

SPECIAL REPORT

March, 1999

School Violence: Disciplinary Exclusion, Prevention and Alternatives

Although there is a substantive body of research on effective options for reducing and responding to school violence and student misconduct, this research has not been applied in many schools (Quinn et al., 1998). Exclusion through out-of-school suspension and expulsion has long been among the most popular forms of school discipline, applied to a wide range of misbehavior from tardiness to serious acts of violence. Nationally, it is estimated that nearly two million students are suspended each year (Harvard Education Letter, 1987). For weapon possession alone, over 6,000 students were expelled in the United States in the 1996-97 school year (Sinclair et al., 1998). With the passage of the 1994 Federal Gun-Free Schools Act and subsequent state legislation (see sidebar), school expulsions are likely to increase significantly.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of expulsion and out-of-school suspension among educators, there is little scientific research to show that zero-

tolerance or other “get-tough” measures are effective in reducing school violence or increasing school safety. On the contrary, there is a growing body of research showing a clear association between disciplinary exclusion and further poor outcomes such as delinquency, substance abuse and school dropout. On the other hand, a growing number of prevention programs have been shown, through rigorous scientific evaluation, to significantly reduce aggression, violence, and weapon carrying in schools. Research has also identified the types and characteristics of programs that are most effective in reducing recidivism among violent and chronic juvenile offenders.

The Issue

Public concern over juvenile violence has been further heightened by a number of highly publicized incidents of school violence over the past two years. These high-profile incidents, including the shooting

Universities Children's Policy Partnership

University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development
University Center for Social and Urban Research

Pennsylvania State University
Prevention Research Center
College of Health and Human Development

This report was prepared by Brian Bumbarger (814-865-2618) with the assistance of Jennifer Brooks, at the Prevention Research Center, Penn State University. The author wishes to thank Robert McCall and Christina Groark for their editorial assistance. The report is one of a continuing series of background papers written for policymakers, funders, journalists, human service professionals, scholars, and citizens that summarize research and best practices on issues of public interest that pertain to children, youth and families. It is produced by the University Children's Policy Partnership (UCPP), a collaboration of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (Christina J. Groark and Robert B. McCall, Co-Directors, 412-624-5527) and the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center (Mark T. Greenberg, Director, 814-865-0112). UCPP is dedicated to contributing to the health and welfare of children, youth and families by providing nonpartisan information on public policy issues.

of a teacher by a student in Edinboro, Pennsylvania have brought school violence issues to the forefront of legislative and policy discussions and driven schools to adopt strict punitive measures.

According to statistics from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, out of school suspensions for incidents of violence or weapon possession increased 14.8% between 1996 and 1997, expulsions increased 34.6%, and arrests showed a 31.1% increase.

Historically, suspension and expulsion were viewed as rather severe punitive sanctions meant to send a clear deterrent message to both the student and parent about the seriousness of the student's misconduct. An out-of-school suspension or expulsion virtually guaranteed getting a parent's attention and getting the parent to attend a school conference to discuss the problem behavior. It also provided a cooling-down period for students who posed a clear and present danger to other students or staff. However the popularity of suspension and expulsion, coupled with a lack of other options, have led to a dramatic increase in their use, often for less serious or nonviolent misconduct, and weakened their deterrent impact. These sanctions are no longer viewed as the severe "last resort" and thus draw little attention from many parents. Educators must rethink their use of these sanctions and develop a broader spectrum of options, beginning with primary prevention.

Primary Prevention

School-based primary prevention programs can increase appropriate behavior and decrease the frequency and intensity of inappropriate behavior, and thus should be the cornerstone of a comprehensive school safety and behavior improvement strategy. Universal primary prevention programs which promote social-emotional competence and cognitive problem solving, such as the Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies curriculum (Greenberg et al., 1995), the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum (Grossman et al., 1997), and the Richmond Youth Against Violence program (Farrell & Meyer, 1997) have demonstrated significant reductions in student

conduct problems, aggression and physical violence. Other programs such as Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (Farrell, Meyer, and White, 1998) have been shown to reduce weapon carrying among students.

In addition to programs which increase student decision-making skills, there are also programs which have reduced violence and aggression by changing the school environment. These include the Child Development Project (Battistich et al., 1996) and the School Transition Environment Project (Felner and Adan, 1988), which addresses the increased risk students face during the normal transition from elementary to junior high school. The prevention programs which have shown the most significant and lasting effects, such as the Seattle Social Development Project (O'Donnell et al., 1995), have combined the individual and ecological approaches reflected above. In each of the examples above, the prevention program produced statistically significant reductions in aggression, violence or weapon carrying based on rigorous evaluation studies.

A Continuum of Options

Even the most effective prevention programs will not prevent all student violence or misconduct. For students who do not respond to primary prevention efforts, educators should have a sufficient variety of options to allow them to craft a continuum of responses appropriate to the level of misbehavior. Options such as in-school suspension, individual and group counseling and Saturday or lunchtime detention coupled with remedial support and social-emotional cognitive skill-building address the present behavior while also recognizing the underlying causes.

For discipline to be effective, the response should be consistent and matched to the severity of the offense. Research would suggest that this is not currently practiced in many schools. Skiba, Peterson & Williams (1997) in researching the practice of school discipline found:

- Most suspensions are for noncompliance or disrespect, and the fewest number are for behaviors that threaten safety; and
- About half of all office referrals are made by a disproportionately small number of teachers.

Similarly, DeRidder (1991) described suspension and expulsion practices as having as much to do with school enrollment patterns, demographics, student characteristics (other than the present infraction), and school and teacher expectations as it did to actual student misconduct. He references one school in which “four or five teachers [recommended] as many as 80 percent of the school’s total suspensions.” In part, the issue is one of effective classroom management and providing teachers with professional development opportunities to strengthen the necessary skills.

Effectiveness of Suspension and Expulsion

In addition to its inconsistent application, a thorough review of the research literature produced no studies demonstrating the positive impact of expulsion or out-of-school suspension in reducing school violence. In fact, some research casts doubt on the effectiveness of exclusion in achieving a safe school environment and raises questions about the potential negative side-effects of exclusion.

Johns and Keenan (1997) point out that exclusionary discipline sends the message to students that they are not wanted in school and that attendance is not important; it teaches them that problems can be avoided rather than addressed. Larson (in press) and Wagner (1991) have linked out of school suspension with poor grades and early drop out. Huizinga and Jakob-Chien (1998) cite the substantial overlap between history of suspension and serious violent offending, especially among males, though the causal link has not been clearly established.

The link between disciplinary exclusion and subsequent negative outcomes makes sense in light of the public health model which identifies poor school bonding as a risk factor for multiple problems including violence, substance abuse, delinquency and dropout. Obviously, suspension and expulsion do

not strengthen commitment and attachment to school. Thus, excluding disruptive students from school may actually reinforce negative behavior and put these students at greater risk for further negative outcomes.

Given the research on the application and effectiveness of suspension and expulsion, use of these exclusionary sanctions should be minimal and reserved for the most serious of infractions involving habitual or violent conduct.

Options for Excluded Students

Colvin et al. (1993) point out that 10 to 15% of students will likely not respond to primary prevention efforts, including 1 to 7% who will exhibit serious or chronic behavior problems. This serious and chronic subgroup will account for 40 to 50% of the major behavioral disruptions at school, and will thus need more intensive, targeted intervention to decrease inappropriate or antisocial behavior. In many cases, these are the students who must be removed from school to ensure the safety of other students and staff. The question that remains is what to do with these excluded students. One strategy gaining in popularity is the use of alternative schools.

Alternative Schools

The term “alternative school” is used frequently by educators and policy makers as a generalization to describe a method of working with “marginal,” “disadvantaged,” or “at-risk” students. Alternative schools take many forms with diverse goals based on different philosophies. Raywid (1994) describes three types: last chance schools, programs which have a remedial focus, and true alternative learning environments.

Last chance schools aim to “fix” nonconforming students and then return them to the regular school environment or to have them “fail out” to permanent exclusion. Last chance alternatives are programs to which students are “sentenced,” often as a last chance before expulsion. They include both short-term and longer-term placements for the chronically

disruptive. They focus on behavior modification with little attention to providing skills to the student or modifying the curriculum or method of instruction.

Programs that have a remedial focus are based on the assumption that students need remediation or rehabilitation in academics, social skills, or both. In the remedial programs, the goal is to address students' deficits through targeted short-term support, and then return the student to the educational mainstream.

True alternative learning environments are based on the philosophy that the problem behavior or academic difficulty may relate to a poor school-student match, requiring an attempt to alter the learning process and structure. The true alternative programs seek to make school challenging and fulfilling for all students. Programs of this type have produced more innovations in the structure and practice of education than the other two. These programs virtually always reflect significant departures from traditional organizational and administrative school structure, and generally they do not strive to re-integrate students back into the "mainstream."

According to Raywid's research, the last chance schools appear to yield few benefits to students. Schools with a remedial focus produce better behavior, attendance, and academic achievement, but these programs are more costly and appear to produce results that are short-lived. Disruptive behavior often reoccurs once the student returns to the regular school. The true alternative schools, which focus on providing a more permanent alternative learning environment are less costly and successes are both more pronounced and longer lasting.

Research by Quinn et al. (1998), which identified and examined ten exemplary schools, supports the philosophy promoted by Raywid. Quinn found that "all the schools visited focused on the strengths and needs of individual students...they looked at the flaws in the organization, not the children."

A meta-analysis of fifty-seven alternative education program evaluations by Cox et al. (1995) found that alternative schools can have a positive impact on academic achievement, attitude and self-esteem, but found no evidence of alternative schools' ability to reduce delinquent behavior. Young's (1990) review of several empirical studies identified several characteristics of more successful programs. These include small school size, a supportive and noncompetitive environment, and a student-centered curriculum. Clearly, alternative schools must continue to be refined and evaluated to determine how they can most effectively respond to student violence and delinquency.

Justice System Response

Students who exhibit serious delinquent or violent behavior in schools often merit the involvement of the justice system, which has developed a broad range of responses specifically to deal with such behavior. These responses include both institutional options, such as residential treatment, boot camps, and wilderness programs, and noninstitutional options such as community service, intensive supervision probation, and family group counseling.

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on the effectiveness of these various responses. Lipsey and Wilson (1998) reviewed 200 experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of programs for serious or chronic juvenile offenders. They identified both programs that were the most successful at reducing recidivism and the variables that had the greatest impact on program outcomes.

Interestingly, the variables that affected program success were different for institutional programs than for noninstitutional programs. For institutional (residential) programs, the variable having the greatest impact on program success was the offender's prior criminal history. Regardless of the method of intervention, program characteristics, or "dosage," offenders with lengthy criminal histories showed little improvement as measured by recidivism.

Lipsey and Wilson found the opposite to be true for non-institutional programs. In this case, program characteristics had the greatest impact on program success. For example, programs administered by mental health personnel were more effective than similar programs administered by juvenile justice personnel, regardless of the criminal histories of those involved. The type and amount of treatment also had a moderate impact on program success, although not to the extent of program characteristics.

In reviewing the *effectiveness* of different programs at reducing reoffending, the authors found an overlap between institutional and noninstitutional programs, both in the programs that were most effective and those that were least effective. Among the types of programs found to have the greatest effect on preventing recidivism were those involving interpersonal skills training and cognitive-behavioral approaches. Among the programs found to have little or no effect on recidivism were wilderness/challenge and milieu therapy programs (e.g. boot camps) and deterrence (e.g. scared straight) programs.

Conclusion

It is imperative for students to learn in an environment free from violence and the fear of potential violence. Likewise, it is unrealistic to expect educators to dedicate large amounts of their attention and resources to a troubling few at the expense of the majority. Research indicates several important points in addressing the issue of school violence:

- School-based primary prevention programs can reduce the number of problem behaviors faced by schools. Many such programs have been evaluated and shown to produce significant reductions in aggression, violence and weapon carrying.
- Effective school safety strategies should include a continuum of options that allow responses to be tailored to the severity of the behavior.

- While there is no data to indicate that exclusionary discipline increases school safety, there is research which indicates that such exclusion may increase poor outcomes in children. Thus disciplinary exclusion should be reserved for students who present a clear and present danger to others.
- Training teachers in effective classroom management may increase the consistency of discipline, potentially reducing unnecessary exclusions and preventing the erosion of the deterrent effect of suspension and expulsion.
- For students excluded for violent acts, programs that teach interpersonal and cognitive-behavioral skills and programs administered by mental health personnel are most effective.

These points should be taken into consideration when crafting policy to reduce and respond to school violence.

The Federal Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA)

In 1995 Pennsylvania passed the Safe Schools Act (Act 26 of 1995,) requiring a one-year expulsion for any student who brings a weapon to school. As mandated by the federal Gun-free Schools Act, every state has passed such legislation as a condition of receiving certain federal education monies, though the scope and definitions vary from state to state. In Pennsylvania, for example, the definition of weapon includes knives, cutting tools and other weapons in addition to firearms. Although this broad definition addresses the important issue of non-firearm weapons in schools, it also qualifies a significantly larger number of students for expulsion.

Although the GFSA includes provisions that allow local officials to refer an expelled student to an alternative education placement or program, only seven states include legislative language that requires alternative schools be created to handle expelled students. Pennsylvania does not have such legislation. More often, states consider the problem of what to do with expelled students as a local issue, which becomes a financial issue as schools struggle to find the resources to provide alternative placements for suspended and expelled students. It is too soon to assess the impact of zero-tolerance legislation on the numbers of students expelled from school or on the amount of violence or weapon possession that occurs in schools. These are areas that merit additional research.

References

- Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., and Solomon, D. 1996. Prevention Effects of the Child Development Project: Early Findings From an Ongoing Multisite Demonstration Trial. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 11(1): 12-35.
- Cox, S., Davidson, W., and Bynum, T. 1995. A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Delinquency-Related Outcomes of Alternative Education Programs. *Crime and Delinquency* 41:219-234.
- DeRidder, L. 1991. How suspension and expulsion contribute to dropping out. *Education Digest*. Feb. 1991: 44-47.
- Farrell, A., and Meyer, A. 1997. The Effectiveness of a School-based Curriculum for Reducing Violence Among Urban Sixth Grade Students. *American journal of Public Health* 87(6): 979-984.
- Farrell, A., Meyer, A., and White, K. 1998. Evaluation of Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP): A School-based Prevention Program for Reducing Violence Among Urban Adolescents.
- Felner, Robert D., & Adan, Angela M. (1988). The School Transitional Environment Project: An ecological intervention and evaluation. In R. H. Price, E. L. Cowen, R. P. Lorion, & Ramos-McKay (eds.), *14 Ounces of Prevention: A Casebook for Practitioners*.
- Greenberg, M., Kusche, C., Cook, E., and Quamma, J. 1995. Promoting Emotional Competence in School-aged Children: The Effects of the PATHS Curriculum. *Development and Psychopathology* 7: 117-136.
- Grossman, D., Neckerman, H., Koepsell, T., Liu, P., Asher, K., Beland, K., Frey, K., and Rivara, F. 1997. Effectiveness of a Violence Prevention Curriculum Among Children in Elementary School: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 277(20): 1605-1611.
- Harvard Education Letter 1987, 3(5).
- Huizinga, D., and Jakob-Chien, C. 1998. The Contemporaneous Co-Occurrence of Serious and Violent Juvenile Offending and Other Problem Behaviors, (in *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions*, by Rolf Loeber and David P. Farrington, eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Johns, B.H., & Keenan, J.P. 1997. *Techniques for managing a safe school*. Denver, CO: Love.
- Larson, K., in press. Dropout prevention for comprehensively at-risk Latino adolescents. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk*.
- Lipsey, M., & Wilson, D. 1998. *Effective Intervention for Serious Juvenile Offenders: A Synthesis of the Research*, (in *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions*, by Rolf Loeber and David P. Farrington, eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Donnell, J., Hawkins, J., Catalano, R., Abbot, R., and Day, E. 1995. Preventing School Failure, Drug Use and Delinquency Among Low-Income Children: Long-term Intervention in Elementary Schools. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 65: 87-100.
- Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office of Safe Schools. 1998. *Violence and Weapon Possession in Pennsylvania's Schools: Annual Report 1996-97 School Year*.
- Quinn, M., Osher, D., Hoffman, C., and Hanley, T. 1998. *Safe, Drug-Free, and Effective Schools for All Students: What Works*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
- Raywid, M.A. 1994. Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership* 52: 26-31
- Sinclair, B., Hamilton, J., Guttman, B., Daft, J., Bolcik, D. 1998. Report on State Implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act - School Year 1996-97: Final Report. U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC.
- Skiba, R.J., Peterson, R.L., & Williams, T. 1997. Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children* 20(3): 1-21.
- Wagner, M. 1991. *Dropouts with disabilities: What do we know? What can we do?* Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Young, Timothy. 1990. *Public Alternative Education: Options and Choice for Today's Schools*. New York: Columbia University Press.