Children’s Needs III: Development, Prevention, and Intervention

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Without question, schools need sound disciplinary systems to maintain school safety and promote student learning. In the face of multiple-victim homicides in the late 1990s, schools have been increasingly motivated to address issues of disruption and violence. The fear created by such incidents also has generated support for more punitive methods of school discipline, often under the broad rhetoric of zero tolerance. The shift toward punitive and exclusionary discipline has substantially increased the number of students suspended or expelled from school (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Thus, schools face what appears to be a profound dilemma. To fulfill their responsibility to promote safety, many schools and school districts have turned to procedures that remove some children from the opportunity to learn. Under federal education legislation, schools are under a mandate to use “only practices that are evidence-based, so only the best ideas with proven results are introduced into the classroom” (No Child Left Behind Act Fact Sheet, 2001). The purpose of this chapter is to examine what is known about the use of school exclusion as a disciplinary strategy. Are zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion effective methods for promoting safe and effective school climates? Are there effective alternatives that can keep schools safe without removing students from the opportunity to learn?

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

Purposes of School Discipline

Although in the public mind school discipline has become increasingly associated with the use of punishment and school exclusion (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), in fact a number of important instructional and organizational purposes underlie any school’s disciplinary system:

- **To ensure the safety of students and teachers.** The increased awareness that deadly violence brought to this nation has drawn attention to the acute need to guarantee the safety of students and teachers.
- **To create a climate conducive to learning.** Effective disciplinary systems should improve academic outcomes by increasing the amount and quality of time teachers can spend teaching rather than responding to behavioral disruptions.
- **To teach students skills needed for successful interaction in school and society.** Children will always require socialization, instruction, and correction to shape fundamentally egocentric behavior into interpersonal skills that make children capable of interacting successfully with others in school and beyond.
- **To reduce rates of future misbehavior.** Behavioral psychology (Skinner, 1953) suggests that those
disciplinary interventions that are effective will lead to reduced rates of inappropriate or disruptive behavior in the school setting.

Among the most dominant disciplinary approaches in the past 15 years has been the philosophy of zero tolerance. Zero tolerance is based on the philosophy of deterrence, that is, the belief that increasing the severity of punishment for both minor and major misbehavior will send a message that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. Before we examine whether the disciplinary practices favored by this approach have been effective in meeting the primary purposes of school discipline, we review the background and definition of zero tolerance.

Zero Tolerance: Background and Definition

Zero tolerance first received national attention as the title of a program developed in 1986 by U.S. Attorney Peter Nunez to impound seagoing vessels carrying any amount of drugs. U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese highlighted the program as a national model in 1988 and ordered U.S. Customs officials to seize the vehicles and property of anyone crossing the border with even trace amounts of drugs, and to charge those individuals in federal court. Beginning in 1989, school districts in California, New York, and Kentucky picked up on the term zero tolerance and mandated expulsion for drugs, fighting, and gang-related activity. By 1993, zero tolerance policies had been adopted across the country, and often were broadened to include not only drugs and weapons but also smoking and school disruption. This tide swept zero tolerance into national policy when the Clinton administration signed the Gun-Free Schools Act into law. The law mandates a 1-year expulsion for possession of a firearm, referral of students who violate the law to the criminal or juvenile justice system, and the provision that state law must authorize local administrators to conduct a case-by-case review of all such expulsions.

State legislatures and local school districts have broadened the mandate of zero tolerance beyond the federal mandates of weapons, to drugs and alcohol, fighting, threats, or swearing. Many school boards continue to toughen their disciplinary policies; some have begun to experiment with permanent expulsion from the system for some offenses. Others have begun to apply school suspensions, expulsions, or transfers to behaviors that occur outside of school (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Michigan Public Policy Initiative, 2003; Potts, Njie, Detch, & Walton, 2003).

As a philosophy more than an intervention, zero tolerance is difficult to define. The National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) report, Violence and Discipline Problems in America's Public Schools: 1996–1997 (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998) defined zero tolerance as a policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specified offenses. Yet the NCES definition of zero tolerance may be unnecessarily broad. One would expect that few school disciplinary policies exist that do not mandate some predetermined consequences for specific behaviors. A more limited definition of zero tolerance is as a disciplinary policy that is "intended primarily as a method of sending a message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated, by punishing all offenses severely, no matter how minor" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 373).

Frequency of Use of Suspension and Expulsion

At the national level, it has been estimated that the number of suspensions and expulsions nationwide has doubled since the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2003). Both state and local district reports suggest increases in out-of-school suspension rates at the local level (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Studies of school discipline (Bowditch, 1993; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997) have consistently found that suspension is among the most widely used disciplinary techniques—perhaps the most frequently used disciplinary tool—but studies also found that rates of usage vary widely. For example, reports of rates of suspension at the high school level have ranged from below 9.3% of enrolled students (Kaeser, 1979) to 92% (Thornton & Trent, 1988). Out-of-school suspension rates appear to be the highest in urban schools, compared with schools in suburban, town, or rural locales (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Mores, 1982). Suspension rates appear to be the lowest in elementary school; they increase and peak during middle school, then drop slightly from middle school to high school (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). School expulsion, though less widely studied, appears to be used relatively infrequently relative to other disciplinary techniques (Heaviside et al., 1998).
PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS

Out-of-school suspension and expulsion are, by their very nature, interventions that pose some risk to educational opportunity. One of the most important findings of educational psychology of the past 30 years is the central importance of academic engagement to learning (Greenwood, Horton, & Ulky, 2002). Thus, suspension and expulsion, which remove students from the opportunity to learn, must be viewed as potentially risky interventions.

Questions about suspension and expulsion as disciplinary tools are essentially issues of costs and benefits. Does the removal of troublesome students from school through suspension and expulsion provide sufficient benefits in terms of safety and improved learning climate to offset the risks to the suspended students' educational opportunity and school bonding that are inherent in disciplinary removal? In the following sections we address that question by reviewing the literature on the efficacy of out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

Efficacy of Disciplinary Removal

How effective is school disciplinary removal in preserving safe school climates that are conducive to learning, in teaching students the behaviors they need to succeed in school, or in deterring students from disruptive behavior? To address that question, we examine research findings on the efficacy of out-of-school suspension and expulsion pertaining to treatment integrity, nondiscriminatory application, and educational outcomes.

Measuring treatment integrity. Treatment integrity, the extent to which an intervention is implemented as planned, has been increasingly viewed as a key factor in judging the effectiveness of behavioral interventions (Lane, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004). Unless an intervention is implemented with some degree of consistency, any changes in school climate or student behavior cannot be attributed to that intervention. For traditional disciplinary interventions, one might expect two indicators of treatment integrity. First, because removal from the opportunity to learn is in most cases the most extreme form of punishment a school could administer, one measure of treatment fidelity would be whether out-of-school suspension and expulsion are reserved for those offenses for which they are intended—the most serious offenses. Second, because disciplinary techniques are intended as methods of behavior change, one would expect that variations in the use of suspension and expulsion would be based largely upon variations in student behavior, not upon idiosyncratic characteristics of schools or school staff. Both of these aspects of the treatment integrity of disciplinary removal are reviewed below.

Are suspension and expulsion reserved for most serious offenses? Looking across studies of school discipline, it is clear that school suspension tends not to be reserved for serious or dangerous behaviors. Fighting or physical aggression among students is consistently found to be among the most common reasons for suspension (Skiba et al., 1997; Stone, 1993). The majority of offenses for which students are suspended, however, appear to be nonviolent, less-disruptive offenses (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Rausch and Skiba (2004) reported that 5% of all out-of-school suspensions in one Midwestern state were in categories such as weapons or drugs that are typically considered more serious or dangerous; the remaining 95% of suspensions fell into two categories: disruptive behavior and other. These data are consistent with Stone's (1993) conclusions from a national survey of 35 school districts representing over a million students: "It appears clear that on reviewing the data to determine if the crime fits the punishment, the answer is no" (p. 367).

One might expect that expulsion, because it is used less frequently, would be reserved for more serious infractions. In one of the few reported studies of school expulsion in American education, Morrison and D'Incau (1997) found that student offenses resulting in expulsion tended to be offenses of moderate to high severity. The authors also reported, however, that the majority of offenses in the sample they investigated were committed by students who would not generally be considered dangerous to the school environment. Some researchers have also suggested that zero tolerance and the increased involvement of law enforcement in schools has led to the criminalization of some relatively minor misbehavior (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Are suspension and expulsion primarily a response to student misbehavior? There can be little doubt that certain students are at a much higher risk for office referral and school suspension and thus account for a disproportionate share of disciplinary effort (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996; Wu et al., 1982). Yet the data also indicate that certain classrooms and schools appear to be responsible for a disproportionate share of disciplinary
referrals. Skiba et al. (1997) reported that at one middle school they studied, 25% of classroom teachers were responsible for 66% of all referrals to the office. In a national study to identify predictors of school suspension, Wu et al. (1982) found that student behavior and attitude did make a significant contribution to the probability of suspension in that model. However, their analyses also showed that a number of school characteristics contributed significantly to the probability of a student's being suspended, including overall school suspension rate, teacher attitudes, administrative centralization, school governance, perceptions of achievement, socioeconomic disadvantage, and racial status. In fact, school and demographic characteristics made a more significant contribution to predicting school suspension than did student behavior and attitude, leading Wu et al. to the following conclusion:

One could argue from this finding that if students are interested in reducing their chances of being suspended, they will be better off by transferring to a school with a lower suspension rate than by improving their attitudes or reducing their misbehavior. (pp. 255–256)

Rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion also appear to be determined by attitudes of school principals. Principals who were interviewed regarding their disciplinary practices for the national report Opportunities Suspended (Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project, 2000) used school suspension in direct proportion to their support for the policy of zero tolerance. Skiba et al. (2003) surveyed 325 principals regarding their attitudes toward zero tolerance, suspension and expulsion, and violence prevention strategies and found a correlation between the attitudes of school principals and school disciplinary outcomes. That is, they found that rates of out-of-school suspension were lower, and the use of preventive measures more frequent, at schools whose principals believed that suspension and expulsion were unnecessary in a positive school climate.

Given the range of school and teacher characteristics that contribute to rates of suspension and expulsion, it is not surprising that district-level research has found the use of disciplinary removal to be extremely inconsistent from school to school (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). Ultimately, then, one must assume that the treatment integrity of out-of-school suspension and expulsion as a disciplinary intervention is low.

**Nondiscriminatory Practice**

Both special education regulations and federal education policy prohibit discrimination in the application or outcomes of intervention. Yet almost 30 years of research has documented racial and socioeconomic disparities in the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

**Disproportionality due to socioeconomic status.** Studies of school suspension have consistently documented disproportionality due to socioeconomic status. Research has found that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of school suspension (Wu et al., 1982). In a qualitative study of student reactions to school discipline, both high- and low-income adolescents reported that students from lower socioeconomic status were likely to commit more frequent and more serious disciplinary infractions than higher income groups (Brantlinger, 1991). Both groups, however, also believed that their school discriminated systematically by social class and agreed that how, and even whether, a student is punished for a given infraction depends on student reputation, achievement, and socioeconomic status.

**Disproportionality due to minority status.** National, state-, district-, and school-level data for the past 30 years shows that African American students have been suspended at rates two to three times that of other students. They are similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wu et al., 1982). Disciplinary overrepresentation of Latino students has been reported in some studies (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2004), but the finding is not universal across locations or studies.

Racial disparities in discipline cannot be fully accounted for by the lower economic status of minority students. Although low socioeconomic status has been consistently found to be a risk factor for school suspension, minority overrepresentation in school punishment remains significant even after statistically controlling for socioeconomic status (Skiba et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982).

Furthermore, no studies show that African American students have higher rates of misbehavior that would result in disproportionate rates of discipline. African American students have been punished for less severe rule violations than white students (Shaw & Braden, 1990)
or have been punished more severely than others who committed the same offense (McFadden & Marsh, 1992). In a study devoted specifically to African American disproportionality in school discipline, Skiba et al. (2002) tested alternate hypotheses for racial disparities in an urban school setting. They found that white students were referred to the office significantly more frequently for offenses that can be objectively documented, such as smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission, and obscene language. In contrast, African American students were referred more often for disrespect, excessive noise, threats, and loitering. Such results suggest a clear pattern of increased subjectivity for African American office referrals. In short, far from showing that African American students act out more than other students, the available evidence suggests that African American students may be subject to office referrals for less serious or more subjective reasons.

Factors associated with disciplinary disparities. Some evidence suggests that the disproportionate representation of African American students originates at the classroom level. Skiba et al. (2002) found that racial disparities in the rate of out-of-school suspension in a large urban district could be almost entirely accounted for by the fact that African American students were twice as likely as white students to be referred to the office by classroom teachers. In an ethnographic observational study, Vavras and Cole (2002) found that many office referrals leading to school suspension in urban classrooms were not the result of serious classroom disruptions. Rather, the authors concluded:

Suspensions are the result of a complex sequence of events that together form a disciplinary moment, a moment when one disruptive act among many is singled out for action by the teacher. This singling-out process, we contend, disproportionately affects students whose race and gender distance them from their teachers, and this subtle, often unconscious process may be one of the reasons why students of color often experience suspension in the absence of violent behavior. (p. 109)

Together, these results are consistent with suggestions that cultural discontinuities may create interactional patterns that increase the likelihood that African American students, especially African American male adolescents, will be removed from class. Townsend (2000) suggested that many teachers, especially those of European American origin, may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the more active and boisterous style of interaction that characterizes African American males. Teachers prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent African American males as threatening or dangerous may thus be more likely to react more quickly to relatively minor threats to authority that might be ignored for other ethnic or racial groups.

In summary, it is hard to argue that disciplinary removal is not discriminatory. Rather, students of color, particularly African American students, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are at increased risk of being removed from school through suspension or expulsion. These disparities cannot be explained simply by socioeconomic status or the behavior of the students themselves. The evidence suggests that these disparities are, at least in part, a product of cultural discontinuity or insufficient training in culturally responsive classroom management practices. Together with findings that racial disproportionality in suspension increases in schools that use suspension more frequently (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986), these data make a case that the use, and especially the overuse, of disciplinary removal carries with it an inherent risk of racial disparity.

Outcomes of Disciplinary Removal

Any frequently used behavioral intervention must consider outcomes to justify their use. Federal educational legislation has increasingly mandated that schools use only evidence-based educational interventions. Disciplinary removal could be judged an effective educational or behavioral intervention if it led to improvements in either individual rates of disruptive or violent behavior or overall school safety or school climate. Data on the outcomes of exclusionary disciplinary approaches are reviewed below.

Do zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions improve student behavior? Behavioral psychology defines an effective punisher as one that reduces the future probability of responding (Skinner, 1953). Yet descriptive studies of out-of-school suspension have consistently shown a high rate of repeat offending (Bowditch, 1993; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). Furthermore, out-of-school suspension in late elementary school has been found to be among the strongest predictors of out-of-school suspension in middle school (Raffaele Mendez, 2003), prompting some
researchers to conclude that, for some students, “suspension functions as a reinforcer … rather than as a punisher” (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996, p. 91).

In the long term, school suspension has been found to be a moderate to strong predictor of dropout, retention, and late graduation. Research on at-risk students in the 1980s found a moderate and stable correlation between out-of-school suspension and high school dropout (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). Raffaele Mendez (2003) also reported that the number of out-of-school suspensions a student received as a sixth-grader correlated negatively with the probability that the student would graduate with his or her cohort of students 6 years later as a 12th-grade student. Interestingly, this relationship was stronger for African American students than for White students.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that the relationship between school suspension and school dropout may not be entirely accidental. Ethnographic field studies of school discipline, which included interviewing administrators and observing the school discipline process, have noted that disciplinarians in troubled urban schools often view their role in large measure as dealing with persistent troublemakers who challenge the institution’s authority (Bouditch, 1993). In such a context, suspension may be used as a push-out tool to encourage low-achieving students and those viewed as troublemakers to leave school before graduation.

Do suspension and expulsion improve school climate? Rather than making a contribution to school safety, the increased use of suspension and expulsion seems to be associated with student and teacher perceptions of a less effective and less inviting school climate. Schools with higher rates of suspension have been reported to have higher student–teacher ratios and a lower level of academic quality (Hellman & Beaton, 1986). Wu et al. (1982) found that attending a school with less satisfactory school governance was a significant predictor of a student’s being suspended at least once in her or his school career.

Because an important purpose of school discipline is to maintain a school climate that is conducive to learning, a positive correlation could be expected between effective school discipline and a school’s average academic achievement. However, emerging data suggest a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and academic achievement. Skiba et al. (2003) reported that states with higher rates of out-of-school suspension had lower average scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, and Ferron (2002) found that student achievement in writing was negatively associated with out-of-school suspensions for middle and high school students.

The simple relationship between achievement and discipline could of course result from a number of factors. For example, schools in more disadvantaged areas might have a higher percentage of difficult students who are suspended and also exhibit lower achievement. To test this hypothesis, Skiba and Rausch (2004) conducted a multivariate analysis testing the relationship of school discipline and academic achievement, controlling for a number of demographic variables, including the school’s percentage of students accepting free and reduced lunch (poverty), enrollment of African American students, and school type (elementary or secondary). Results indicated that higher school rates of out-of-school suspension were associated with lower passing rates on the state accountability test, regardless of the demographic or the economic or racial makeup of the school.

Summary: The Failure of Zero Tolerance as a Disciplinary Paradigm

Schools must use all effective methods at their disposal to prevent violence and to ensure a school climate that is maximally conducive to learning. Schools have a right and responsibility to minimize disruptions that can threaten the integrity of the learning environment. In the wake of frightening violence in some U.S. schools in the 1990s, there can be little doubt about the depth of the consensus around these propositions.

Among the key words in that understanding, however, is the term effective. In the climate of fear generated by real and perceived threats to the safety of schools, many schools and school districts adopted a get-tough deterrent philosophy of zero tolerance as an intuitive method for addressing perceived threats to school safety. It makes logical sense that strict levels of enforcement for both major and minor incidents will be effective in sending a message to students that disruption will not be tolerated. It makes sense that removing troublemakers will be effective in improving and strengthening the school climate for those students who remain. Yet as data on zero tolerance, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion have emerged, they have overwhelmingly failed to support these commonsense notions that lie at the heart of the zero tolerance philosophy. Suspension and expulsion
appear to be used too inconsistently to guarantee treatment integrity. Over 30 years of consistent data on African American overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion indicate that disciplinary school exclusion may carry inherent risks for creating or exacerbating racial and socioeconomic disadvantage. No evidence as yet shows that zero tolerance contributes to school safety or improves student behavior; rather, increased levels of out-of-school suspension and expulsion are related to less adequate school climates, lower levels of achievement at the school level, a higher probability of future student misbehavior, and eventually lower levels of school completion. These data indicate that the actual benefits of removing a child from school for disciplinary reasons are in no way sufficient to counterbalance other concerns created by those interventions in terms of loss of educational opportunity and threats to school bonding.

Expecting that schools will simply cease suspending and expelling disruptive students is of course unrealistic. In the absence of any other effective strategy, removing the tool many administrators believe is their only or best option might simply increase school disruption and chaos. Thus, it becomes extremely important to examine the available alternatives to suspension and expulsion and the potential for the effective implementation of those alternatives in schools.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS FOR PREVENTION

Given the mandate of No Child Left Behind to use only effective strategies, one would assume that over time pressure will increase on schools to develop more effective disciplinary approaches that can maintain safe school climates with a lower risk to student learning. To what extent do such alternatives exist? How widely are they implemented? How can schools begin to move away from ineffective and punitive discipline toward more evidence-based procedures?

Evidence-Based Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion

Effective alternatives for reducing the threat of youth violence have been identified nationally. In the past 10 years, the U.S. government has convened or sponsored a number of research efforts and panels on school-based prevention of youth violence, including a report to Congress on youth violence (Sherman et al., 1997), the Department of Education/Juvenile Justice response to school shootings (see Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998), and the report of the U.S. Surgeon General on violence prevention (Elliott, Hatot, Sirovatka, & Potter, 2001). Those panels have in general relied on relatively rigorous methodological criteria in the selection of effective and promising programs. Their findings have been remarkably consistent, with each other and with scholarly reviews (e.g., Gagnon & Leone, 2001), in outlining an emerging conceptual model and in identifying programs that appear to be most effective within that model.

In 1993, the American Psychological Association (APA) released its report Violence and Youth: Psychology’s Response (APA, 1993), which addressed what was then widely perceived as an epidemic of youth violence. That report framed youth violence prevention efforts in terms of a three-tiered primary prevention model. Since the publication of that report, a large number of researchers, policy makers, and professional organizations have articulated similar prevention models that can be applied to mental health (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994), youth violence in general (Elliott et al., 2001; Tolan & Guerra, 1994), or school violence in particular (Walker et al., 1996). The model became the centerpiece for efforts by the U.S. Department of Education to provide guidance to America’s schools concerning the prevention of violence (Dwyer et al., 1998).

Figure 1 represents the three levels of a primary prevention model. As applied in school settings, the framework acts as a useful schematic for organizing violence prevention and school disciplinary interventions. The model represents the following three levels: First, to promote a safe and responsive climate for all students, schools implement primary or universal prevention efforts, such as the following, school-wide: conflict resolution (Bodine & Crawford, 1998), bullying prevention (see chapter 10), social and emotional learning (see chapter 1), teaching to instill self-discipline (see chapter 3) and improved classroom management (Gottfredson et al., 2000).

At the secondary or selected prevention level, schools implement early screening or identification efforts for children who may be at risk for violence (Walker & Shinn, 2002) and programs such as anger management (see chapter 9) or mentoring that can reconnect students with schools and other institutions.

Third, despite schools’ best efforts, some form of disruption, aggression, or perhaps violence will likely occur that requires an appropriate response. Tertiary or indicated prevention interventions, such as multisystemic
Tertiary Prevention: Effective Responses to Inappropriate Behavior

Figure 1. The Safe and Responsive Schools Model of school violence prevention. Primary prevention approaches to create a safe and positive school climate are applied universally to address issues of day-to-day disruption and school climate. Secondary prevention strategies of early identification and early intervention are applied to a smaller proportion of the school population that may be at risk for violence or disruption. Effective response strategies and intervention are in place for those students who are already engaging in disruptive behavior.

therapy, are targeted at those students who have already engaged in violence and disruption. Such efforts are characterized by a planned and coordinated response that seeks to minimize the future damage of aggression to the child and others (Bear, Webster-Stratton, Furlong, & Rhee, 2000; Walker & Shinn, 2002).

Increasingly, policy pressures from federal (e.g., No Child Left Behind) and state government have emphasized student outcomes in the areas of academic achievement, attendance, and dropout. This reality has forced schools to reorganize their practices to produce positive changes in those performance indicators. The increased academic focus necessitated by accountability planning may increase schools’ resistance to considering programs that are not viewed as directly relating to mandated outcomes, such as programs that focus on interpersonal competence. However, the emerging research base that documents the relationship between a positive school climate and academic outcomes suggests that, by minimizing disruption and improving student engagement, preventive and social-emotional interventions represent a key element in attaining strong academic outcomes (Brophy, 1988; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Thus, the perception that improving academic outcomes and improving social-emotional outcomes are somehow contradictory is probably in error. Rather, the data suggest that prevention-based programs that
focus on social–emotional learning are an important component in achieving the improved academic outcomes mandated by federal and state accountability requirements.

Implementation of Preventive Alternatives

The existence of an extensive and relatively consistent database on school-based intervention for the prevention of violence does not guarantee that schools will implement those strategies. G. Gottfredson et al. (2000) surveyed a nationally representative sample of school principals and teachers regarding the implementation of prevention programs at their school. More than 50% of the principals reported a prevention activity in most of the 20 prevention categories surveyed. However, teachers reported that implementation of prevention activities was typically at a level that would be considered unacceptable for guaranteeing efficacy. In addition, the most widely used prevention practices were not necessarily those identified in evidence-based literature but instead tended to be less widely researched procedures with respect to their effect on student behavior.

Nor has it been demonstrated that schools can implement prevention programs with a high degree of treatment integrity. Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Skroban (1998) attempted to implement a multicomponent violence prevention strategy, using only evidence-based strategies, in a single middle school. Despite the school’s personnel having levels of training well in excess of typical school research, Gottfredson et al. (1998) reported that few of the components of the program were received by more than 60% of the students, and that the intensity of the interventions was lower than expected.

The problem of implementing evidence-based violence prevention programs in school settings may be the result of an overfocus in the field on the notion of internal validity and experimental control. Schoenwald and Hoagwood (2001) argue that the majority of evidence-based practices have been developed under “test tube conditions” that fail to mirror the realities of school settings. Generally, the programs most often identified as effective or promising in violence prevention research have been implemented by highly trained professionals, researchers, or graduate assistants and often have been accompanied by a large influx of grant support. Such rigorous experimental conditions are critical to demonstrate internal validity and to enable judgments that the treatments, and not nuisance variables, are responsible for observed effects. Yet such conditions do not guarantee that evidence-based procedures will be feasible in real-world settings, which typically lack highly trained researchers, graduate assistants, and large amounts of discretionary funds.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Restructuring of School Disciplinary Methods: Two Alternatives

Extensive study with fairly rigorous experimental criteria has identified a number of effective nonexclusionary, evidence-based alternatives capable of reducing the threat of school violence and of maintaining an instructional climate conducive to learning. However, the existence of effective evidence-based alternatives unfortunately has not guaranteed widespread implementation of those alternatives in school settings. The most critical challenge facing alternative approaches to school discipline, therefore, is to find effective methods of implementing research-based practices in school discipline and school violence prevention.

A number of strategies have been designed to improve implementation of such alternatives. Those strategies typically are characterized by attention to the process by which schools implement effective alternatives that are tailored to local needs. Two of those efforts, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Safe and Responsive Schools, are highlighted below.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Originally developed to address the persistently challenging behavior of students with disabilities, the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model focuses on providing schools, especially classroom teachers, with comprehensive, positive, and locally generated systems of proactive resources (Sugai et al., 2000). One key assumption of PBIS is that human behavior is learned. Thus, PBIS seeks to teach students appropriate behaviors that promote academic and social engagement by intentionally altering environmental contexts, including the behaviors of teachers and administrators, that may contribute to student misbehavior. The system creates and fosters support systems at the school-wide level (i.e., all students and all staff), in specific school settings (e.g., hallways, transition periods), at the classroom level (e.g., improved classroom management practices), and at the individual student level (e.g., functional behavior
assessment). It also assumes that behavior occurs in a unique social and cultural context, and any proposed changes must be socially and culturally responsive.

PBIS is structured to be responsive to local needs, allowing schools to address local issues. A school PBIS plan is typically created and implemented by a team of local educators, community members, and parents. That team is charged with reviewing their school’s discipline and other relevant data to identify areas of concern and the contextual variables hypothesized to be contributing to the concerns, and generate positive interventions to change those relationships. The team also implements selected interventions, tracks the effects of the interventions, and modifies the program as needed.

A growing body of evidence suggests that PBIS can be effective as an alternative to disciplinary removal (Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003; Scott & Barrett, 2004; Sugai et al., 2000). Reductions in office referrals for misbehavior, suspensions, expulsions, teacher attrition, and turnover have been noted, as well as increases in positive school climates and results from state-mandated assessments (Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003). Results also suggest that well-designed PBIS systems produce significant decreases in time spent on discipline by classroom teachers, students, and administrative staff, freeing up time to focus on instruction and a more productive educational environment. For example, as a result of reductions in office disciplinary referrals and suspensions, one urban elementary school’s comprehensive PBIS implementation resulted in a total 2-year gain of 31.4 days of administrator time and 158.9 additional school days for students (Scott & Barrett, 2004). After taking into consideration the expenditures on PBIS training and implementation and converting administrator and student time into monetary values, this particular school realized a net savings of almost $7,000 in the first year of implementation and close to $10,000 in the second implementation year, compared with baseline levels.

**Safe and Responsive Schools.** The Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS) project (Skiba, Peterson, Miller, Ritter, & Simmons, in press) has sought to enable schools and school districts to develop a broader perspective on school safety, stressing comprehensive planning, prevention, and parent and community involvement. The goal of the project has been to increase the knowledge base of teachers and administrators concerning what works in discipline and violence prevention, and to develop a comprehensive model of systems change in school discipline. Working from a three-tiered primary prevention model, the SRS project has worked with rural, suburban, and urban schools in two states to assist them in developing school safety plans.

Skiba et al. (in press) describe the implementation of the SRS model in two states (Indiana and Nebraska) over 3 years. To proceed strategically toward a school safety plan that would address key school issues, participating schools engaged in a year of structured school planning that consisted of four phases.

1. **Team Formation.** Participating schools developed a team, including general and special educators, school psychologists, administrators, parents, and students, which met biweekly to carry out the planning activities.

2. **Needs Assessment.** SRS teams engaged in two needs assessment activities that helped the team identify their most significant school safety problems and the resources available at their school to address those problems.

3. **Best Practices Review.** Once the SRS team had identified their school’s areas of greatest need in terms of safety and violence prevention, they reviewed fact sheets and Internet-based materials that might address the safety needs of the school. Team discussion considered (a) the key components of the strategy, (b) the general evidence available to determine the effectiveness of that strategy, and (c) the extent to which that intervention appeared to fit the needs and resources of their own school.

4. **Strategic Planning.** Finally, guided by a series of strategic planning worksheets, each school team considered both their needs assessment data and available best-evidence strategies to design a Safe and Responsive Schools plan.

Evaluation data after 1 year of the SRS plans’ implementation are highly encouraging. Table 1 shows that among the first four participating secondary schools in the state of Indiana, out-of-school suspensions for the entire school showed a decline of 40% to 60%. Gains also extended to students with disabilities. One middle school showed a drop from 39 suspensions for students with disabilities in 1999–2000 to no suspensions in 2000–2001.

The process was exemplified by the experience of one participating school: Owen Valley High School in rural Spencer, Indiana. During the planning year, the SRS team identified one of the school’s major problems as being the large number of disciplinary referrals to the office, especially for minor misbehavior. To respond to that issue, the school developed an innovative new...
Table 1  Total Number of Suspensions for Participating SRS Schools: 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 School Years\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spencer Owen</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen Valley High School</td>
<td>1293</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen Valley Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richland Bean Blossom</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgewood High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgewood Junior High School</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Data were taken from the Suspension Report submitted by all Indiana schools each year to the Indiana Department of Education.

program called the intervention room. Before making an office referral, any teacher can refer a student exhibiting a behavioral problem to the intervention room, which is staffed by both a general and a special education teacher. Students referred to the intervention room for behavioral issues meet with the intervention room teachers, who process the incident with the student, attempt to help the student take responsibility for his or her behavior, and assist the student in returning to the classroom with a plan for avoiding future problems. SRS team members at Owen Valley High School attribute many of the changes in their disciplinary data to the implementation of the intervention room. Finally, these improvements reflect the relationship between positive discipline and academic excellence. In the 2001–2002 school year, Owen Valley High School was one of six schools in the nation that won the prestigious New American High School award from the U.S. Department of Education in recognition of its reform efforts and increased academic excellence.

**Recommendations for Practitioners**

Recommendations for modifying or moving away from a zero tolerance model have begun to emerge. School psychologists who wish to move their school toward best-practices school discipline and violence prevention programs might consider advocating for the following recommendations.

- **Reserve zero tolerance disciplinary removals for only the most serious and severe of disruptive behaviors, and define those behaviors explicitly.** The need to protect against the most serious infractions should be balanced with the lack of efficacy data supporting the use of zero tolerance for less serious offenses. A best-evidence approach would suggest restricting zero tolerance to only the most serious of infractions, such as possession of firearms on school property.

- **Replace one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with graduated systems of discipline, wherein consequences are geared to the seriousness of the infraction.** In response to community concerns about punishments that do not fit the crime under zero tolerance, many school districts are implementing graduated systems of discipline, reserving severe punishment for only the most serious, safety-threatening offenses. Less serious offenses, such as classroom disruption, attendance-related behaviors, or even minor fights among students are met with less severe consequences that might range from in-school suspension to parent contact, reprimands, community service, or counseling.

- **Define all infractions, whether major or minor, carefully.** Garibaldi, Blanchard, and Brooks (1996) argued that inadequate reporting of disciplinary information allows individual bias to creep in, which can lead to disproportional discipline. Carefully drawn definitions of all behaviors subject to the school disciplinary code protect students from inequitable consequences and protect school officials from charges of unfair and arbitrary application of school policy.

- **Expand the array of options available to schools for dealing with disruptive or violent behavior.** One must assume that school boards or administrators implementing zero tolerance policies are not doing so because they take pleasure in removing children from school. Rather, many school disciplinarians may simply be unaware of more effective alternatives. School psychologists can play a critical role in the
development of more effective disciplinary systems by becoming aware of best practices for effective preventive alternatives and by disseminating that information to administrators and teachers.

- **Implement preventive measures that can improve school climate and reconnect alienated students.** Osher, Sandler, and Nelson (2001) noted that many of the most effective programs in the nation for dealing with student disruption are characterized by high levels of student support and community. Solutions to the zero tolerance dilemma might also seek to shift the focus from relying on punishment strategies of questionable efficacy, to using research-supported strategies such as conflict resolution and bullying prevention to improve the sense of school community and belonging.

- **Improve collaboration and communication among schools, parents, juvenile justice professionals, and mental health workers to develop an array of alternatives for challenging youth.** The behaviors of the most challenging of youth can seriously disrupt school environments, and the problems faced by these youth and their families often exceed the abilities of any one agency to address them. Collaborative approaches such as “wraparound” (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002) are promising as ways of providing additional resources to schools to address the most serious and challenging behaviors.

- **Evaluate all school discipline and school violence prevention strategies to ensure that all disciplinary interventions, programs, or strategies are truly affecting student behavior and school safety.** Accountability of instruction has become a national priority. There is no reason why behavioral or disciplinary procedures should be held to a lower standard of accountability. The implementation of any procedure addressing student behavior or school violence—whether it be zero tolerance, conflict resolution, school security, or classroom management—must be accompanied by an evaluation adequate to determine whether that procedure has indeed made a positive contribution to improving school safety or student behavior. Without such data, time and resources could be wasted on strategies that sound appealing but, in fact, do little to decrease a school’s chances of disruption or violence.

Using data from reform efforts such as PBIS and Safe and Responsive Schools, Table 2 presents a four-step process as a guide for school psychologists and other school leaders who seek to restructure their school’s or district’s disciplinary practices. Previous efforts have shown that a school- or district-wide commitment to exploring alternatives is a critical first step in school reform. Thus, school psychologists can work with school administrators to ensure that initial efforts are led by a team of respected professionals with the mandate to consider alternatives and with the authority to have their recommendations accepted. Once the planning team is in place, a structured needs assessment process enables the team to identify both the key local disciplinary concerns and the resources currently in place or needed for addressing those concerns. With that information, the team explores the availability of evidence-based programs that can address the most important concerns raised by the needs assessment. Finally, in the strategic planning phase, the team begins to implement the new program or programs to meet identified needs and evaluate the outcomes of that effort.

### Table 2  A Four-Step Process for Disciplinary Reform: Putting the Safe and Responsive Schools Process Into Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Making a commitment</td>
<td>Develop school-based teams composed of respected representatives of key school and community constituencies, and ensure that the time and accomplishments of that team are valued and recognized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Looking at local data</td>
<td>Review available data (questionnaires, surveys, team discussion, and disciplinary data) to (a) identify the greatest local needs or concerns with respect to violence, disruption, school discipline, and school climate; and (b) identify the school’s strengths and resources in school violence prevention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Finding and examining resources</td>
<td>Review evidence-based practices for addressing violence and disruption at all three levels of prevention to identify promising practices and assess how those practices could be adopted within local resource constraints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Using strategic planning to create change</td>
<td>Use data from all previous phases to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses local violence and disciplinary prevention needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SUMMARY**

Clear and effective school discipline systems are critical in maintaining safe school environments conducive to learning. Yet the evidence has failed to support disciplinary
exclusion as an intervention capable of ensuring such a climate. Viewed as behavioral interventions, out-of-school suspension and expulsion appear to lack treatment integrity, to show consistent evidence of racial and socioeconomic disparities, and to be associated with negative outcomes in terms of school climate, student behavior, student achievement, and school dropout. Fortunately, effective alternatives are emerging, many with strong empirical support. Problems of implementation clearly remain to be solved, although school reform strategies such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Safe and Responsive Schools appear to hold promise as methods for reforming school discipline systems. The challenge ahead for research and practice will be to identify ways to increase the implementation of effective disciplinary systems that maintain school safety without removing students from the opportunity to learn.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books and Other Printed Material


This collection of articles addresses the issue of zero-tolerance interventions that are designed with a non-technical audience in mind.


This book thoughtfully considers the forces that maintain zero-tolerance policies and the consequences of those policies.


This collection of six reviews consider the data on zero tolerance, suspension and expulsion, and the alternatives to those procedures.

Websites

http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/

Blueprints for Violence Prevention, the website of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, presents findings of its evidence-based evaluations identifying effective violence prevention programs.

http://www.pavnet.org

The Partnerships Against Violence Network is a virtual library of information about violence and youth at risk with data from seven federal agencies. Professionals can communicate and share resources using the network.

http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/

Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General was a collaboration of three federal agencies (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to describe the status of knowledge about youth violence prevention, and especially to identify effective and promising practices for addressing youth violence.

http://www.unl.edu/srs/ or http://www.indiana.edu/safechil

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project at University of Nebraska–Lincoln and Indiana University is a framework that enables schools to engage in a strategic planning process to restructure school discipline and school safety planning.

http://www.tolerance.org/reach/index.jsp

Tolerance.org is a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center that helps educators and others teach tolerance.

http://ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind

Children Left Behind is the website of a project analyzing one state’s disciplinary data in order to create a meaningful dialogue among policymakers, educators, and community members about suspension, expulsion, and their alternatives.

REFERENCES


