

What Are the Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspension?

Schools in British Columbia and throughout Canada are charged with the responsibility of carrying out effective discipline programs. As public perception builds around the increasing acts of violence within schools, administrators are using stiff disciplinary actions to affect student behaviour. As such, one of the most commonly used disciplinary measures has been out-of-school suspension. This action is effective in removing immediate threats to school safety; however, out-of-school suspension is probably not effective in changing student behaviour (BC Ministry of Education, 1999).

Three promising alternative discipline programs to out-of-school suspension are in-school suspension, the identification of at-risk youth, and the building of positive relationships. None of these methods is to be implemented alone; rather a combination of two or all three may prove to be the best alternative. Likely the most effective method for changing student behaviour is in-school suspension. Albeit a costly one financially and structurally, this option may result in the desired change. Used in conjunction with in-school suspension programs, identifying youth who are at-risk and then supporting them through intervention programs may also alter their problematic behaviour. An integral part of all alternatives is the development of positive relationships with students who face disciplinary action. These relationships go a long way in supporting students in ameliorating their behaviour.

The Surrey and Langley School Districts provided the context for the study because they are typical of many districts in B.C. in that they are socially, economically, and culturally diverse and practise common disciplinary methods relevant to this study, including in-school and out-of-school suspension. The rationale for this study was to investigate the use of alternatives to out-of-school suspension in order to inform policy makers of the strengths and limitations of out-of-school suspension and the effects of alternatives to suspension. Based on our reading of the literature and our own personal experiences with discipline, three questions formed the foundation of our investigation. Are in-school suspension programs an effective method of student discipline? Does the identification of at-risk youth prevent out of school suspension? What interpersonal relationships are important in reducing the reoccurrence of problematic behaviour?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on suspension indicates there are many negative aspects of using out-of-school suspension as a discipline strategy. Firstly, it is often used in response to relatively minor infractions, such as disobedience and disrespect and attendance problems, that do not threaten school safety (Morrison & Skiba, 2001, Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Secondly, out-of-school suspension is seen as being an illogical solution, particularly for students suspended for skipping class or school altogether (Morris & Howard, 2003). The research literature shows that there are alternatives to suspension that positively affect student behaviour. In-school suspension programs are being developed as a result of the growing concern that out-of-school suspensions are ineffective in disciplining students and changing their behaviour. The goal of these alternatives is to provide a meaningful learning experience for the student, which results in the modification of their conduct to prevent further suspension.

Our examination of the literature reveals that researchers define at-risk youth as those disadvantaged due to conditions of: socio-economic status related to inner-city neighbourhoods, children of substance abusers or abusers themselves, youth from single parent homes, and/or those having a history of violent, aggressive or problem behaviour. "There is evidence that

students who are repeatedly suspended from school suffer academically and are more likely to drop out of school” (Dupper, 1994). The identification of at-risk youth, followed by an effective intervention program may lead to a positive effect of changing their problematic behaviour. The most significant finding among studies of intervention programs is the importance of relationships between students and adults, peers and mentors.

The development of supportive relationships can be part of an effective strategy in the prevention of the reoccurrence of out-of-schools suspensions. Administrators, teachers, peers, counsellors, parents and other supportive adults can all play a role in supporting student behaviour. It is the collective sum of positive relationships that help to prevent the reoccurrence of suspension. “Effective discipline practices focus on teaching social responsibility and appropriate behaviour, not on demanding arbitrary obedience.” (BC Ministry of Education, 1999, p.17) The literature shows that the more often students have positive interactions with peers and adults, the more likely a change in behaviour.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research is a mixed methods design, using both qualitative and quantitative research in order to gather data. The instrument for the quantitative method of data collection was a questionnaire that was sent out to vice-principals in both of our selected school districts. In-depth, personal interviews formed our qualitative method of data collection. We chose to survey and interview high school administrators because they are the people who have extensive experience relating to suspension and its effectiveness and are aware of alternatives to suspension that are currently used in the school system. The survey responses provided the researchers with valuable information about how vice principals felt about suspension and its value as a disciplinary technique. Many surveys were returned with anecdotal comments about how out-of-school suspensions are used within the respondents’ schools and also mentioned any alternatives currently being practised.

CONCLUSIONS

Four conclusions were drawn from the study conducted in the Surrey and Langley School Districts. The conclusions are organized using the conceptual framework of: Intervention, Identification, and Prevention. This framework is based on the findings in the literature review. Our conclusions also provide a response to the three research questions posed at the beginning of the study.

Are in-school suspension programs an effective method of student discipline?

In-school suspension programs are an effective method of student discipline that improves student behaviour but there are barriers that prevent effective implementation. There was overwhelming agreement that in-school suspension programs can be an effective method for changing student behaviour, provide an educational experience and rehabilitative component, and not be punitive in nature. The lack of funding is the main reason for the shortage of programs and has resulted in few of these alternative programs being implemented on a regular basis.

Does identifying at-risk youth reduce out-of-school suspension?

The identification of at-risk youth is not a clear indicator that this group of students will engage in problematic behaviour. In conjunction with identification, a strong indication exists that intervention methods are necessary on a case-to-case basis in order to change and support

student behaviour. While respondents disagreed on the effectiveness of identification, they unanimously supported the creation and implementation of a school based program of intervention. With proper follow up and continued support along the way, vice-principals feel that youth at-risk will begin to realize some success and cease to act out for attention. As well, vice-principals in our study felt strongly about the importance of relationship building during the discipline process.

What interpersonal relationship are important in preventing the reoccurrence of problematic behaviour, and why?

Relationships between students and administrators, teachers, peers, counsellors, and parents play an important role in supporting the student in order to prevent the reoccurrence of problematic behaviour. A reoccurring theme from the interviews with vice-principals was the importance and need for students to have genuine, caring relationships with adults in schools. Vice-principals extolled this strength and emphasized that students needed to forge positive relationships with adults in schools because they often lacked that type of relationship outside of the school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon a review of our conclusions, we have developed a set of recommendations for schools, districts, and policy makers. We believe that student discipline should not be punitive in nature, but rather reformative. Vice-principals are challenged to improve student behaviour, but the means by which this is to be achieved under the present system lacks physical and human support. The following recommendations advocate for alternatives to out-of-suspension that do not punish, but rather support behavioural change. In order for these recommendations to be effective, they need to be approached proactively rather than reactively.

- The Ministry of Education must host a yearly symposium on the topic of alternatives to out-of school suspension. It is also recommended that individual School Districts meet bi-yearly in order to collaborate and prepare for this yearly conference.
- The Ministry of Education must allocate specific funds for districts that want to implement alternatives to suspension programs within their schools.
- Due to the lack of in-school suspension programs in the Langley and Surrey School District, the researchers recommend the creation of a pilot in-school suspension program in one Langley and Surrey high school that can then be evaluated and reproduced in all high schools within both districts.
- More program evaluations are needed to measure the benefits and analyze the effects of in-school suspension programs.
- Administrators, counsellors, teachers and district support staff who are involved in the discipline process must work collaboratively to create and implement a streamlined method(s) for the identification of at-risk youth.
- A database of major contacts (ex. District counsellors, Drug & Alcohol counsellors, Youth Care Workers) must be created that is easily accessible to all vice-principals in the Langley and Surrey School Districts.

While we found that in-school suspension programs are effective alternatives to out-of-school suspension programs, issues associated with the implementation of change prevent the development of these programs. A disciplinary model that does not educate appropriate behaviour will be ineffective in teaching students to change their behaviour. School Districts can no longer

be complacent with their disciplinary approach. The issues and difficulties facing students dictate that a more responsive approach to discipline is needed.

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Authors

David Baldasso, Secondary Teacher, Surrey School District, baldasso_d@sd36.bc.ca

Jerome Francis, Secondary Teacher, Arch Bishop Carney Regional Secondary, francis@acrss.org

Cheryl Loewen, Secondary Teacher, Surrey School District, quashie_c@sd36.bc.ca

Adrienne McLeod, Secondary Teacher, Langley School District, amcleod@sd35.bc.ca

For further information on the complete study please contact one of the authors listed above.