Alternative discipline can benefit learning
Mary Schmid Mergler, Karla M. Vargas and Caroline Caldwell
Phi Delta Kappan 2014 96: 25
DOI: 10.1177/0031721714553406

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://pdk.sagepub.com/content/96/2/25

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Phi Delta Kappan can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://pdk.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://pdk.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Sep 22, 2014

What is This?
Removing students from the classroom is a primary way that schools address student misbehavior. Research shows that such exclusionary discipline practices have lasting negative effects on students, including an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, dropping out of school, and coming into contact with the juvenile justice system — contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Notably, many schools across the country are changing how they discipline students by implementing research- and evidence-based disciplinary practices that have yielded positive results for

MARY SCHMID MERGLER (mmergler@texasappleseed.net) and KARLA M. VARGAS (kvargas@texasappleseed.net) are staff attorneys at Texas Appleseed, Austin, Texas. CAROLINE CALDWell is a legal intern at Texas Appleseed.

By Mary Schmid Mergler, Karla M. Vargas, and Caroline Caldwell

Tossing a misbehaving child out of class or suspending the student from school may not be the best option for the student, school, or community.
suspensions, are commonplace in schools throughout the United States. National data show that in recent decades suspensions increased from 1.7 million in 1974 to more than 3.3 million in 2006. Such exclusionary discipline practices are aligned with zero-tolerance policies and attempt to promote school safety and student accountability. A groundbreaking 2011 report, *Breaking Schools’ Rules* (Fabelo et al., 2011) by the Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG) explains that there is no evidence proving that these policies lead to safer schools. In contrast, the report conclusively shows that exclusionary discipline practices do more harm than good to students. *Breaking Schools’ Rules* is a comprehensive report that not only highlights the increased reliance on exclusionary discipline nationwide but specifically studies the effects of these practices on Texas students. The Texas public school system — the second largest in the nation — reflects the changing demographics of school districts across the country. CSG examined data for three cohorts of students, following those students from grade 7 through the year after 12th grade, and tracking the types of disciplinary referrals that these students experienced along with their educational outcomes. The data analysis demonstrated that Texas students who experienced some form of exclusionary discipline were much less likely to experience academic success and were much more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system. Specifically, the CSG report showed that 59.6% of all Texas public school students experienced some form of exclusionary discipline during middle and high school. Furthermore, 31% of students with at least one suspension or expulsion repeated their grade level, compared to only 5% of students with no disciplinary involvement. Moreover, exclusionary discipline was rarely a one-time event for these students. The report found that “half of all students who received [a suspension or expulsion] were involved in at least four disciplinary incidents, and the average amount of incidents per student was eight” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. 37). The high number of repeat incidents after an expulsion or suspension calls into question the effectiveness of these policies, and it illustrates the extent to which some students are repeatedly removed from the classroom. Additionally, the more often a student experienced exclusionary discipline, the less likely that student was to graduate. Almost 60% of those who were disciplined more than 10 times failed to graduate from high school during the study period, compared to about 18% of students with no disciplinary violations (Fabelo et al., 2011).

In addition to exclusionary discipline’s effect on student achievement, such practices are also correlated to an increased likelihood of student contact with the juvenile justice system. The CSG report found that 23% of students who experienced exclu-
sionary disciplinary actions in school had subsequent contact with the juvenile justice system. By contrast, only 2% of students with no interaction with exclusionary disciplinary measures had contact with the juvenile justice system. These shocking statistics shine a bright light on the significant correlation between exclusionary school discipline and eventual contact with the juvenile justice system — a cause for concern for teachers, administrators, and parents dedicated to student education and success. Fortunately, proven alternative disciplinary systems more effectively address student misbehavior and increase the likelihood of student academic success.

Alternative #1: Restorative justice

The restorative justice model originated in the criminal justice system. It engages the victim, offenders, and the community in redressing the harms caused by a crime. The success of this model is such that it has been adapted outside the criminal justice context and is growing in popularity as a means to address student misbehavior (National Opportunity to Learn, 2014). Within schools, this model creates a system that focuses on developing relationships among students and school administrators, teaching students how their actions affect the school community, and providing a platform for students and administrators to engage in righting the wrongs caused by the student’s behavior. This model also supports “the emotional health, well-being, and learning potential of the youth and all adult members of the school community” (National Opportunity to Learn, 2014, p. 15-16).

Unlike exclusionary discipline, where a student experiences a punitive measure as a consequence of misbehavior, restorative justice challenges students to hold each other accountable and right a wrong. It creates a space where misbehaving students and those affected by the misbehavior work together to identify the harm, identify and acknowledge the effects of that harm, and work toward a resolution to remedy the harm (Jones, 2013). Typically, students use a restorative justice “circle” where they identify the individuals (students, teachers, school administrators) with whom they have a conflict or individuals affected by misbehavior. A third-party teacher, staff person, or even student mediates the discussion, or circle, so affected parties can reach a resolution acceptable for all involved. The goal of that resolution is to remedy the harm done by the misbehavior, while taking into account the effects of that harm on the individuals affected and the larger school community. This encourages students to take responsibility for their actions and allows them to address their behavior by acknowledging and understanding how their behavior directly affects their peers, the learning environment, and the school community (National Opportunity to Learn, 2014).

Addressing bullying

Concerned about the rising use of exclusionary discipline as well as bullying, Ed White Middle School in San Antonio, Texas, introduced the restorative justice model during the 2012-13 academic year. Teachers had two days of training, which included teacher and staff participation in restorative justice circles. Teachers were instructed on the importance of effectively using restorative justice circles and their nonhierarchical intent of putting all involved on an equal playing field, thus encouraging students to more effectively communicate with peers and teachers since everyone has an equal voice in the circle (Armour, n.d.).

Ed White incorporates various restorative justice circles throughout different stages of its discipline process. At the first stage, teachers used circles to build community in the classroom by checking in with students to ensure that they are ready to participate in the learning process and are not preoccupied with other matters. The circles were then incorporated into student problem solving, where students who had issues with other students could participate in a circle to address the conflict before it ballooned into a disciplinary matter. As the school year progressed and the school became better acquainted with using circles, teachers were encouraged to use them as the main form of discipline in the classroom. Students responded positively to the restorative justice circles, and they perceived disciplinary actions at the school as having much more procedural fairness after the program’s implementation (Armour, n.d.).

The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at the University of Texas at Austin observed Ed White’s first year of implementation and analyzed improvements during the transition to the restorative justice discipline system. The study found that the number of suspensions and expulsions were reduced, but the most noticeable change was the difference in school climate and culture (National Opportunity to Learn, 2014). “Circling it” is now a catchphrase at Ed White, and students in conflict with one another will ask staff to help them engage in restorative justice circles (KVUE, 2013). A teacher at Ed White said the restorative justice program has been a life-changing experience, and its ability to help troubled students open up and speak with staff has made a difference in overall behavior, specifically in classroom behavior. Similarly, Ed White students found that using the circles helped them understand other students better and that understanding helped resolve conflicts more quickly. The change from an exclusionary discipline policy to a restorative justice
students who are still not responsive to second-tier interventions, third-tier strategies include highly individualized responses to problem behavior, such as a functional behavioral assessment and a personalized support plan involving assessment-based strategies to modify behavior (National Technical Assistance Center, n.d.).

PBIS has been demonstrated to decrease schools’ reliance on exclusionary discipline like out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Runge, Staszkiewicz, & O’Donnell, 2011). Disciplinary incidents have been shown to decrease anywhere between 20% and 60% in schools implementing PBIS (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2009). PBIS has been shown to have other benefits as well, including improved academic performance, increased attendance, improved school climate, and sense of school safety. For these reasons, PBIS implementation in schools is rapidly expanding. An estimated 18,000 schools nationwide were implementing PBIS as of 2012, more than double the number of schools in 2007 (Texans Care for Children, 2012).

For schools and districts interested in implementing PBIS, statewide or regional support networks and training centers may be available. For example, Florida has established a statewide Positive Behavior Support: Multi-Tiered Support System. As of the 2011-12 school year, the project reported that 1,174 schools received training for Tier 1 of PBIS, with about half of those implementing Tiers 2 and 3 as well. After just one year of implementation, schools reported a 15% decrease in office disciplinary referrals, an 18% decrease in in-school suspensions, and an 8% decrease in out-of-school suspensions (Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project, 2012).

The extent to which a school implemented PBIS with a high degree of fidelity was also a determining factor in the school’s improvement in discipline. For example, high-implementing schools had an average of 38% fewer in-school suspensions than low-implementing schools (Florida’s Positive Behavior Support Project, 2012). Other resources that provide implementation training and coaching are available in states across the country. General information as well as a list of state and regional PBIS coordinators.

**Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** incentivizes good behavior by acknowledging students who exhibit good behavior instead of simply singling out students who exhibit bad behavior.

**Alternative #2: PBIS**

Like restorative justice, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports seeks to minimize the need for exclusionary discipline by improving school climate and changing student behavior (Dignity in Schools, n.d.). Instead of waiting for students to misbehave and then punishing them, PBIS establishes behavioral expectations for the school community and rewards students who successfully follow community guidelines (Texans Care for Children, 2012). Schools following the PBIS model seek to establish a climate where appropriate behavior is the norm, and students are rewarded for following community standards.

PBIS is an evidence-based disciplinary model that uses a three-tier system of behavioral support. It is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum but rather an approach to discipline that can include a number of different strategies at each tier, allowing each school to tailor and update its discipline policies to meet the individualized needs of students and teachers (Dignity in Schools, n.d.). The first tier involves a schoolwide system that creates clear and consistent expectations for student behavior and teaches behavioral expectations to all students. PBIS incentivizes good behavior by acknowledging students who exhibit good behavior instead of simply singling out students who exhibit bad behavior. Also included in the first tier are classroom management training and strategies for how educators should respond to misbehavior (Texans Care for Children, 2012).

The second and third tiers focus on students who don’t respond to first-tier preventative interventions. Second-tier strategies include interventions focused on small groups of students and may include practices such as small classes or clubs teaching social skills and conflict resolution, or Check In/Check Out, a program through which students check in with an adult at the beginning and end of each day and receive teacher feedback throughout the day. For
SEL overseen by a newly created Department of Social and Emotional Learning. So far, it has launched SEL programs in schools serving more than half of the district’s students, with the goal of serving all students by the 2015-16 school years. AISD’s program emphasizes the five essential SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The program calls for specific instruction each week on the principles, and AISD teachers also integrate SEL into existing lesson plans (AISD, n.d.).

Cunningham Elementary School in south-central Austin has implemented SEL in all aspects of its environment. Faculty share their SEL experiences at monthly staff meetings and develop school wide SEL activities. Teachers at Cunningham also look for ways to include SEL lessons in established curriculum and academic areas. Furthermore, the school has implemented Peace Paths, which provides step-by-step instructions to help students in conflict until they reach a mutual resolution.

Austin evaluates the effectiveness of its SEL programming through districtwide school climate can be found on the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs’ web site (www.pbis.org).

**Alternative #3: Social and emotional learning**

Social and emotional learning is a research-based approach that helps children learn critical skills like recognizing and managing their emotions, building positive relationships with others, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.). Students are instructed in core social and emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Research shows that SEL programs that effectively teach these skills experience a significant decrease in student misbehavior, hence a decreasing reliance on exclusionary discipline. SEL programs also can contribute to improved academic achievement, as well as safe and supportive school learning environments where students feel respected and are actively engaged in learning (CASEL, n.d.).

In 2013, the Austin (Texas) Independent School District (AISD) began an initiative to implement SEL...
surveys and through interactions with students to measure perception and growth. Two years into the program, Austin administrators saw a noticeable positive change in the school climate and an increase in actively engaged students during classroom activities. Discipline referrals declined, and school interactions improved. At one high school, SEL instruction combined with tutoring and study skills for at-risk freshmen led to a 20% drop in class failures and a 28% drop in disciplinary referrals compared to the previous year (AISD, n.d.).

**Conclusion: Alternatives work**

Over the past few decades, many schools have increasingly relied upon exclusionary discipline to control student misbehavior. Yet, in most cases, removing disruptive students from the classroom does not modify student behavior, and research shows it does more harm than good. We now know that students who are suspended or expelled from school are less likely to succeed academically and more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. Exclusionary discipline has created a school-to-prison pipeline that funnels children away from schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

However, the alternative to exclusionary discipline is not tolerance of misbehavior. Rather, school administrators, teachers, and staff must develop ways to address misbehavior and improve all students’ chances for success. Fortunately, proven alternative approaches to school discipline exist. Restorative justice programs, PBIS, and SEL all have been shown to reduce schools’ need for exclusionary discipline by preventing student misbehavior in the first place and successfully modifying misbehavior when it occurs. As an added benefit, schools implementing these disciplinary alternatives have seen improved school climates and academic achievement. Implementation of such programs takes dedication and work, but the results are worth it.

**References**


