Alternatives to Suspension

Suspending or expelling students may seem like a quick way to both solve a problem and send a message that rule-breaking won't be tolerated. But education research consistently shows that high rates of suspension are related to a number of negative outcomes for both suspended students and schools, including elevated rates of school dropout, poor school climate, and low academic achievement (Norden, 2005; Rosch & Iselin, 2010). What is more, increases in suspension rates do not contribute to increased school safety (Skiba, 2004).

Research also suggests that there are various ways to minimize or replace the use of suspensions, keeping students connected and schools safe (Mochrie, 2012). The suggestions below are among the promising practices available to schools seeking alternatives to suspension. Studies show implementing a range of strategies at multiple levels (e.g., administrative, school personnel, individual student) is likely to benefit not only individual students but also the broader school community (Rosch & Iselin, 2010; Skiba, Rausch, & Ritter, 2004).

Practices that Create a Positive School Climate

1. Enhance classroom management by
   a. Collaboratively developing and regulating rules and expectations (i.e., teachers and students are involved),
   b. Acknowledging and rewarding positive behaviours, and
   c. Training teachers in more effective methods of classroom management. (This has been a component in many of the most effective programs, and has been shown to decrease suspension, expulsion, and dropout, reduce teacher burnout, and improve student on-task behaviour and academic achievement.)
2. Establish and foster collaborative relationships with students, parents and other stakeholders to develop ways to
   a. Define consequences so that they are educational (rather than punitive), fair, age-appropriate, and matched to the behaviours that should be changed,
   b. Teach, model, and reinforce appropriate behaviours (e.g., mentoring programs or positive behaviour cards that can be used for free admissions, field trips, dances, and additional privileges), and
   c. Support student needs and use knowledge about these needs to address the root causes of a student's misconduct.
3. Offer conflict resolution training programs (to students, teachers, and administrators) that
   a. Acknowledge that conflict is inevitable and is either helpful or harmful depending on how it is handled and
   b. Identify non-violent practices that change characteristics of the individual as well as characteristics of the environment that contribute to the conflict.
4. Use programs and practices that
   a. Promote resilience and
   b. Teach effective problem-solving and pro-social skills at multiple levels (e.g., student peer mediation programs, curriculum, teaching, administration).

Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions

1. Develop a sense of community, and hold students and others accountable. This might include
    a. In-school community service programs (e.g., assisting teachers with preparatory work),
    b. Restitution (having people repair any harm they do), and
    c. Restorative practice (having people restore any damage done to their relationships with peers or school personnel).
2. Reconnect alienated students by
    a. Increasing their connections with school and school personnel,
    b. Encouraging caring relationships between students and teachers (e.g., mentoring students through an advisor/advisee program), and
    c. Matching policies to meet the developmental challenges of students' age (e.g., adolescent challenges include the reliance on peer relationships, asserting autonomy, seeking support from non-parental adults, negotiating their development of a unique identity, and building selfefficacy).
3. Develop disciplinary systems that
    a. Have graduated levels of disciplinary actions matched to the seriousness of the infraction (with suspension being the last alternative reserved for situations in which personal safety cannot be maintained otherwise),
    b. Provide clear definitions of all minor and major behavioural misconduct to all staff and students,
    c. Include individual behaviour plans which tend to be used with students having a disability, but may also be useful in addressing the underlying function of concerning behaviour of nondisabled students, and
    d. Have teachers and personnel who have regular contact with students provide the first point of contact for communicating with parent(s) about disciplinary actions.
4. Provide in-school alternatives such as
    a. Establishing spaces in which students can "cool off" or work privately,
    b. Providing individual counseling or wrap-around teams, and
    c. Requiring before- or after-school detentions or Saturday school.

Note: implementing a data management systems that records student misconduct and disciplinary practices can help guide development of alternative options tailored to disciplinary issues that exist in each school.

References

Mochrie, C. (2012). Keeping Youth Connected, Healthy and Learning: Effective Responses to Substance Use in the School Setting. Victoria, BC: Vancouver Island Health Authority.

Norden, P. (2005). Keeping Them Connected: A National Study Examining How Catholic Schools Can Best Respond to Incidents of Illicit Drug Use. Richmond, Victoria: Jesuit Social Services, Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research.

Rosch, J., & Iselin, A.-M. (2010). Alternatives to Suspension. Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University.

Skiba, R. (2004). Zero Tolerance: The Assumptions and the Facts. Education Policy Briefs, 2(1), 1–8.

Skiba, R., Rausch, M. K., & Ritter, S. (2004). "Discipline is always teaching": Effective alternatives to zero tolerance in Indiana's schools. Education Policy Briefs, 2(3).