

Discipline, Achievement, and Race

Is Zero Tolerance the Answer?

Augustina H. Reyes (Ed.)

Rowman & Littlefield Education
Lanham, Maryland • Toronto • Oxford
2006

represented the population we were trying to reach, which was primarily teachers in mainstream public middle and high schools. The other four groups were comprised of teachers at the school where we held the focus groups, with the exception of one group where two of the seven teachers came from a nearby high school (see table 5.1).

REFERENCES

- Ayers, W., Dohrn, B., and Ayers, R., eds. (2001). *Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in Our Schools*. New York: The New Press.
- Casella, R. (2003). Punishing dangerousness through preventative detention: Illustrating the institutional link between school and prison. *New Directions for Youth Development* 99, 55–70.
- The Civil Rights Project and the Advancement Project. (2000). *Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of School Discipline and Zero Tolerance Policies*. Available at www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/discipline/discipline_gen.php.
- Gordon, J. (2003, November 16). Connecticut: In schools, bad behavior is shown the door. *New York Times*, p. 1A.
- Public Agenda. (2004, May). Teaching interrupted: Do discipline policies in today's public schools foster the common good? Prepared by Public Agenda with support from Common Good, www.publicagenda.org.
- Skiba, R., and Edl, H. (2004). *The Disciplinary Practices Survey: How Do Indiana's Principals Feel about Discipline?* Bloomington: Indiana University, Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.
- Stein, N. (2001). Sexual harassment meets zero tolerance: Life in K–12 schools. In W. Ayers, B. Dohrn, and R. Ayers (eds.), *Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in Our Schools* (pp. 143–154). New York: The New Press.
- Vavrus, R., and Cole, K. M. (2002). "I didn't do nothin'": The discursive construction of school suspension. *The Urban Review* 34, 87–111.
- Wald, J., and Losen, D. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *New Directions for Youth Development* 99, 9–16.

Exclusion Is Not the Only Alternative: The Children Left Behind Project

M. Karega Rausch and Russell J. Skiba

Current evidence strongly suggests that the philosophy and practice of zero tolerance school discipline has failed as an educational intervention to ensure student safety, improve school climates, advance student learning, or provide equitable results; yet, the approach remains popular among many educational administrators and political leaders. The popularity of zero tolerance, however, does not mean that all educational leaders ascribe to this paradigm. Absent from much of the research base to date are the voices of school principals actively promoting alternative philosophies and practices better suited to meet the paramount goals of student safety and learning. This chapter describes the findings of the Children Left Behind project, focusing on the perspectives and practices of school leaders in one midwestern state. The emerging results of this project suggest that (1) diversity exists among school principals in their endorsement of zero tolerance school discipline, (2) the disciplinary perspectives of school principals are related to the use of exclusionary student removal and use of preventive alternatives, and (3) the perspective of principals endorsing alternatives to student exclusion suggest that removing students from the learning environment is not the only method available for keeping students safe to learn.

Out-of-school suspension and expulsion are widely used in our schools, and their frequency is increasing. Our best evidence to date shows that suspension and expulsion are among the most widely used disciplinary techniques, perhaps the most frequently used disciplinary tools (Bowditch, 1993;

Mansfield and Farris, 1992; Rose, 1988; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams, 1997; Uchitelle, Bartz, and Hillman, 1989). National data estimate that about 7 percent of the school population missed at least one day of school due to being suspended or expelled, double the number since the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003). Further, large and widening racial disparities are evident in the composition of students removed from school; in 2000, while representing 17 percent of the student population, African Americans represented 34 percent of the suspended population (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003). African American students are currently 2.6 times as likely to be suspended compared to white students, up from about two times as likely in the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003).

Scholars have suggested that the surge and growing inequity in student removal is due in part to the emergence and popularity of the philosophy termed "zero tolerance" (Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers, 2001; Noguera, 1995; Skiba and Peterson, 1999; Verdugo, 2002; Wald and Losen, 2003). In short, zero tolerance school discipline is based on the assumption of *deterrence*: irrespective of context, punishing school "troublemakers" severely sends a message that misbehavior will not be tolerated, and schools will be more orderly and safer for those remaining. The philosophy assumes that distributing uniform punishments and removing disruptive students will yield safer schools, improved climates more conducive to learning, and more equitable distribution of punishment (Skiba, 2004).

Although intuitively appealing, our best evidence has failed to support the assumptions of zero tolerance. Zero tolerance in general and suspension and expulsion in particular have been associated with a number of negative schooling outcomes including higher rates of dropout (Bowditch, 1993), a more punitive schooling environment (Bickel and Qualls, 1980), high rates of repeat offending (Tobin, Sugai, and Colvin, 1996), and increased racial inequality without any evidence of higher rates of misbehavior in minority student populations (Skiba et al., 2002; Wald and Losen, 2003). Frequent use of student exclusion has also been found to be related to lower achievement on state accountability examinations, even after controlling for other strong sociodemographic predictors of achievement (Davis and Jordan, 1994; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, and Ferron, 2002; Rausch, Skiba, and Simmons, 2005). Further, emerging evidence suggests that zero tolerance strengthens a school-to-prison pipeline by criminalizing student misbehavior that would normally have been addressed by school officials (Advancement Project, 2005; Wald and Losen, 2003).

In spite of the evidence suggesting the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance

school discipline, it remains a popular approach advocated by many political leaders and educational administrators. Recent evidence at the national, state, and school-district levels have demonstrated large surges in the number and percent of students being suspended and expelled from school, often coinciding with the implementation of zero tolerance policies (Advancement Project, 2005; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher, 2001; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Michigan Public Policy Institute, 2003; Potts et al., 2003; Richart, Brooks, and Soler, 2003). The popularity is also illustrated by state legislatures and local school districts broadening the mandate of zero tolerance beyond the federal mandates of firearms (i.e., the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994; Public Law 103-227, 1994) to drugs and alcohol, fighting, and 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 et al., 2001; Michigan Public Policy Initiative, 2003; Potts et al., 2003).

Yet the current popularity of zero tolerance school discipline does not mean that all educational leaders ascribe to this paradigm, including those serving student populations assumed to be at a higher risk for school removal (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Dunbar and Villarruel, 2004; Mukuria, 2002; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Absent from much of the research literature to date are the perspectives and practices of school leaders explicitly advocating an approach that favors preventive alternatives to student removal. Consistent with a growing research base suggesting that prevention is more effective than removal (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998; Elliott et al., 2001; Gagnon and Leone, 2001; Mihalic et al., 2001; Thornton et al., 2000), these voices-in-practice offer much to the dialogue on how best to ensure safe and productive learning environments for students.

There is no debate that schools must be places that preserve, maintain, and create climates conducive to learning for *all* students, and disciplinary systems must facilitate progress toward these goals. The question that creates controversy is *how* to create disciplinary systems supportive of these ends. The large and growing research base suggests that student exclusion as a primary part of a school's disciplinary system has been unable to help educators meet these goals. Thus, alternative perspectives and practices from those engaged with students every day are of paramount importance. This chapter seeks to fill this gap, by describing some of the findings of the Children Left Behind project,¹ illustrating that many school leaders believe that preventive disciplinary systems are best suited to achieve the goal of creating school climates conducive to learning.

THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND PROJECT

The goals of the Children Left Behind project were twofold: (1) to open a statewide dialogue concerning the best methods for promoting and maintaining a safe and productive learning climate in the schools of this midwestern state, and (2) to initiate and maintain a forum for discussion between those in the juvenile justice system and the state's educational system to ensure that methods chosen for maintaining order in our schools do not jeopardize the human potential of young people or the overall safety of communities. The project was guided by two foundational principles: (1) schools have a right and responsibility to apply methods that are effective in maintaining a climate that is as free as possible of disruptions to student learning, and (2) best practice suggests, and recent federal policy mandates (i.e., the No Child Left Behind Act; Public Law 107-110, 2002), that all educational practices employed in schools must maximize the opportunity to learn for all children, regardless of their background.

In the following sections, we describe the data from the Children Left Behind project, highlighting the perspectives-in-practice of local principals in creating and maintaining safe and productive schools. First, we describe results from a survey of school principals, querying their attitudes about the purpose, process, and outcomes of school discipline. Next, the results of in-depth interviews with principals describing preventive practices used in their schools are presented. One of these interviews, describing how a preventive approach can have a transformative effect on the schooling environment, is described in more detail.

PRINCIPAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: THE DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES SURVEY

A common misconception held by some educators and policy makers is that there are virtually no alternatives to school removal for maintaining safe schools. However, surveys with principals in this midwestern state suggest that a diversity of perspectives, opinions, and activities exist within schools.

A survey of 325 school principals was conducted in the state of Indiana to better understand principal attitudes towards school discipline (Skiba and Edl, 2004). The survey was administered in an online format during March and April of 2003. Principals were asked to rate their agreement with statements reflecting various attitudes about school discipline. Principals were also asked to rate usage of a number of preventive disciplinary strategies (e.g., bullying prevention, conflict resolution, etc.) in their schools.

Results revealed that principals hold very different perspectives on school

discipline. Principals were almost evenly split over whether zero tolerance "sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in schools." Further, a large majority (98.5 percent) of principals thought that "teachers ought to be able to manage the majority of students' misbehavior in their classrooms." Yet, only 29 percent thought that teachers were adequately trained by their teacher training programs to deal with student misbehavior.

Further statistical analysis revealed three distinct perspectives on school discipline among these principals (see table 6.1). These clusters were categorized as prevention orientation, support for suspension and expulsion, and pragmatic prevention. Importantly, differences in principal perspectives were not only associated with use of suspension but were also related to attitudes regarding parents, students, and special education disciplinary regulations.

Table 6.1 Representative items endorsed more frequently by principals with different perspectives on school discipline*

-
- Group 1: Prevention Orientation
- Developing and implementing prevention programs pays off in terms of decreased disruption and disciplinary incidents.
 - Suspension and expulsion do not really solve disciplinary problems.
 - Students with disabilities who engage in disruptive behavior need a different approach to discipline than students in general education.
 - I feel it is critical to work with parents before suspending a student from school.
 - Conversations with students referred to the office should be factored into most decisions about disciplinary consequences.
- Group 2: Support for Suspension and Expulsion
- Zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.
 - Out-of-school suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining school order.
 - Most if not all disciplinary problems come from inadequacies in the child's home situation.
 - Disciplinary regulations for special education create a separate system that makes it more difficult to enforce discipline.
 - My duties as an administrator simply don't allow me the time to get to know students on an individual basis.
- Group 3: Pragmatic Prevention
- Suspension and expulsion allow students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.
 - Teachers at this school were adequately prepared to handle problems of misbehavior and discipline.
 - *Least likely to believe that:* Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option.
 - *Least likely to believe that:* Violence is getting worse at my school.
-

*Unless otherwise noted, items listed are those that the group in question on average rated the highest of the three groups, and significantly higher than at least one other group.

For example, the one third of responding principals supporting a preventive approach to discipline were also more likely to believe that it is critical to work with parents before suspension, that discipline should be adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and that conversations with students are an important part of the disciplinary process. This cluster of principals served schools with fewer suspensions for both serious infractions (e.g., drugs, weapons) and general disruptive behavior, and were more likely to report having conflict resolution, individual behavior plans, peer mediation, bullying prevention, and anger management programs in place.

In contrast, one third of the principals supported the use of suspension and expulsion and agreed that zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at their school. They were also more likely to believe that discipline problems stem from an inadequate home situation, that special education disciplinary regulations create a separate system that makes it more difficult to enforce discipline, and that they lack sufficient time to get to know students on an individual basis. These principals served schools with higher rates of out-of-school suspension.

The final group of principals that emerged might be termed a “pragmatic prevention” group. On the one hand, these principals agreed that out-of-school suspension and expulsion encourage students to think about their behavior, but they are also least likely to believe that suspension and expulsion were their only options and were least likely to believe that school violence was increasing at their school. The attitudes expressed by this group tended to fall somewhere in-between the first two groups. They also more closely resembled the prevention orientation group, with a lower rate of suspension and a higher reported use of prevention programs than principals who supported suspension and expulsion.

Thus, consistent with previous research (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Morrison, Morrison, and Minjarez, 1999; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002), there appear to be important differences among principals in their beliefs about school discipline. In the following sections, we explore these perspectives in more detail, presenting interviews with principals who have chosen a more preventive approach to discipline for maintaining a safe and productive school climate.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND ACTIONS TO ZERO TOLERANCE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

In order to come to a deeper understanding of the choices that principals make at the school level, the Children Left Behind project interviewed princi-

pals across the state who described a variety of options they use as an alternative to zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions.² Principals participating in the study were solicited through the state association of school principals and volunteered to share information about programs in their schools that they feel are effective in maintaining a safe and productive learning climate. Protocols were developed and used querying the following areas: (1) philosophy/program description (e.g., what is the school’s disciplinary philosophy, who does the program serve, where is it located, etc.), (2) structure (e.g., what methods are used to prevent violence and disruption from occurring or intervene when they do occur), and (3) outcomes (e.g., how have students and staff responded to this philosophy/program).

Telephone interviews were conducted with nine principals and one high school assistant principal responsible for discipline. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Transcribed interview data were analyzed for trends and themes (Silverman, 2000; Yin, 2003) specific to programs, practices, and perspectives that participants reported using to maintain safe and productive schools. Three researchers analyzed the data independently and then came to a consensus on the most relevant, recurring, and informative themes and trends.

Across conversations with principals serving a diversity of schools, three primary themes emerged: (1) the necessity of intervening proactively rather than reactively, (2) an emphasis on building and strengthening connections with students, especially those placed at risk, and (3) utilizing creative options to suspension and expulsion, even for the most extreme behavior. Each of these themes is described in turn below.

Proactive Intervention

Principals stressed the importance of promoting a common understanding among staff, students, parents, and administrators of how discipline works at their schools. These principals work closely with their teachers to define what the most appropriate referrals to the office are and which are better handled at the classroom level.

“We went through some scenarios—for example, a child taking a pencil away from another child—that should never come to the office. A child who intentionally is trying to hurt another child—that directly comes to the office. . . . My philosophy has always been you settle it at the lowest level.”

Principals suggested that this approach actually gives teachers more authority in their classrooms.

Once you send a child to the office, as a classroom teacher you give up a part of your control over that child. . . . So, I think as a school we've come to realize that it's a lot better to handle the discipline within the team [of teachers] if we can because that sends a message to the student that the team has control.

Such an approach also frees up administrator time, noted the principals, from having to deal with an endless stream of referrals to more time for counseling students or meeting for planning with teacher teams.

These schools also reported involving parents throughout the disciplinary process. At a number of schools, teachers contact parents before any referral to the office is made. In one school, parents are actively encouraged to support the school's disciplinary code early in the year:

"At the beginning of the year, I had the child sign [the code of conduct card], and I had the parents sign it. . . . At our back-to-school meeting, I shared with the parents that I was asking for their support."

As a result of such communication, parents tend to be more supportive of school disciplinary actions, as this urban elementary school principal notes,

"I have very few parents who get upset with me because a lot of times we've done a lot of interventions. . . . There are no surprises. And, I have to think the parents appreciate that because they've been part of it through the entire process."

Building Meaningful Relationships with Students, Especially Those Placed At Risk

School alienation has been found to be a risk factor for both juvenile delinquency (Elliot, Hamburg, and Williams, 1998) and deadly school violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002). For those students whose behavior indicates a higher risk for disruption, principals suggested that they worked hard to establish communication with students. One high school administrator noted,

We're very hands-on administrators. I think that the students feel like they can come to us at any time and work with us. We go to a lot of student activities, a lot more than I know most administrators do, just trying to be present and let the students know that we really do care, and we try to work with them. That's not a program; that's just kind of a philosophy that we have.

As a result, these administrators believe that students are more willing to communicate potential problems to staff and administrators in the building. An assistant principal in a suburban high school described the school's attempts to keep channels of communication open:

"Every time he [the principal] has the student body together, he reminds them that if there is anything out there that's lingering and dangerous to make sure that you bring it forward. He just continually impresses upon the kids how important communication is."

Trust of administrators proved critical in this building: when a student approached the administration to report a student with a cache of weapons, administrators and local police were able to take preventive action that headed off a potentially deadly situation (*Herald Times*, 2001).

Mentoring programs, such as the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program have been identified as among the most effective programs for reducing the risk of violence (Mihalic et al., 2001). At one urban elementary school, every adult, from administrators to teachers to custodial staff, was asked to mentor one child who had been identified as someone "who we considered to be disconnected from school."

And all we asked was that the adults would meet with these kids once a week . . . I would have lunch with this child, and we would play chess and we would talk . . . We saw that we were making progress with these kids because really a lot of these kids didn't have anyone who really took an interest in them.

Many of the principals remarked on the relationship for many students between risk for academic failure and risk for acting-out behavior. One administrator in a suburban high school described the relationship between academic and behavioral problems this way:

Some behavioral problems are due to [a student's] feeling inadequate in the classroom or feeling as if they can't perform academically—"I'd rather be bad than dumb." That [understanding] has really helped us a lot. . . . We have alleviated that problem by trying to keep kids from feeling that way in whatever setting they are in.

Creative Alternatives to Student Removal

By no means were the principals we talked with inclined to in any way relax their expectations for appropriate behavior. Suspension and expulsion were by no means ruled out as an option for seriously disruptive behavior.

We will not put up with misbehavior. . . . You are here to learn, and we're going to do everything we can to provide the proper education. Your teachers are here to work with you. We're doing everything we can to support you, but then again we will not deal with any misbehaviors. That's the bottom line. If you hit somebody, you're going to be suspended.

Yet the principals we interviewed also typically rejected a one-size-fits-all disciplinary approach. As one elementary school principal noted,

"We don't have a zero tolerance policy. . . . In the office, we really seek to understand what's going on and have consequences that make sense. [We] try not to use out-of-school suspensions unless we're at our wits' end. We want them here at school."

Trying to achieve this balance seems to lead these principals to an approach wherein the severity of punishment is more likely tailored to fit the seriousness of the infraction. According to one principal,

"Just to have a standard, people say, 'Well, okay, you lose a recess no matter what the infraction is.' But let's say they have written on a wall in the bathroom. I think they should put on gloves and clean it off. That makes sense."

Perhaps most striking were the creative ways in which these schools modified the traditional notions of out-of-school suspension and expulsion to send a strong disciplinary message to students without reducing (and perhaps even increasing) their time in school. One high school uses what they term "probationary expulsion" for nondangerous offenses.

We absolutely do not believe in zero tolerance policies. . . . If we're going to expel a student, probably 90 percent of the time we will expel him or her technically but we allow the student to return to school on what's called a continuing education agreement. . . . What we're trying to do is make a commitment to try to help kids, to allow them, even though they've made a pretty major mistake, for example possession of drugs or alcohol . . . to return to school on a probationary basis. It is very proactive because for the student's benefit we require drug testing and counseling as a part of that.

The principals we spoke with reported that a combination of high expectations and support for students can be effective even for the toughest kids. As one high school disciplinarian noted,

We've had several really tough kids enter this school, and after going through and being surrounded by kids who have embraced the class and the culture of the school they've turned it around. We're not seeing that aggressive behavior. Because they know this is a nurturing place. They know that the teachers care about them as individuals. Other classmates care about them . . . that has helped eliminate many of the problems.

PREVENTION-IN-ACTION: THE GREENFIELD MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

A story of transformation especially intriguing to the interviewing staff of the Children Left Behind project is that of Greenfield Middle School under the leadership of Jim Bever, the 2004 Metlife/National Association of Secondary School Principals and Indiana Middle School principal of the year honoree. Greenfield's story illustrates that implementation of preventive alternatives in schools can have profound positive outcomes for students. What follows is a brief summary of that interview,³ and supporting documentation of the effectiveness of the innovative approaches implemented at Greenfield.

The Disciplinary Climate at Greenfield

Discipline prior to Bever's accepting the principalship seemed to be consistent with the zero tolerance philosophy of punishing even minor student misbehavior severely in an attempt to "send a message" to students.

The atmosphere in the building was one of demanded respect as opposed to earned respect. Comments from students, sometimes inappropriate in nature, were often considered disrespectful and punished as a violation of the schools expectation of respect. There was little delineation between behavior that was inappropriate and in violation of the school's conduct code and behavior that teachers found distasteful or personally objectionable. Both types of behaviors were severely punished when referred to the office. There was a common understanding that students must suffer as a result of punishment.

Further, the disciplinary climate at this middle school was less than optimal, as evidenced by some serious acts of violence and a heavy reliance on school administrators to deal with student behavior.

We were seeing 300 plus office referrals a month in 1998 and 1999. . . . There were some fairly violent acts occurring in this building. . . . The year prior to me coming to this building, there was even a student who had been so severely beaten she lost continence and was taken out on an ambulance cot. So things were not very good here when I came.

The high levels of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions seemed to be due, not to any inherent desire to remove students from schools, so much as not knowing what else to do. This is evidenced by a conversation between a teacher and Bever.

"This is the only thing I've ever known. The first principal that I worked under told me you have to put a kid up against the wall now and then to get their attention. . . . It's the only thing I knew in my high school career and it's the only thing I know now." So I told him, "Okay, well, we're going to learn something different."

Elements of Change at Greenfield Middle School

One of the more critical elements of transformation, according to Principal Bever, was working on changing the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the teaching staff. One structural change Bever implemented was the establishment of an executive committee, comprised of leaders from each of the middle school teams within the building, charged with much of the disciplinary decision making.

We started asking our folks to think logically through the discipline piece. . . . The most severe thing we can do is separate a student from school. . . . This is punitive and not always effective in terms of the individual's education. We have to look at another way of doing it. . . . I'm really asking those team leaders [on the executive committee] to truly be leaders of the building. . . . They really assume a lot of the decision-making basis in the building.

Further, a strong emphasis was placed on responsible behavior and decision making among the teaching faculty.

Walk your talk. When teachers don't model the behaviors they expect out of their students, the stage is set for disaster. And when you have teachers who rule through intimidation, you're going to have a mess in your school because the kids will respond similarly. . . . Kids must come first. Every decision we make at Greenfield Middle school always proceeds with the question "what is going to be best for the kids?"

Bever also believed it important to challenge assumptions that the students at Greenfield were "bad" students. Due to a recent redistricting process that redistributed many students in the school district, a commonly held belief among many was that Greenfield received the "worst" students. Bever believed it essential to challenge this belief:

"The first task really involved getting them [teaching faculty] to see that our kids are not the worst students. Are they different maybe than some of the kids they had here before? Yes. Are they less able? Absolutely not."

To reinforce the notion that Greenfield's students were just as capable as the students who had been transferred during redistricting, Bever showed his

teaching staff that the students at Greenfield had a cognitive aptitude score (as assessed by the state's mandatory accountability examination) that was within one point, plus or minus, of the students they had "lost."

Principal Bever also placed a heavy emphasis on collaborating with community agencies in transforming the disciplinary climate at Greenfield. Bever believed he had to take a swift and direct approach in getting a school with serious and at times violent behavior under control. In his words,

The very first thing I did was to take a very aggressive approach to the discipline piece. I immediately began involving the local police department. We began hiring uniformed security for a lot of our after school functions. . . . So, the first thing I did was come in here with a real hard line effort.

In retrospect, however, Principal Bever indicated that this approach was necessary, but not an optimal long-term solution, in establishing safety at Greenfield. The purpose of using local law enforcement, according to Bever, was to establish safety, not to manage student behavior. It is thus not surprising that since safety has been established at Greenfield through a greater variety of disciplinary options, a uniformed police presence is no longer necessary. Interestingly, however, the ties between Greenfield and local law enforcement have not ceased but rather have been transformed into a more collaborative relationship.

It's the same thing with the police department. . . . They get to see what we were about and what we stood for which was not taking troubled kids and getting them out the door. . . . We've really opened the door to them. We invite uniformed officers on shift to come in and eat with the kids. I have a detective on the police department who has become very, very involved in our parent leadership group. . . . They've come in and done defensive tactics training. . . . They have talks with our students about self protection and how to stay out of situations that could get them in trouble. . . . We have a wonderful relationship where we help them by not putting kids out on the street who are going to end up becoming a problem for them. We try to find alternatives.

The strategy of using external agencies to make Greenfield a safer and more responsive school has also been extended to agencies beyond law enforcement.

I began to establish some good bridges to community organizations, the police department, the probation department, family social services, and child protective services. . . . We work a great deal with the probation department with attendance. . . . That's been a great thing. If I had a student in need or I have a student that I suspect may be involved in an abusive situation at home, one quick

call to child protective services and we get incredibly fast and cooperative responses to respond collaboratively to support this student and get them through this difficult time.

Outcomes of a Different Approach

The change in culture and climate at Greenfield has been dramatic according to Principal Bever.

We just don't see the issues of physical violence anymore. Do we have aggressive middle school boys in pushing and shoving matches now and then? Yes. Do we have the highly aggressive fist throwing and all-out fights? No. Very, very rarely does that happen anymore. The office referrals we now see are more typical with what you're going to see when dealing with middle schools.

Data drawn from the state of Indiana database on out-of-school suspension and expulsion over the last eight years (Indiana Department of Education, 2004) provide additional evidence of the disciplinary changes at Greenfield. Table 6.2 is a comparison of the disciplinary infractions for the year prior to Bever's arrival and during the first year of his principalship. The out-of-school suspension incident rate dropped from 50.67 incidents per 100 students in 1998–1999, to 18.53 incidents per 100 students in 1999–2000. Moreover, the number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol incidents dropped from fourteen to one, even with increases in student enrollment.

These changes in the data appear to be maintained over time. Comparing the four years prior to Bever assuming the principalship to the four years of

Table 6.2 Disciplinary infractions at Greenfield Middle School: 1998–1999 and 1999–2000 School Years^a

School Year	School Enrollment	OSS ^b	OSS Rate ^c	DWA ^d	DWA Rate ^e
1998–1999	450	228	50.67	14	3.11
1999–2000	475	88	18.53	1	0.21

Note: Jim Bever became principal during the 1999–2000 school year.

^a Data were drawn from the Suspension and Expulsion Report form from the Indiana Department of Education.

^b OSS is the total incidents of out-of-school suspension.

^c OSS Rate is calculated by dividing the total number of out-of-school suspensions by the total school enrollment, multiplied by 100. Thus, this rate represents the total out-of-school suspension incidents per 100 students and can be compared across school years.

^d DWA (Drugs, Weapons, and Alcohol) is the total number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol.

^e DWA Rate is calculated by dividing the total number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol by the total school enrollment, multiplied by 100. This rate represents the total drug, weapon, and alcohol incidents per 100 students and can be compared across school years.

his tenure as principal, the out-of-school suspension and expulsion incident rates have dropped significantly (see figure 6.1) and, since 2000, are roughly equivalent to state averages for middle schools (Rausch and Skiba, 2004).

Further, the average numbers of suspensions and expulsions for drugs, weapons, and alcohol have dropped almost eightfold (see figure 6.2). Very clearly then, the different disciplinary approaches and philosophies taking hold at Greenfield Middle School have changed the consequences experienced by its students.

Importantly, these changes in disciplinary climate and outcome appear to extend to the learning environment. Bever notes that test scores have increased, although he still hopes for more improvement.

That piece [the learning environment] is much slower to respond. We are seeing a difference, however. Our teachers are learning how to retool their teaching to focus

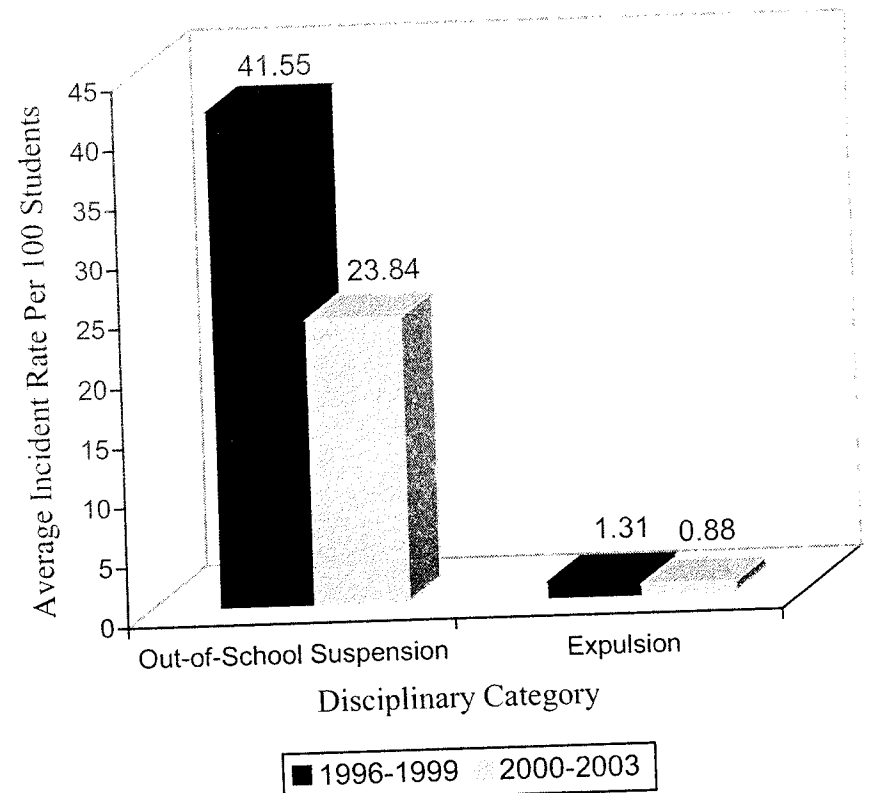


Figure 6.1. Disciplinary Incident Rates at Greenfield Middle School: 1996–1999 and 2000–2003 School Years

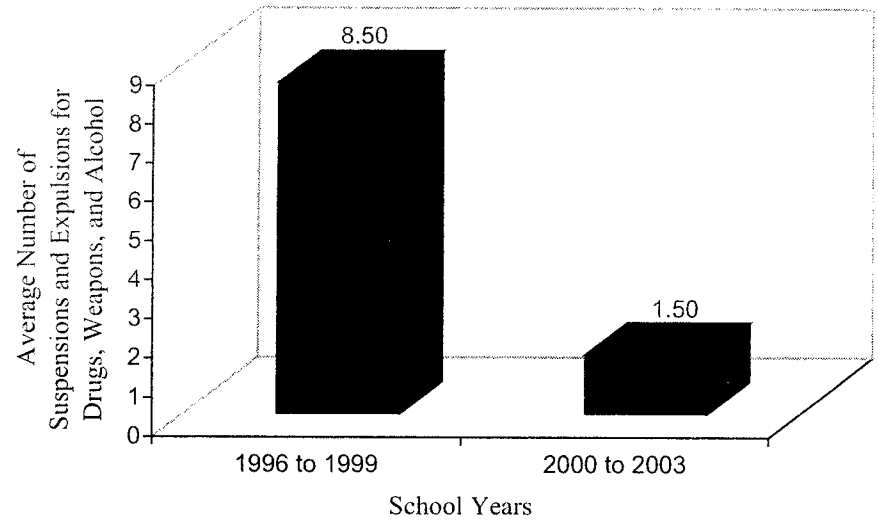


Figure 6.2. Suspensions and Expulsions for Drugs, Weapons, and Alcohol at Greenfield Middle School: 1996–1999 and 2000–2003

not on their teaching but rather [on] the students' learning. We've seen some appreciable increases in student achievement over the past several years, but I don't think that we're performing at a level that is consistent with our students' ability.

Bever attributes some of the gains in student learning to changes in the teacher-student relationship: "What we do see though is just much more positive interactions between students and teachers, and I think that alone has certainly helped us out in terms of the learning environment."

Bever may be underestimating the effects of school climate change and improvements in student achievement at Greenfield Middle School. Figure 6.3 shows that since the 2000–2001 school year, one year after Bever became principal, Greenfield Middle School's percentage of students passing both the English/language arts and math sections of the state's accountability assessment has been higher than the state median for Indiana middle schools, averaging around a sixty percent passing rate.

Principal Bever is quick to point out that he believes there is still much work yet to be done at Greenfield, stating, "We're moving in the right direction, but again, I'll emphasize we're measuring in millimeters movement that needs to be measured in miles." He is especially cognizant of the demands placed on staff by a more preventive and individualized approach to school discipline.

Every move we make creates a ripple, in effect, placing increasing demands on our faculty. Innovation and improvement puts a great deal of pressure on our staff to

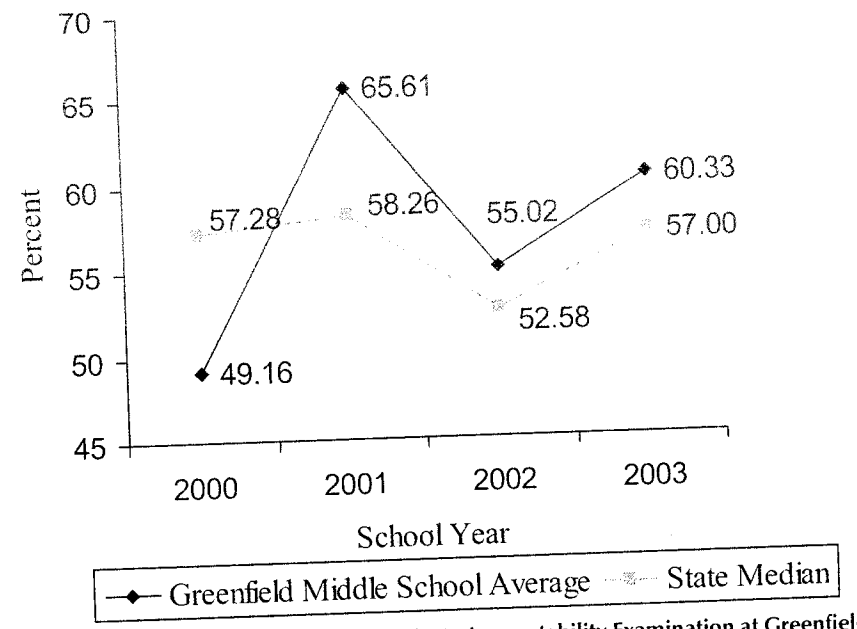


Figure 6.3. Percent of Students Passing State Accountability Examination at Greenfield Middle School Compared to State Median for All Middle Schools

learn new things and conduct business differently, all the while continuing to work with up to 170 students per day. We've done a lot of good on very, very few resources. It's taxing, and our folks are really spread far too thin.

He feels strongly that policymakers must be aware of the resources that schools need in order to develop more effective disciplinary climates. In particular, he argues for state resources to support the presence of more adult role models.

Only 15 percent of a youngster's time, from kindergarten through the senior year of high school, is spent under the direct influence of the school and its personnel. Even though that is relatively little time, we can have a significant positive impact on our students if we play our game reasonably well. I need additional high quality, well prepared adults who can work with kids in small ratios. In this manner, we can maximize the impact of good, adult role models on our students' lives.

CONCLUSIONS

Every day, principals are faced with the complex job of bringing hundreds of students from widely varying backgrounds together and ensuring that they

can focus on their schoolwork, not disruptions. The principals described in this paper have sought and found methods that allow them to preserve the safety and integrity of the learning climate in their schools while maximizing student opportunity to learn. While zero tolerance school discipline may currently be popular among many educational administrators and political leaders, the principals we interviewed described many alternatives to student removal, suggesting that exclusionary disciplinary systems are not the only way of ensuring school safety and productivity.

To be sure, these principals made it clear that there are students who threaten the safety of the learning environment and who need to be removed from the school environment for a period of time. Yet, they also used practices and approaches seeking to prevent negative behavior from occurring, they focused on establishing meaningful relationships with disconnected students, and they sought to implement creative alternatives to exclusion for students engaged in disruptive and even severe behavior. These perspectives are congruent with national research documenting the effectiveness of preventive planning and implementation (Dwyer et al., 1998; Elliott et al., 2001; Gagnon and Leone, 2001; Mihalic et al., 2001; Skiba et al., forthcoming; Thornton et al., 2000).

Student attitude and behavior contribute to the likelihood of being removed from school (Wu et al., 1982). Yet, differences in beliefs and practices among educators that relate to different outcomes for students suggests that the choices made by educators, principals in particular, substantially contribute to student exclusion (Bowditch, 1993; Dunbar and Villarruel, 2004; Mukuria, 2004; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Vavrus and Cole, 2002; Wu et al., 1982). Thus, the fact that some principals, even those serving "tough" student populations (Mukuria, 2004; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002), are able to maintain the integrity of the learning environment without removing large numbers of students from the opportunity to learn illustrates that there are efficacious alternatives to student removal.

The implementation of different ways of disciplining students is not resource-free. In an era when schools and teachers are being required to do more and more with fewer resources, placing the responsibility of change solely on the backs of educators can be overwhelming to those personnel. A substantial commitment of time, effort, and scarce school resources has been necessary to create the changes seen at Greenfield Middle School and other schools (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Richart et al., 2004). This suggests that provisions of additional targeted resources are necessary for these preventive approaches to take hold, grow, and evolve.

Even with limited resources, however, the principals highlighted in this paper have sought and found methods that allow them to preserve the safety

and integrity of the learning climate in their schools without removing large numbers of students from the opportunity to learn. Their perspectives, programs, and practices serve as models for school and community leaders interested in ensuring safe and effective schools for all students. As our knowledge of available options for promoting a safe and effective school climate increases, it becomes apparent that there is no contradiction between the need to keep schools safe and the mandate to maximize educational opportunity for all children.

NOTES

1. Further information on the Children Left Behind project, including briefing papers and supplemental analyses, can be found at the project website, ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind.
2. For the complete study, see Skiba, Rausch, and Ritter (2004). "Discipline is Always Teaching": *Effective Alternatives to Zero Tolerance in Indiana's Schools*. ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind.
3. For more detail, see Rausch and Skiba (2004). *Doing Discipline Differently: The Greenfield Middle School Story*. ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind.

REFERENCES

- Advancement Project. (2005). *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Ayers, W., Dohrn, B., and Ayers, R. (2001). *Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in Our Schools*. New York: The New Press.
- Bickel, F., and Qualls, R. (1980). The impact of school climate on suspension rates in the Jefferson County public schools. *Urban Review* 12, 79-86.
- Bowditch, C. (1993). Getting rid of troublemakers: High school disciplinary procedures and the production of dropouts. *Social Problems* 40, 493-507.
- Davis, J. E., and Jordan, W. J. (1994). The effects of school context, structure, and experiences on African American males in middle and high schools. *Journal of Negro Education* 63, 570-587.
- Dunbar, C., and Villarruel, F. A. (2004). What a difference the community makes: Zero tolerance policy interpretation and implementation. *Equity and Excellence in Education* 37, 351-359.
- Dwyer, K., Osher, D., and Warger, C. (1998). *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Elliott, D. S., Hamburg, B. A., and Williams, K. R. (1998). *Violence in American Schools*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Elliott, D., Hatot, N. J., Sirovatka, P., and Potter, B. B. (2001). *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Washington, DC: U.S. Surgeon General.