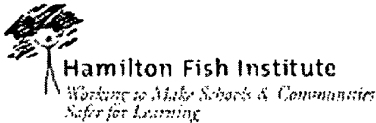


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**ZERO TOLERANCE: THE ALTERNATIVE IS EDUCATION**

198397

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**Introduction**

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Suspension and expulsion have long been used to remove students from school for serious offenses. These disciplinary actions represent the upper end of the continuum of actions available to school administrators and have been historically reserved for repeat offenses of a serious nature or for single offenses of the most egregious type. Traditionally, a degree of tolerance has been shown to youth who commit mild to moderate violent or other offenses at school, with graduated repercussions applied along a continuum, depending on the student's record of conduct. Recently, however, students are being expelled for less serious acts using a "zero tolerance" rationale, particularly where even a mild threat or act of violence is involved, even on a first offense, regardless of the student's record of conduct. The rationale is based on increasing concern for the safety of students in schools where egregious acts of violence have increased in number and come with few warning signs that are often difficult to detect.

A zero tolerance policy is defined as a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishment for specific offenses (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 1998a). This type of policy is meant to convey a "tough" response that, it is hoped, will deter youth from committing violations. Communicating the policy is only the first step to its implementation. Youth who are the first violators of such a new policy and who receive the predetermined consequences send a message to other youth that the policy will be strictly enforced. The intolerance shown by administrators in such cases is intended to have a shock effect on students and their parents that will increase their perception of the risk associated with violating the policy. Although the definitions of zero tolerance and the behaviors covered by zero tolerance policies vary widely, there is a common theme: prescribed sanctions for specified behaviors regardless of the intensity or degree of repetition of the behaviors or the circumstances surrounding them. Often the only deviation from swift punishment is the determination that a student's known disability contributed to the behavior. Zero tolerance policies are being widely adopted, with significant influence on trends in suspension and expulsion.

The initial source of this new direction in the use of suspension and expulsion is the U.S. Congress, although schools have sometimes taken this approach further than Congress envisioned:

- The Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA P.L. 103-382, October 20, 1994) requires each State to have a law providing that all public schools consider for expulsion for not less than 1 year any student carrying a firearm at school (OJJDP, 1996). The term "firearm" includes other incendiary devices such as explosives, grenades, pipe bombs, and the like, as well as associated paraphernalia such as silencers. The GFSA explicitly recommends zero tolerance policies.
- Chief administrators are allowed to modify the punishment on a case-by-case basis and are prevented

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from expelling the student if that student has received a diagnosis of specific disabilities and if such disability contributed to the incident. The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), as amended, requires States to monitor the rates at which special education students are suspended and expelled (IDEA Amendments of 1997 [1412(a)(22)]. Special education students are more likely than other students to be suspended or expelled (The North Carolina Education and Law Project, 1997; Cooley, 1995).

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in 1997 that about 90 percent of schools had implemented zero tolerance policies for firearms and other weapons (ED, NCES, 1997).
- Adding to guidelines provided by the Federal government, States and localities have outlined in far greater detail the rules, regulations, and rights of students regarding suspension and expulsion. Most States have school codes. Districts may issue student conduct codes that regulate and list infractions and consequences. Using this flexibility, many districts and schools have seized the trend in zero tolerance for firearms charges and have adopted zero tolerance policies for carrying other types of weapons; possession, sale, or use of drugs; and aggressive and other undesirable behaviors. The substance and enforcement of these policies vary from school to school and district to district.
- As would be expected by those implementing zero tolerance policies, expulsions increased between 1990-1991 and 1996-1997 (ED, NCES 1992, 1998a). In some States, the number of expulsions has more than doubled since enactment of these policies.

Whether zero tolerance policies and the corresponding increase in expulsions has made students safer in school, and at what cost to those expelled and to society in general, require a closer look. This bulletin is a preliminary attempt to assess these new directions in suspension and expulsion.

### **Distinguishing Between Suspension and Expulsion**

Suspension and expulsion are most commonly used for events that occur at school, on school property, on a school bus, or at a school-sponsored event. Cases have been reported recently, under zero tolerance policies, in which students who were arrested for violent crimes in other places (anywhere in the community) were suspended or expelled from school if the school administrators learned of the arrest. The rationale given for such disciplinary measures is often that the school is responsible for protecting the safety of the student body.

Suspension is distinguished from expulsion in several important ways. The Illinois School Code (2000) provides a good example of the differences. The following is the Illinois policy on suspensions:

- May last for no more than 10 days (though longer suspensions can be imposed in cases involving bus safety)
- May be issued by the school board or (with board authorization) district superintendent, principal, assistant principal, or dean of students
- Must be accompanied by notice of the reasons for suspension and the right to have the suspension reviewed by the school board
- Does not specify the method of notice.

Suspension is commonly imposed both in school and out of school. In-school suspension is used for less serious infractions and carries certain advantages over out-of-school suspension or expulsion:

- Ease of communication concerning homework assignments
- Maintenance of school income from higher Average Daily Attendance (ADA)
- Opportunities for structured behavioral guidance
- Access for counseling purposes as teachable moments arise
- Access to computers, laboratory equipment, and other learning resources

Examples of offenses that typically might result in an in-school suspension in the United States include:

- Disruptive or off-task behavior (including sleeping)
- Insubordination to school staff
- Problems with attendance or tardiness
- Failure to complete assigned academic tasks
- Antisocial behavior or fighting that results in light injury or no injury, whether the student was the

- primary instigator or not
- Inappropriate dress, speech, or gestures
- More serious offenses committed by students with special needs
- Possession of unauthorized over-the-counter medications or mildly harmful substances not allowed under explicit school rules, including cigarettes and alcohol
- Sexual, racial, religious, or other types of harassment
- Vandalism or theft under \$50

Examples of offenses that typically might result in an out-of-school suspension (when in-school suspension is an option) throughout the United States include:

- Multiple or repeated offenses of the type listed above
- Threats of serious harm to a student that are repeated or followed up with actions that bolster the threats
- Physical fighting involving shouting, coarse language, and light to moderate physical injury when the student has been determined to have been the primary aggressor
- A first offense of weapon carrying or possessing a toy weapon that looks realistic
- Possession of marijuana, diet pills, stimulants, depressants, or volatile substances
- Selling any of the above listed substances, alcohol, cigarettes, or other contraband
- Explicit threats of any kind to a school staff member
- Vandalism or theft of \$50 to \$250

Expulsion carries stiffer penalties and thus typically requires more rigorous standards of due process. The following section from the Illinois School Code on expulsions serves as a good illustration, particularly in contrast to the Illinois policy on suspensions outlined above:

- May last up to 2 calendar years
- Can be issued only by the school board
- Can take effect only after parents are notified and given opportunity for a hearing
- Requires notification of a request that the parents appear at a meeting with the school board (or board-appointed hearing officer) at a specified time and place
- Requires delivery of the notice by certified mail

Examples of offenses that typically might result in an expulsion throughout the United States include the following:

- Multiple or repeated offenses of the type listed under out-of-school suspension above
- Fighting with fists or weapons that involves moderate to serious physical injury
- Carrying or selling hard drugs such as cocaine, crack, or heroin
- Physically attacking a school staff member
- Vandalism or theft of over \$500

Local school policies vary widely on each of these distinctions, however, as do levels of enforcement and consistency in applying the policies.

### **National Levels of Firearm-Related Suspension and Expulsion**

The GFSR Report lists the total number of firearm-related expulsions as 3,930 in 1997-1998, with many districts not reporting (ED, 1999). A survey of school principals by NCES reported that, for the 1997-1998 school year, 5,000 students had been expelled for possession or use of a firearm, an additional 3,300 students were transferred to alternative schools for the same infraction, and 8,144 students were placed in out-of-school suspensions lasting 5 or more days (ED, NCES, 1998b). In the NCES survey, the schools were asked to report on 3 types of disciplinary actions: expulsions, transfers to alternative schools or programs, and out-of-school suspensions lasting more than 5 days. The NCES figure of 5,000, though higher than the GFSR report of 3,930, is still likely to underestimate actual incidence because of flawed record-keeping systems and the reluctance of principals to report incidents that may reflect badly on their job performance.

The NCES survey also reported the types of infractions and their consequences. For possession or use of

a firearm, approximately 49 percent of those caught were given out-of-school suspension of more than 5 days, 31 percent were expelled, and 20 percent were transferred to alternative placements (ED, NCES, 1998b). For possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm, 55 percent were given out-of-school suspension, 23 percent were expelled, and 22 percent were transferred to alternative programs. For physical attacks or fights, 66 percent were given out-of-school suspension, 15 percent were expelled, and 19 percent were transferred to alternative schools or programs. Underestimates are also likely in these statistics, although the degree of underestimation is unknown.

The GFSA Report (ED, 1999) included the number of students who received modified expulsions (i.e., less than the federally suggested 1 year). Of the total number of expulsions reported, 44 percent were shortened to less than 1 year. Of these, 62 percent of the students were not considered disabled under section 602(a)(1) of IDEA. In addition, 43 percent of expelled students were referred to alternative placement. Schools are clearly using discretion in dealing with student infractions to the GFSA.

These national levels of suspension and expulsions mask unique variations among States. Trends over time within States convey important additional information.

- The Chicago public schools have experienced an eight-fold increase in expulsions since the 1995-1996 school year (Fornek, 1999). This trend is typical for a State that initiates zero tolerance policies with vigor over a short period of time. Such an upward trend might typically be followed by a moderate decline in expulsions and violent incidents, less because zero tolerance is effective as a deterrent than because a critical mass of violence-prone students have been systematically eliminated from the student body through expulsion. Once expelled, students are often less likely to reenter school and reoffend, although further study of this phenomenon is needed. By April 1997, the Illinois State expulsion law had been amended to include the possession of any weapon, including knives, pipes, or any item used to cause bodily harm, and the Chicago Public Schools had made expulsion the penalty for the use, possession, or sale of alcohol and illegal drugs on school grounds (Fornek, 1999).
- Pennsylvania has seen a significant increase in the length of time for which students are expelled (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1999), though no increase in the number of expulsions. In 1996-1997 and 1997-1998, the Pennsylvania expulsion rate remained fairly level, but expulsions of more than 1 year rose nearly 960 percent in 1997-1998. Out-of-school suspensions in Pennsylvania have increased by approximately 12 percent each year since the 1995-1996 school year. This pattern is typical of a policy that provides for a more measured response to student violence including consideration of the history of the student's behavior and the nature of the incident, rather than a wholesale move toward zero tolerance.
- In Massachusetts, the number of students removed for 60-364 days increased from 121 to 224 between 1996-1997 and 1997-1998 (Johnston, 1999).

These examples illustrate that zero tolerance policies have effects on suspension and expulsions rates that vary somewhat with the approach taken. Generally, the immediate effect of zero tolerance is an increase in the number of long-term expulsions. Other possible outcomes, both short-term and long-term, are considered later in this bulletin.

### **Complying With Federal Laws**

Those involved with school-based discipline must be familiar with both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and IDEA. School administrators, child study chairpersons, guidance counselors, and special education teachers must ensure that disabled students' rights are protected while safe-guarding the entire school. This section offers an overview of the two laws. Obtaining specific legal advice may be important to achieving compliance with them, however, because of their complexity. Incorrectly applying the provisions of these laws can lead to unfortunate consequences for students, schools, and parents.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects the civil and constitutional rights of persons with disabilities. Originally the main thrust of Section 504 was to prevent discrimination against disabled individuals in employment. However, in recent years advocacy groups as well as legal firms have focused on the act's requirement to ensure that students with disabilities have the full range of accommodations and services to participate in and benefit from a public education. In general, Section 504 applies if impairment *substantially* limits a student's ability to function at school. For example, a youngster with sickle cell anemia who needs periodic hospitalization for extended periods of time during the school year is guaranteed accommodations and services necessary to that student's education. Providing

accommodations under Section 504 is a general education responsibility, not a part of special education.

A student may be eligible for services under Section 504 but not included under IDEA. However, all individuals eligible under IDEA are considered disabled and therefore protected under Section 504. IDEA defines eligible students as those who have certain specified types of disabilities and who, because of these disabilities, need special education. While there are a host of disabling conditions, four common ones are mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or other health impaired.

Operationally, special education means specially designed instruction. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) documents the specially designed instruction for each child. To be considered eligible under IDEA, the student's disability must be causing an adverse effect on academic performance. These laws are intended to ensure that students with disabilities have the same opportunities to succeed as students without disabilities. The laws are quite specific when a student with a disability is subject to disciplinary action. Compliance with the IDEA discipline procedures will generally ensure compliance with Section 504.

Under IDEA provisions, a determination of the causal relationship between the misconduct and any disability must be made. This process is called a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR). A school system cannot impose a long-term suspension (more than 10 days) or expel a student with special education needs if the misbehavior was a manifestation of the student's disability (i.e., the IEP was not related to the behavior or was not being implemented, the child was unable to understand the impact and consequences of his or her behavior because of the disability, or the child's disability impaired his or her ability to control the behavior in question).

If the MDR concludes that the disability caused the youth to behave in a certain way, the discipline may not be imposed, but other actions can result. The student's IEP may be reviewed and revised. This is important because the IEP determines the necessary services and consequent placement necessary to deliver those services. Furthermore, in cases where a disabled student brings a weapon or drugs to school, a 45-calendar-day referral to an alternative education setting may be made.

If the MDR concludes that the student's behavior was not a result of the disability, the student is subject to the same discipline procedures as a student in general education. This outcome points up a significant difference between students who are protected under Section 504 and those who qualify for services under IDEA. School systems are under no obligation to provide alternative education arrangements for the general education youth. The special education student must have an IEP, which must be followed during the period of school suspension or expulsion. In contrast, for students protected under Section 504, no educational services are required during the suspension or expulsion unless those services are available to nondisabled students.

*For a full understanding of the rules and regulations surrounding the disciplining of students eligible for special services under IDEA, see IDEA Amendments of 1999 (20 U.S.C., Y1415 (k)(1)(A); 34 CFR, §§Y300.519-300.529). A good primer on procedures for effective use of suspension and expulsion in compliance with Federal laws is Rossow and Parkinson, 1999.*

## **Counting the Costs**

The net financial result of the heavy use of suspension and expulsion is arguably positive when several conditions prevail: when the analysis is limited to the financial implications for the local school system rather than the broader community, when suspension and expulsion are used chiefly for violent offenses, when the proportion of violent offenders in the school is relatively low, and when school funding is linked to ADA. Heavy use of suspension and expulsion results in a direct loss of funding to a specific school based on ADA. Retaining demonstrably violent students in that school, however, may increase student fears and result in parents' withdrawing their children from school, causing even greater losses in ADA. On the other hand, in a school with frequent incidents of violence, heavy use of suspension and expulsion would remove so many students that violent behavior would become less feasible or acceptable. Any savings accrued to the school through suspension and expulsion may be at the expense of the broader community into which the rejected student is sent, where services must be provided. Thus the heavy use of suspension and expulsion can be seen as an expensive practice for the community even if it is cost-effective for the school.

Placing violent students in an alternative education setting is a compromise that mitigates both sources of potential ADA reductions (i.e., from the loss of violent offenders and fearful students) but at a high cost per student served in alternative education. This is a cost many school administrators must weigh against competing needs. Because the law allows the expulsion of the student into the broader community, effectively transferring the cost of educating that student, administrators have a difficult choice to make: achieving broader good for the student body or meeting the needs of the offending student. The administrator is more likely to be judged by performance statistics of the entire student body than the outcome of each student entering the school, so is more likely to expel the offender. Yet alternative education is used by most administrators because it holds the best promise for reclaiming the violent youth before further antisocial behavior leads to more serious consequences.

Allowing suspended or expelled students to immediately reenter another local school (which generally occurs in a reciprocal arrangement) ensures that ADA remains reasonably high, alternative education costs remain low, student fears are minimized (by the unknown), and offending students get a second and third chance. But this practice places the student body at risk of being victimized by the offending student, places the school at risk of litigation, and probably leads to a somewhat higher dropout rate. This practice often escapes notice and reflects a system in which administrators are more likely to pass their problems to one another than to work together to solve them. It is perhaps more common in larger and more dysfunctional school systems.

In many school systems, administrators have a perverse financial incentive to suspend or expel students who, if screened, could be eligible for IDEA protections because those protections are so costly. Retaining the student after violent behavior might lead to subsequent determination of IDEA eligibility and create a financial "risk" for the school. When no additional funding to the school follows IDEA eligibility determination, administrators are again faced with the difficult choice of better serving the student body or serving the few students who are disruptive, even if they may be candidates for screening under IDEA.

When the cost appraisal includes the broader community, the financial benefits of suspension and expulsion over alternative education may completely disappear. If students who are suspended or expelled do not reenter school right away, they are likely to fall farther behind academically and are at increased risk of falling into criminal activity in the community. Their likelihood of being incarcerated increases accordingly. The high costs of incarceration are not generally weighed against the relatively lower costs of alternative education, as would be recommended in a "holistic" cost appraisal. Nor are the potentially negative socialization experiences faced by alternative education students typically weighed against the more severely negative socialization experiences faced by incarcerated youth. High recidivism in incarcerated settings leads to taking the long-term view of the costs of initial incarcerations and their prevention through alternative education. It is possible that keeping children in school, even in an alternative setting, reduces the likelihood of their engaging in criminal activity.

Costs for the broader community are likely to be minimized when the basic educational and other needs of children are met at the earliest possible age. Troubled youth can often be identified early, and they will cost the community more than other children regardless of the course of action. Paying the costs earlier increases the chances of redirecting the child into productive outcomes. Keeping children in school when they do not pose a significant risk to other students is essential. Once students pass that threshold, placing them in constructive alternative education programs reduces the risk of a downward spiral either from being left to an unstructured life or reentering another school merely to manifest their unresolved problems there. Students who seriously violate school rules often need help in reading and math, additional counseling, behavioral skills training, and attention to basic needs.

Investing in alternative education yielded significant savings to the State of Iowa in welfare, unemployment, and incarceration (Morley, 1991). The American Federation of Teachers has estimated that "for the [\$1,750] additional dollars spent on each [disruptive] student attending an alternative school, the public annually gains \$14,000 in student learning time that would have been lost, \$2,800 in reduced grade repetition costs, \$1,750 in reduced welfare costs, and \$1,500 in reduced prison costs," for a total savings of \$18,300 per student (Tiny knife sets off big debate, 1995).

### **Is Zero Tolerance Working?**

If zero tolerance is working, suspensions and expulsions for school violence would increase initially, then quickly decrease as the students at risk of repeat offending are removed from the school system. This

has not happened. Expulsions have increased unabated since the advent of zero tolerance. The time necessary for the effects to be seen has come and gone already, but the data have not been fully compiled yet. If the data do not provide evidence of reductions in expulsions this year, the conclusion will be made that zero tolerance has failed.

The unlikely benefits of zero tolerance could have been foreseen, given a closer analysis of school safety data. Zero tolerance can only have an effect in so far as school officials are capable of finding students who are weapon carriers or perpetrators of violence so they can be prosecuted as violators. In fact, a very small percentage of students who carry firearms to school are ever caught. Evidence for this proposition is found in the rate with which students are considered for expulsion for carrying a firearm (ED, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and Planning and Evaluation Services [OESEPEs], 1998) in relation to the number of students who report carrying firearms to school, with or without being caught or considered for expulsion (CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, analyzed by the Hamilton Fish Institute). Calculation of this rate reveals that less than 1 percent of high school students who reported carrying a firearm to school were actually caught and considered for expulsion in 1997. The odds are that a weapon carrier will not be caught, so the deterrence is minimal.

This small group of firearm carriers who are being caught at school could conceivably be less violent youth, not the ones targeted by zero tolerance policies. Students who are generally younger, less sophisticated in criminal endeavor, and first time offenders are more likely to be caught. Making examples of these youth, while letting the more serious offenders who escape detection escape prosecution under zero tolerance policies clearly sends the wrong message to students and at great cost to those suspended or expelled on first offense. Zero tolerance could indeed be driving the practice further underground, forcing the more hard core violent students to be more careful to avoid being caught.

Zero tolerance policies may have a positive public relations effect on parents and other community members if they convince the public that school officials are getting serious about school safety. But this perhaps only works for parents who believe that zero tolerance is effective. The public relations effect is eroded when the zero tolerance policy is used for trivial incidents.

Some of the early success stories about zero tolerance for fighting in schools led to broad acceptance of the strategy. Henry Foss High School in Tacoma, Washington was cited as one of these early successes of zero tolerance. Fighting incidents dropped from 195 the year before zero tolerance (1990/91) to 4 the year after, and was as low as 3 incidents the following year (1993/94) (Burke and Herbert, 1996). The policy was well communicated to students, and was part of a comprehensive approach to school safety. Students who were removed from school were placed in other high schools or alternative education programs. The policy withstood legal scrutiny.

Once the success of such programs was widely known, a Federal mandate was established for zero tolerance. From that point on, schools began to implement the policy in the absence of systematic comprehensive school safety plans, and without adequately communicating the policy. In the wake of the Columbine tragedy, the hysteria that prevailed led to some questionable applications of zero tolerance:

- A 17-year-old New Jersey boy scribbled on a school desk "Colorado will happen again because of people like you," referring to football players who abused "non-jocks" was carried away in handcuffs and expelled from school (Prudence or paranoia, 2000).
- Another New Jersey child was suspended for pointing a finger in anger at another child (Schools are taking threats seriously, 1999).
- A third student in that state was suspended for writing an essay about blowing up his school (Schools are taking threats seriously, 1999).
- A 10-year-old boy in Seattle was expelled for taking a 1-inch long G.I. Joe accessory handgun to school (Boy expelled from school for showing tiny toy gun, 1997).

The list goes on. These trivial uses of zero tolerance policies undermine respect for school policies and for administrators enforcing them, and disrupt the lives of children and their families.

Schools are losing these cases when they are adjudicated. I was called to give testimony regarding zero tolerance with regard to a New Jersey high school student who changed a computer logoff message to say "if you turn me off I will blow up." The school officials were judged "arbitrary and capricious" in



expelling this youth, who had a clean disciplinary record, a good academic record, and was showing his friend that he knew how to program the computer message using JAVA script. The youth, meanwhile, had to leave the single mother who raised him and stay with his father in a different state where he could gain entry to another school. The pain on the face of this young mother was clearly evident. She had been, by all standards, a successful single mom, but she was losing the company of her son.

The suffering from trivial uses of zero tolerance extends beyond the suspended/expelled students and their parents. Anecdotal evidence is emerging that suspending or expelling a violent student from school increases the risk that the student will return to retaliate against other students or administrators:

- Kip Kinkel returned to his Springfield, Oregon, school after being expelled to shoot several students (The Boy Who Loved Bombs, 1998).
- On September 22, 1999, two Chicago teenagers were wounded by an expelled 17-year-old while walking home from a South Side Chicago high school (Teen held on bond in Fenger shooting, 1999).
- On March 25, 1998, in a crowded California schoolyard, a 13-year-old fired a .25 caliber pistol at the Principal because he was angry at being sent home early from school the previous week (Guns in American Schools, 2000).

As events of this type accumulate, it becomes more apparent that excluding students from school without adequate supports or resources is not an effective solution to the youth violence problem, and literally "backfires" at times.

As a result of increasing opposition to zero tolerance policies, some school systems are softening their stance. Tustin, California, had a zero tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol that said administrators "must expel" students on the first offense, but that was recently changed to "may expel." This change was highlighted in connection with a similar loosening of the law that occurred in Decatur, Illinois (Johnston, 1999), after the number of students expelled rose from 1,182 in the 1990-1991 school year to 2,744, 7 years later. Other districts are following suit. Federal law requires only that the student be "considered" for expulsion of 1 year or longer for carrying a firearm at school. The reality is that local school boards or other administrators have tremendous flexibility in their final course of action in any single case involving a student from the general student population, and they are increasingly using that flexibility to ensure that the disciplinary action is appropriate to the misbehavior.

Rather than focusing on harsher penalties for moderate threats of violence among children who are soft-core offenders, school officials should improve the safety of schools through comprehensive approaches that involve school safety plans, crisis management, incident reporting by youth, incident tracking by administrators, school security services, counseling education and skills training in violence prevention, alternative education, and altering the architectural design of school facilities for greater safety. Suspension and expulsion should be reserved, as they have been historically, for the most egregious acts and for repeat offenders.

### **Preventing Suspension and Expulsion**

Because suspension and expulsion remove students from constructive learning environments, they are not ideal disciplinary actions. The necessity for using these disciplinary measures should be decreased by reducing behaviors that invoke them. Evidence of programs that are effective in preventing suspension and expulsion is growing. See the window boxes throughout this bulletin for examples of these prevention programs.

Prevention typically focuses on known risk factors for suspension and expulsion. To increase the chances of their effectiveness, prevention and intervention efforts are directed toward the more potent risk factors. However, there is limited information about what these risk factors are. Table 1 draws from several factors, most of which are likely to be correlates of suspension or expulsion but not causes per se. The table presents odds ratios and risk ratios for a number of risk factors for suspension or expulsion among 12th graders (looking back over their entire school careers) from the Monitoring the Futures Study (1996 data analyzed by the Hamilton Fish Institute). The more important (higher positive value) risk factors include black race, absence of either a male or female guardian, use of cigarettes and alcohol, and being offered drugs at school. This means that inner-city youth (race is a proxy for inner-city residence) without intact families, who smoke, drink, and are targets of drug pushers are more likely to

have been suspended or expelled from school but to have managed to return to school and continue into grade 12. Youth who were suspended or expelled and who did not return to school are not included in the study and may have a different set of risk factors.

Table 1.

*Risk Factors for Being Suspended or Expelled (Lifetime) Among Students in Grade 12*

	Males		Females	
	<i>(n = 1,100)</i>		<i>(n = 1,300)</i>	
	OR <sup>†</sup>	RR <sup>‡</sup>	OR <sup>†</sup>	RR <sup>‡</sup>
Ever smoked cigarettes	2.57	1.93	1.50	1.39
Smoked cigarettes (past 30 days)	2.50	1.80	2.00	1.75
Drank alcohol (past 30 days)	2.69	1.98	1.80	1.62
Had 5+ drinks in a row (past two weeks)	2.31	1.74	1.80	1.59
Describe yourself as Black rather than White	2.99	1.88	5.88	3.80
No father or male guardian in household	1.71	1.40	2.40	1.99
No mother or female guardian in household	1.78	1.42	3.05	2.28
Skipped school one or more days (past four weeks)	2.64	1.86	1.76	1.57
Skipped one or more classes (past four weeks)	1.81	1.48	2.19	1.88
Received a traffic ticket or warning (past 12 months)	1.42	1.26	1.23	1.18
Received a traffic ticket or warning after drinking alcohol (past 12 months)	2.72	1.77	8.07	3.61
Had an accident while driving (past 12 months)	1.08	1.05	1.31	1.25
Agreeing that "Sometimes I think I am no good at all"	0.93	0.95	0.67	0.71
Agreeing that "I get a real kick out of doing things that are a little dangerous"	1.47	1.30	1.68	1.52
Agreeing that "I like to test myself every now and then by doing something a little risky"	1.43	1.28	1.53	1.41
Carried a gun to school (past four weeks)	1.77	1.41	0.88	0.90
Received an offer of illegal drugs at school (past 12 months)	2.07	1.60	2.71	2.17

<sup>†</sup> Odds Ratio

<sup>‡</sup> Relative Risk

Source: Monitoring the Future Study, Institute for Survey Research, University of Michigan, 1997.

When the analysis is focused specifically on out-of-school suspension or expulsion, which includes more serious incidents, and younger students are added (grades 7 through 12, which includes some who will not continue in school as far as grade 12), the stronger risk factors for suspension and expulsion include being a victim or witness of violent acts, being a runaway, stealing expensive merchandise, breaking and entering, stealing cars, selling drugs, painting graffiti on other people's property, being a perpetrator of violent acts, and feeling rejected by fellow students or teachers and/or feeling unsafe at school (Table 2, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995; 1994-1995 data). These are clearly troubled and rejected children living in troubled neighborhoods. It is possible that community factors are as important as individual factors in putting a student at risk of suspension or expulsion. "Lowering the boom" on youth who are victims of circumstance through suspension and expulsion is a questionable practice despite their poor behavior choices. A more effective approach would be to meet students' individual basic human needs to the extent possible to allow them to continue in school to rise above their circumstances and poor choices.

*Table 2.*  
*Risk Factors for Receiving Out-of-School Suspension (Lifetime) or Expulsion (Lifetime), Grades 7-12*

	Out-of-School Suspension		Expulsion	
	Males (n = 9,100) OR (95% CI)	Females (n = 9,500) OR (95% CI)	Males (n = 9,100) OR (95% CI)	Females (n = 9,500) OR (95% CI)
Witnessed a shooting or stabbing	3.07 (2.54-3.70)	3.39 (2.76-4.15)	3.95 (3.06-5.10)	4.79 (3.34-6.88)
Someone pulled a knife or gun on them	3.40 (2.88-4.02)	3.64 (2.91-4.56)	3.45 (2.65-4.47)	4.53 (3.06-6.70)
Someone shot them	3.47 (2.24-5.38)	2.22 (1.05-4.67)	4.38 (2.51-7.65)	not significant
Someone stabbed them	3.35 (2.62-4.27)	3.82 (2.70-5.41)	4.04 (2.89-5.64)	5.76 (3.44-9.63)
Involved in a physical fight	2.75 (2.42-3.13)	4.33 (3.67-5.11)	2.55 (1.97-3.31)	4.99 (3.63-6.87)
Got jumped	3.46 (2.92-4.09)	4.75 (3.71-6.07)	3.64 (2.78-4.78)	4.96 (2.77-8.89)
Required medical attention after a fight	0.62 (0.54-0.71)	0.29 (0.25-0.34)	not significant	0.34 (0.22-0.52)
Was loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place	1.47 (1.29-1.68)	1.69 (1.47-1.94)	not significant	2.58 (1.79-3.74)
Ran away from home	3.58 (2.85-4.48)	3.94 (3.24-4.80)	3.97 (3.06-5.15)	6.69 (4.33-10.35)
Painted graffiti on someone else's property	2.17 (1.77-2.68)	2.32 (1.81-2.98)	2.27 (1.66-3.11)	3.63 (2.30-5.73)
Deliberately damaged someone else's property	1.60 (1.40-1.82)	1.93 (1.62-2.31)	1.42 (1.08-1.85)	3.00 (1.99-4.54)
Shoptlifted	2.13 (1.84-2.47)	2.28 (1.96-2.67)	1.76 (1.42-2.19)	1.95 (1.28-2.96)
Stole something worth less than \$50	2.02 (1.76-2.31)	1.80 (1.49-2.18)	1.43 (1.14-1.81)	1.75 (1.16-2.64)
Stole something worth more than \$50	3.80 (2.97-4.86)	3.94 (2.88-5.38)	3.98 (2.76-5.73)	3.47 (1.95-6.16)
Drove a car without owner's permission	2.69 (2.19-3.30)	2.78 (2.27-3.41)	3.01 (2.29-3.94)	4.75 (3.15-7.16)
Entered a building to steal something	2.54 (2.07-3.13)	2.72 (1.96-3.79)	2.65 (1.95-3.59)	2.61 (1.41-4.83)
Sold marijuana or other drugs	4.25 (3.39-5.33)	4.40 (3.15-6.15)	4.27 (3.29-5.54)	5.82 (3.16-10.71)
Used or threatened to use a weapon to get something from someone	3.23 (2.46-4.25)	3.82 (2.84-5.13)	4.20 (3.04-5.78)	5.39 (3.16-9.17)
Involved in a serious fight	3.04 (2.64-3.51)	4.77 (4.06-5.61)	2.70 (2.15-3.41)	5.51 (3.68-8.25)
Hurt someone badly enough to require medical attention	3.24 (2.76-3.79)	4.01 (3.37-4.77)	2.88 (2.34-3.53)	4.32 (2.88-6.46)
Fought with friends against another group	2.62 (2.30-2.98)	2.77 (2.31-3.32)	2.65 (2.06-3.41)	3.81 (2.72-5.34)

Carried a weapon at school (lifetime)	2.62 (2.19-3.12)	5.05 (3.81-6.70)	2.98 (2.35-3.76)	6.70 (4.29-10.47)
Used a weapon in a fight (lifetime)	4.17 (3.36-5.16)	6.04 (4.56-8.00)	3.84 (2.95-4.98)	7.97 (5.18-12.25)
Pulled a knife or gun on someone	5.07 (4.00-6.44)	5.93 (4.20-8.36)	4.57 (3.40-6.15)	7.63 (4.39-13.26)
Shot or stabbed someone	5.39 (3.76-7.72)	9.48 (5.00-17.99)	6.74 (4.43-10.25)	7.05 (2.70-18.41)
Carried a weapon to school (past 30 days)	2.70 (2.17-3.78)	5.24 (3.64-7.54)	2.75 (2.06-3.68)	4.05 (2.21-7.41)
Rarely or never felt hopeful about the future (past week)	1.65 (1.39-1.95)	1.80 (1.46-2.22)	1.54 (1.16-2.03)	2.13 (1.25-3.63)
Does not usually feel safe in their neighborhood	1.95 (1.56-2.43)	2.05 (1.60-2.62)	2.30 (1.64-3.21)	not significant
Believe they are likely to be killed by age 21	2.04 (1.35-3.08)	2.66 (1.57-4.52)	2.68 (1.57-4.58)	2.73 (1.20-6.20)
Disagree that they "are doing everything just about right"	1.97 (1.60-2.42)	1.61 (1.33-1.95)	1.93 (1.35-2.75)	not significant
Do not think that parents care "very much" about them	1.69 (1.45-1.98)	1.59 (1.34-1.88)	1.66 (1.25-2.20)	2.01 (1.39-2.90)
Do not feel close to people at their school	2.19 (1.85-2.59)	2.13 (1.74-2.60)	2.57 (1.91-3.45)	2.76 (1.91-4.00)
Do not feel like a part of their school	2.56 (2.17-3.02)	2.34 (1.86-2.94)	3.15 (2.39-4.14)	3.16 (2.19-4.55)
Believe that students at school are prejudiced	1.16 (1.01-1.33)	not significant	not significant	not significant
Are not happy to be at their school	2.92 (2.48-3.45)	2.80 (2.32-3.38)	3.05 (2.39-3.88)	3.12 (2.08-4.68)
Do not think that teachers at school treat students fairly	2.32 (2.00-2.70)	2.07 (1.72-2.49)	1.96 (1.56-2.46)	2.39 (1.56-3.64)
Do not feel safe in their school	2.72 (2.27-3.27)	2.56 (2.05-3.20)	3.07 (2.36-4.00)	2.03 (1.33-3.10)

Note: All risk factors refer to the 12 months prior to the collection of the data unless otherwise noted.

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave I, In-Home Interviews, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1995.

Additional information about the risk factors for expulsion comes from smaller studies, which may or may not be representative of broader national trends. Among 43 students expelled from Nashville Public Schools for aggressive behavior and enrolled in alternative education in 1997-1998, ninth graders predominated (McDonald, 1999). They were behind their peers in reading and math. Those expelled for assault had significantly lower reading scores than those expelled for weapon possession. Seventy-nine percent had been retained at least one grade in school, and 92 percent had been previously suspended from school. Almost three-quarters had a history of juvenile court charges.

Regional studies appear to have contradictory results because of differences in local school policies and procedures. A recent regional study of 86 students, ages 14-16, who were suspended or expelled from school, found that nearly all had committed a criminal offense, with nearly half having committed an assault or wounding, and nearly a third having committed a burglary (Powis, et al., 1998). In contrast, a study of 158 students in K-12 expelled from school in another region found that the majority of offenses were committed by students who would not generally be considered to be dangerous to the school environment (Morrison & D'Incau, 1997).

Effective interventions for reducing the need for suspension and expulsion are featured throughout this paper in window boxes. Generally, staff at the Hamilton Fish Institute have determined from their research that programs are more effective if they:

- start earlier in a child's life,
- are more interactive than didactic,
- are longer in duration,
- involve skill-building and behavioral rehearsal,
- focus specifically on the risk factors that are amenable to change in school settings, and
- involve adults in the lives of youth in meaningful ways.

Future research will point the way to other effective strategies.

### **PATHE (Positive Action Through Holistic Education)**

This program combines an environmental change approach with direct intervention for high-risk youth to reduce delinquent behavior and increase educational attainment. The program, designed for middle and high school students, focuses on comprehensive school improvement, including revised disciplinary procedures, enhanced school activities to promote achievement, and a positive school climate. The program also provided services to "marginal" students designed to increase their self-esteem and success experiences. Innovations introduced by the program include a team structure for managing school improvement (five teams of school staff, students, parents and community members, along with two full-time project-funded workers to administer the project); a Curriculum Review and Revision intervention designed to improve teacher competencies and school administration curriculum development and delivery; school-wide academic improvement modules, including studying, reading, and test-taking programs; school-wide climate innovations, including expansion of extracurricular activities, peer counseling, and rap sessions; career exploration programs aimed at introducing students to various career opportunities; and a set of activities aimed at providing affective and academic services to students considered moderate in achievement.

The effectiveness of this intervention has been evaluated in high school and middle school samples. Youth in the Environment and Individual Intervention (EII) high school sample reported considerably different rates of suspension at pretest with students in EII reporting a standardized rate of nearly 19 percent more suspensions than were reported by students not participating in an EII high school. By posttest, this difference had decreased with students in EII reporting 6 percent more suspensions than students in the control school. Among high school students, EII reduced suspensions by a standardized 13 percent. This improvement in suspension rates was not found among the middle school sample. Middle school students reported a standardized increase in suspensions of 1.5 percent.

#### Evaluation Information:

- Charleston County, South Carolina Public Schools
- Sample population included 4 middle schools (and 1 comparison site), 3 high schools (and 1 comparison site)
- 7 schools located in Charleston's inner city, a densely populated, depressed and predominantly African-American area
- 2 schools located in James Island, a rural impoverished area where 68-78% of its population is African-American

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### **Classroom Conflict Resolution Training for Elementary Schools**

This curriculum was designed by the Community Board Program in San Francisco in 1992. Here, it is used in Chicago schools. The curriculum is suggested for use with children from 3rd through 8th grade. The program is designed to foster communication and problemsolving skills and includes 19 classroom activities. The curriculum is designed to address new skills in communication, understanding and labeling

feelings, understanding other people's points of view, problem identification, and open classroom discussions. Conflict managers were also trained to assist other students to resolve disputes. The conflict managers receive extra training in communication skills and the procedure to follow when assisting others to resolve disputes. The managers are selected by teachers in participating classrooms, and when a dispute arises, the teacher may offer the choice to resolve the conflict with the assistance of two conflict managers.

While no information was given on the pretest comparability of suspension rates for this examination of Classroom Conflict Resolution Training for Elementary Schools (CCRT), by posttest the 87 students in the CCRT program were reporting a standardized rate of nearly 6.5 percent fewer suspensions.

#### Evaluation Information:

- Chicago Public Schools
- Sample population of 173 4th, 5th, and 6th graders
- 87 students in experimental group
- 98% of student population at the participating school qualify for reduced or free lunches
- 93% of the school population are below the poverty line
- Treatment phase lasts for 5 months

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#### **Anger Management for Adolescent African-American Males ("STAR")**

This anger management program is tailored specifically to the needs of young adolescent African-American males who lose instruction time in school at a disproportionate rate because of school suspensions for fighting. The model teaches Afro-centric anger management techniques. The treatment was delivered by an African-American male adult skilled in teaching young black males about how to manage anger and personal conflict. Students are selected for the intervention based on a history of fighting. The instructor teaches a method of anger management called "STAR," an acronym for STOP, THINK, ACT, AND REVIEW. The STAR program also incorporated lessons on racial pride, African history, and the goals and objectives an African-American male must master before passing into adulthood or the "Rite of Passage into Manhood."

In a very small test of the effectiveness of STAR in reducing the number of instructional days lost due to suspension during the 6 weeks after the intervention, the 26 youth in the STAR program reported 6.5 percent fewer days lost than the 25 students not receiving the STAR intervention. No pretest information was reported on which to judge the pretest comparability of the two samples.

#### Evaluation Information:

- Fairfield Middle School in the Fairfield County School District
- Sample population of 51 7th and 8th grade African-American male students
- Middle school population of 600 students, 85% African-American
- 100% of student population qualifies for free lunch

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#### **Alternative School Placements**

A recent statewide study illustrates who is typically served by alternative school placements (State of Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 1999). A study of 11 programs in Florida offered as alternatives to suspension and expulsion examined data on 246 youths (from a group of 840 to whom services were provided) who had finished the program in which they were enrolled and thus had complete data. The 11 programs varied and occurred throughout Florida. The youth were predominantly male (70 percent).

African-Americans were over-represented (34 percent), as were youth from single parent families (61 percent). The majority (57 percent) had a prior referral to the programs, and 52 percent had a prior suspension (the average student had 3.9 suspensions before program enrollment). The average age of youths when enrolled in the programs was 13.8 years. Their average grade point average was 1.6 on a 4-point scale (before receiving program services). Students were absent an average of 12.7 days in the current school year (before program enrollment).

In-school disciplinary procedures that serve as alternatives to suspension and expulsion include individual pullouts, separate classes, and alternative schools. Pullouts are used for individual students within their regular school but outside their regular classes. A student may be assigned to a mentor, teacher, or counselor who provides special tutoring, behavioral guidance and training, or assistance with other needs. Separate classes are sometimes offered to students who have been labeled "high risk." These classes vary greatly in content, design, and duration. They can be schools-within-schools, where students have their own network of teachers and counselors; or they can simply be classes where students are taught social skills or given training in a profession. The alternative school is usually an entirely separate educational facility. Such schools are typically smaller and more individually focused. Sometimes they serve a broad multicounty region or a single large city. Some schools offer all three alternatives to better meet the full range of student needs.

Alternative schools may be the appropriate place for students who pose a risk to other students or who are simply not having their needs met in traditional classrooms. Alternative schools vary greatly in design, philosophy, and effectiveness (Fizzell & Raywid, 1997). The unique characteristics of these programs and the diverse populations they serve have made rigorous evaluation very difficult. Few studies on the effectiveness of alternative programs have been conducted and generalizations beyond the settings in which evaluations occurred cannot be made. There is evidence, however, that students at risk who are served in comprehensive, well-designed alternative programs do better than would be predicted had the students not attended the alternative programs (Morely, 1991; Raywid, 1995, 1996b).

Small alternative schools with low student-teacher ratios provide an atmosphere that is warm, individualized, and manageable. Benefits of smaller schools in general include better attention and retention; better behavior, attitude, and engagement; enhanced academic performance; and increased participation in extracurricular activities (Raywid, 1996a). There is little doubt that smaller classes are better for students with emotional, social, or behavioral problems.

Alternative education programs that feature a vocational component can be successful. Providing a link to the business community and offering real-world experience can lessen feelings of alienation that many suspended or expelled youth feel. Reising (1995) advocates long-range, real-world, systemic changes in attitudes and experiences on the path to reducing violence and other problem behaviors. At-risk students are prone to miss the point of instruction, falling into the trap of rote learning and missing opportunities the school provides. (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991). High quality, dynamic instruction is an important way to retain students' attention. Alternative education students need not be tracked into blue collar vocations; rather, real-world applications and experiences can provide students the impetus needed for meaningful participation in the school experience.

Many students who exhibit violent and antisocial behavior need clearly defined and structured environments. Lipsey and Wilson found that behavioral programs have "positive effects" and that, for noninstitutionalized juvenile offenders, the evidence for this is "consistent" (Lipsey & Wilson, 1988). Students who were not able to manage their own behavior well enough to succeed in general education were referred to highly structured classrooms for behavioral support. With the help of this system, students learned self-control.

In addition to teaching effective behavior management, clear and fair punishment for different problems and infractions is important. Kauffman (1997) outlines the problem:

Aggressive behavior is less likely to recur if it is followed by consequences that are nonviolent but immediate, certain and proportional to the offense. Violence as a means to controlling aggression engenders counter-aggression, setting the stage for further coercion. Violence is reduced in the long term if the consequences are swift, assured, and restrictive of personal preferences rather than harsh or physically painful.

Fair and clear consequences are important, but positive rewards for good behavior have also proven promising. Mayer demonstrated the value of using positive rewards for acceptable behavior, clarifying classroom rules, using group rewards, and providing rewards for compliance (Mayer, 1995).

Mentoring by adult volunteers from the community can have a positive effect on a student's life. Cornell cites a study by Morrow and Styles (1995) that outlines the kinds of mentoring that have proved successful (Cornell, 1999). They distinguished between "developmental" and "prescriptive" mentoring styles. Developmental mentors proved to be more caring in their relationships with the students. Prescriptive mentors were more organized in their approach, planning different events and topics of discussion. Developmental mentors were more likely to have longer term relationships with their students, compared to prescriptive mentors.

Social skills instruction is a critical alternative education strategy. Social skills deficits in school predict future delinquency (Walker, Stieber, & Bullis, 1997). Children as young as four can be taught important interpersonal skills (Cornell, 1999). Some comprehensive instructional programs focus on developing self-control, stress-management, responsible decisionmaking, social problemsolving, and communication skills (Kingery, Murphy, & Minogue, 1998).

While it is true that many students who attend alternative schools do better while in those schools, many of the students fall back into their old habits when they return to their former schools. This indicates the need for a reassessment of separate alternative sites, as well as a discussion on helping students in transition. Returning students need to be supported by both regular school staff and by teachers with whom they bonded at the alternative site (Karlin & Harnish, 1995). This will help the students feel that they have a support network in both places. Students often bond with their alternative school teachers and regret leaving them and returning to the regular school environment. Creating caring relationships between students and teachers at both schools will help ameliorate the situation.

Connecting with parents is essential in dealing with aggressive and violent students. Normally, this is part of a preventive measure-catching the student before something serious happens-but it also applies to those being disciplined. Cornell stresses the need for long-term programs, rather than quick fixes (Cornell, 1999). He states, "Effective programs involve parents in ongoing relationships and training sessions that last from six months to several years. This investment pays off in reduced delinquency and better school adjustment for many years afterwards." Another aspect of parent education that Cornell cites is encouraging parents to limit the time their children spend watching television and movies and playing video games that are violent in nature (Cornell, 1999).

Making sure that students have their basic needs met is another important component of any program. Many students requiring alternative interventions are lacking such basics as clothing, food, and housing. Meeting these needs often means putting the student in contact with a social service provider. Unless basic needs have been met, the likelihood that a student will be amenable to intervention is small.

Alternative education programs are increasingly common, although evaluations of these are scarce to nonexistent. Three such programs are now being evaluated rigorously through the Hamilton Fish Institute. Three universities working with the Institute have established local community/school/university partnerships committed to long-term violence reduction and prevention through alternative education as part of a broader seven-State Institute Consortium. Each partnership diagnoses specific violence problems within the schools and neighborhoods and collaboratively develops, implements, and evaluates alternative education strategies. During this unprecedented 5-year initiative, the university partnerships have developed and are now testing three distinctly different approaches to alternative education. These are featured in window boxes throughout this bulletin.

### **The Regional Alternative Education Program**

The Regional Alternative Education Program, being tested by the George Washington University in partnership with the Stafford County Public School System in Virginia, serves as an alternative to long-term suspension or expulsion for middle and high school students who have violated school policies for violence, weapons, and controlled substances. The alternative school was established in 1994 to serve a region of five Virginia counties and is funded by the Commonwealth of Virginia and a per diem amount from the participating school districts. The school is centrally located in a separate building away from



other school classes. On average, 150 students are admitted to the program each year. Students are referred by the school districts' superintendents, with some referrals coming from local juvenile court units.

Program staff work directly with the central office and base school staffs of referring school districts to coordinate academic, counseling, family, and transportation services. Upon admission, students work with alternative school staff, including a full-time counselor, to assess academic status, address deficiencies, set goals and objectives, and outline plans of study in preparation for successful reentry into the students' home schools by the following school year. Some students may also complete a high school program while in the alternative education program by finishing diploma classes or successfully taking the GED test. In some situations, the student may return to the Regional Program during the next school year to complete a course of study.

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### **The Violence is Not the Answer (VINTA) School**

Syracuse University has partnered with the Syracuse City School District to implement and assess Violence is Not the Answer (VINTA) School, an alternative school for middle and high school students (grades 7-12) with weapons (other than guns) violations, averaging about 90 students each school year. Anger management, conflict resolution, and problemsolving and communication skills are incorporated into a required Prosocial Skills class given every other day. The Prosocial Skills class is considered an integral component of the school, and each student is given a grade for it. In addition, skills from the class are reinforced in an eight-session informal Art Lab, where students apply their knowledge and skills in a creative project. The VINTA program includes extensive parent outreach and involvement, and students are counseled, mentored, and tutored to facilitate transition back into the home school within 1 year.

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### **The Springfield, Oregon, Alternative Education Program**

The University of Oregon and the Springfield School District have partnered to implement and test a comprehensive set of school-based services to identify, treat, and retain high-risk youth in a middle school. The alternative program is being implemented within a middle school identified as having the highest number of referrals in the district to the State Department of Youth Services.

Sixth graders who are identified as high risk for school failure and future violence using a multiple gating approach and enrolled in the alternative education program receive special support (e.g., instruction in study skills, tutoring, mentoring, behavior monitoring, interpersonal skills training, and in-depth lessons from "Second Step," a violence prevention curriculum), while spending most of the day with other students. In addition, a Building Discipline Team carries out a universal intervention, based on the Second Step curriculum, aimed at reducing violence and destructive behavior for all sixth-grade students (numbering 197 during the 1998-1999 school year) in the school. Staff provide extensive support for basic needs and behavioral and academic problems.

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With the stricter regulations regarding behavior and weapon carrying in schools, alternative education programs have proliferated. Some very important issues need to be addressed and studied, however, before specific strategies can be recommended. One such issue is the purpose of alternative schools. Alternative schools historically were a response to the failure of regular schools to meet the needs of certain students (Gregg, 1998). The use of alternative schools now is more disciplinary than corrective. The approach of alternative schools is to make a student fit the system, often transferring the child back to his or her original setting. As has been noted, students often lose what they gained during the alternative placement upon returning to their regular school. The Appalachia Educational Laboratory points out that "a focus on the 'problem' students may obscure or ignore real problems in the system" (Gregg, 1998). Alternative placements should not be seen as a panacea. Comprehensive school reform is an additional avenue of inquiry.

Because of the punitive nature of many alternative programs, alternative schools run the risk of becoming dumping grounds for disruptive students. Many zero tolerance policies are vaguely written and are used as quick fixes for behavioral problems (Kochhar, 1998). Some educators have voiced concerns regarding the practice of sending special education students to alternative programs, which have neither the staff nor the resources to meet the needs of special populations (Kochhar, 1998). The special needs of all students in alternative settings should be considered carefully.

### **Community-Based Interventions**

Schools and their communities must work together to adequately address the needs of suspended and expelled students. Keeping students linked to the public schools through some means is the best way to ensure that they will complete high school. Alternative education programs under the authority of the school are an important option for handling this problem. When alternative schools are not feasible, GED programs are a distant second in terms of options, and these can be placed in the broader community. If the school's role is merely to educate those who behave well (or whose poor behavior results substantially from their disabilities), then the community must educate those who do not behave well (some of whom have disabilities, and all of whom have special needs). Passing troubled youth off from the school to the broader community ensures that the community will have to deal with the problem, and the solution will be expensive no matter how the costs are calculated. If the problem is not dealt with early and constructively, it will be dealt with in incarcerated settings where returns are diminished. Yet few communities are heavily invested in serving youth who have been suspended or expelled before their behavior leads to incarceration. At this point, all communities are heavily invested. As the strain of incarcerating youth grows, the move toward community-based alternatives will become more essential. The effective approaches for community-based programs have yet to be identified in meta-analytic studies, but that process is now underway at the Hamilton Fish Institute. (For further information, see the Institute's Registry project at [www.hamfish.org](http://www.hamfish.org)).

### **Summary**

Suspension and expulsion have their place in effective school discipline. They can be overused or misused, however, with disastrous consequences for students. Zero tolerance represents a move toward strict discipline of a few scapegoats in a failed attempt to make schools safer. Prevention efforts move students who come from high-risk environments and students who make poor behavior choices into more productive paths, limiting the need for suspension and expulsion. When students must be excluded from the general student population for help or for the safety of others, every effort should be made to keep youth involved in meaningful educational experiences. A range of options is available, and evidence is growing that indicates that particular strategies can have positive outcomes. The growth in alternative education can be a promising trend if it brings more relevant services to students with special needs, or it can be a problematic trend if it excludes students from effective educational experiences. When these alternatives fail, community-based programs must fill the gap to prevent youth from a further downward spiral toward involvement in the criminal justice system.

To say that more research is needed on all aspects of these problems is an understatement. A massive effort is required in systems for collecting and reporting information about student behavior, in systems for preventing and reducing violent, self-destructive, and antisocial behavior, and in measures for improving the safety of children both in school and in the broader community. As the research begins, administrators and other school staff must consider carefully the effects of the strategies they implement, watching for evidence of effectiveness and for opportunities for improvement. Lawmakers need assistance in making policy for school safety, and administrators need financial support and technological support for carrying out their increasingly difficult responsibilities. Administrators and all school staff need preservice and inservice training in school safety techniques. Communities need information about alternative programs that can maintain links with the school to support high school completion. Suspension and expulsion should not be seen as an easy solution to the problems faced by communities and schools, but these measures should be used with great discretion in ways that have measurable positive impacts.

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