools and dropout rates for black and white students. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 34(2), 167-192.

⁵ American Psychological Association. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools?: An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 63(9), 852-862. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.63.9.852

⁶ Minnesota Department of Education. (2011, October). Alternatives-to-suspension fact sheet: Outcomes of out-of-school suspension. Retrieved from <http://www.mnase.org/files/47050423.pdf>

⁷ Michigan Public Policy Initiative. (2003, January). Zero tolerance policies and their impact on Michigan students: Zero tolerance policies in context. Spotlight. Retrieved from http://action.mnaonline.org/pdf/spotlight%202002_12.pdf

⁸ Dignity in Schools. (n.d.). Fact sheet on school discipline and the pushout problem. Retrieved from http://www.dignityinschools.org/files/Pushout_Fact_Sheet.pdf

⁹ Nixon, C. (2010, September). Keeping students learning: School climate and student support systems. Presentation at the Tennessee LEAD Conference, Nashville, TN.

¹⁰ Skiba, R. J. (2000). *Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice* (Policy Research Report #SRS2). Retrieved from <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/zsze.pdf>